

## Welcome

One thing that is popular at a lot of churches is missions trips. But we've never done a missions trip here at Catalyst. There's a reason for that - we hadn't been able to figure out how to do it well.

For much of the last several hundred years, Christian service has followed what is popularly called a 'savior' mentality. There was a time when words like 'savior' and 'charity' had positive connotations, but over the last few decades, they've come to feel different.

'Charity' used to be a synonym for love. It's how the King James Version translates the Greek word 'agape'. Charity used to have the connotation of love with no strings attached. No conditions.

But that's not *exactly* what 'charity' means today, is it? Today 'charity' primarily has a connotation of a person with means giving to a person in need. Charity assumes a power imbalance. (Again, it doesn't *have* to, but that's the way the word *feels*. No one wants to be a 'charity case,' do we?)

Same thing with 'savior'. The word came from Christianity, with Jesus as our savior. He's our source of self-giving love. And yet today, 'savior' doesn't really feel like someone who sacrifices themselves for our good. It feels more like someone who is more powerful swooping in to rescue us.

So too, when we think about Christians serving, it far too often becomes savior charity. We who have much look for those who have less. Maybe it's homeless people or people in other countries who live in poverty. Whatever it is, we look to those people and say, "Aha, we can take Jesus to them. We can show them charity. We can get them saved!"

There's a reason that attitude feels gross: it's profoundly unChristian. So as we look to Catalyst's future today, I want to consider rather than a savior model of serving, a pilgrimage model. And, yeah, we're going to talk about Catalyst's first mission trip, coming up next summer!

## Message

In these final weeks before Advent, we're revisiting our core values. Our series is called *Church of Theseus*, which is a callback to an ancient thought experiment. Imagine a man named Theseus owns a ship. Over the years, as he works to maintain the ship, he eventually replaces every part - the mast, the sails, the planks in the deck and the hull. Years later, after every single piece of original wood has been replaced, the question is: is this still the ship of Theseus?

We could ask the same question of Catalyst: our staff is wholly different from a decade ago. Much of the congregation has changed. Even the place we gather is different - we used to meet

in living rooms and movie theaters and even other church buildings! It's worth asking: are we still the same church God planted in Rowlett all those years ago?

We're answering that question with a resounding YES! Though our congregation has changed over the years, the same God who planted us and called us is still with us, leading us through the future.

For a long time here at Catalyst, we've reserved the last few weeks before Advent begins to explore our core values. And even those have changed - they were once Love, Grow and Serve. But several years ago, our leadership recognized that Catalyst has grown and changed, and it was time to set new core values, too.

So we spent two months in Journey to Love, exploring that first core value of Friendship. Here at Catalyst, we believe Friendship is the heart of Jesus' good news proclamation, so we spent two months exploring how God's love transforms us into friends with God and friends with each other.

Then Sonya Brown, explored our second Core Value, *Diversity*. Last week, we considered Transformation as our goal - something deeper than and different from just knowledge about God.

Today, we're exploring our final core value - Pilgrim. Sounds appropriate for the Sunday before Thanksgiving but we're not talking about those pilgrims. Pilgrimage is an ancient religious idea. At the core, it's a journey. We set out on pilgrimages to encounter God. At the core of the pilgrimage is a conviction that there are some ways we can only know God by going somewhere else.

For us here at Catalyst, this idea shapes how we serve. And we draw from the example of the first Christians.

Turn with us to [Acts 10](#).

The story of Acts is the story of the early church trying to figure out what exactly Jesus' resurrection means for their lives. How does his resurrection change their religion? How does it change who their neighbors are? How does it impact their calling? This story features two people - the apostle Peter and a Roman centurion named Cornelius.

Today, we'd see Peter as a pastor and Cornelius as one of those targets on the mission field. We'd expect the story to go that Peter is taking Jesus to Cornelius. But as we read the story I want you to notice it's quite the opposite:

God is already with Cornelius before Peter ever shows up. And Peter isn't perfect. He actually has a lot to learn about what God is up to - lessons he learns *from* Cornelius.

Let's read from the First Nations Version:

Now there lived a man in Chief Village Caesarea whose name was Little Horn Cornelius. He was a head soldier in the Young Bulls Italian band of the People of Iron Romans. He was a

spiritual man who had deep respect for the Great Spirit. He, along with all his family, gave with a big heart to the poor and prayed to Creator at all times.

One day, in the middle of the afternoon, he had a sacred vision. He could clearly see a spirit-messenger from Creator coming toward him.

“Little Horn Cornelius!” the messenger said to him.

Little Horn Cornelius could only stare at the spirit-messenger and tremble with fear.

“What is it you want, Honored One?” he asked the messenger.

“Your prayers and gifts of kindness have been remembered. They have risen like sweet-smelling smoke to the Great Spirit. Now you must send messengers to Village of Beauty Joppa to find One Who Hears Simon, who is also named Stands on the Rock Peter and ask him to come to your home. He is lodging at a house near the great waters at the home of Hearing Man Simon, the tanner of hides.”

After the spirit-messenger who spoke to him had left, Little Horn Cornelius called two servants and a trusted soldier from the ones who were under his command. After he told them everything they needed to know, he sent them to Village of Beauty Joppa. -- Acts 10:1–8 (FNV)

Cornelius receives a vision from God. He needs to seek out Peter. So he does.

But don't skip over this point. Cornelius is Roman. For those early Christians like Peter, the Roman soldiers were wicked and godless - they killed Jesus! At best, Cornelius was supposed to be the *target* of evangelism. The guy who *needed* God. But Acts tells us that God was already with Cornelius. Working in his life. Giving him divine messages!

Whatever happens next in the story, Peter isn't *taking* Jesus to Cornelius. Jesus is already there! Speaking of Peter, what's he up to?

Acts cuts over to Peter and he receives a vision from God. God lowers a big picnic blanket filled with all kinds of animals that are unclean by Jewish dietary law. There's a LOT happening in Peter's vision. But the core message Peter takes away is that he should not call 'unclean' what God calls 'clean'. That's super important because Cornelius is a Gentile, and Jews like Peter considered Gentiles 'unclean'.

So Peter literally gets done having this vision where God says, “I'm in charge of who and what are clean, not you,” and then immediately some Gentiles show up asking for him.

Before we move on, again I want you to see that Peter had to grow in his relationship with God, too. He wasn't there yet. He hadn't arrived. God was still teaching *Peter* who God is, and God is going to use *Cornelius* to do it.

Wow.

God is using the pagan to evangelize the pastor. Let's see it happen:

As soon as Stands on the Rock Peter came into the house, Little Horn Cornelius dropped to his knees and began to pray to him. But Stands on the Rock Peter made him stand to his feet.

“Stand up!” he said to him, “I am only a weak human being, just as you are.”

Stands on the Rock Peter kept talking to him as they went inside the house. There he saw all the people who had gathered to hear him.

“As all of you must know,” he said to them, “it is against our law for a Tribal Member like myself to have anything to do with someone from an Outside Nation. But Creator has helped me to see that I should not consider anyone to be impure or unclean. So when I was asked to come here, I did not hesitate to come. So tell me, why have you sent for me?” -- Acts 10:25–29 (FNV)

Cornelius goes on to tell Peter his story, so then Peter tells them all about Jesus’ death and resurrection (remember: this is all new, so they haven’t heard yet). As he does, Cornelius and his family start worshipping and rejoicing in what they’re hearing.

Peter tells them about Jesus, and as he’s doing so, the Holy Spirit comes to Cornelius and his whole household. Which is amazing. But also confusing, if you’re Peter. Because Gentiles aren’t supposed to be able to receive God’s Holy Spirit. They’re unclean.

Cornelius asks Peter if they can be baptized.

And Peter would normally say, “No. Of course not. You’re Gentiles. You’re unclean.” But he can’t deny what he’s seeing with his own eyes: God has *already* given them the Holy Spirit because they responded to Peter’s announcement about Jesus’ death and resurrection.

And Peter remembers God’s words: “Don’t call ‘unclean’ what I have called ‘clean’.”

So Peter baptizes Cornelius. And then Peter has to return to Jerusalem and tell all his Jewish friends this amazing news: God loves Gentiles

And here’s the thing: Peter couldn’t learn this in Jerusalem. He had to leave, to go into Gentile territory to know the God who loved not just his people, but everyone. Peter was a Pilgrim.

Both Peter *and* Cornelius are transformed by this exchange. Both of them come to know Jesus better.

*Catalyst Mission Trip + Interview with Penny*

Friends, this is what we mean here at Catalyst by the Pilgrim model of serving. We don’t believe we have a monopoly on Jesus. When we serve, we’re not taking Jesus anywhere. We’re going to meet Jesus where he is already at work. We come with open hearts and open spirits because we know that this is a mutual relationship. They are going to teach us and we are going to teach them. We’re not saviors. We’re pilgrims.

## Communion + Examen

We're invited to this table where God commands us not to call anyone unclean God has called clean.

Where have I experienced God in my comfort zone in the last week?

When recently has God invited me to 'leave'?

Who are the Corneliuses in my life God may be inviting me to engage?

How can I approach them as a pilgrim, rather than a savior?

## Assignment + Blessing