

## Welcome

There's a growing epidemic in our country. It was on the rise even before COVID-19, but the global pandemic exacerbated it. That pandemic is loneliness. A recent study reported that more than half of all US adults (58%, which is actually nearly 3 in 5) are considered lonely.

What does that mean, specifically? Some of the phrases used in the surveys include, "no one knows them well," "feel left out," "always feel alone," "lack companionship" or "relationships with others are not meaningful."

We're lonely, as a nation.

And it's worse for certain groups - Black and Latine adults are 68% and 75%... way higher than the national average.

Lower-income folks are also way more lonely - 63%. And young adults 18-24 report a staggering 79%.

Loneliness correlates to sharp decline in mental health and quality of life. Which shouldn't surprise us - after all, we are a church that confesses that we were created for meaningful relationships.

What do we do in the face of a loneliness epidemic?

I want to propose a somewhat radical solution today. What if we chose to make friends not by inviting people among us, hosting, but by going out? What if we looked for spaces where people the lonely people already are and go to them?

This is, after all, what Jesus has done for us. Jesus came among us, put himself at our mercy, and transformed us into friends!

## Message

Believe it or not, we're only a month from the beginning of Advent! Traditionally, here at Catalyst we've used these four weeks to revisit our core values. A few years ago, our Leadership Team brought new core values to the congregation that we believe better specify who we are and what we're about as a congregation.

They were: Friendship, Diversity, Discipleship and Pilgrim. Over the last couple of years, we've been playing with the wording - especially the last two, since they're still really insider-church language.

So this year, we're going to reintroduce them as: Friendship, Diversity, Transformation and Curiosity. We believe these four words embody who God calls us to be as a congregation and help us look ahead to next year.

We're going to begin with Friendship. That can sound strange to our ears - to hear a church talk so much about friendship. Christians, after all, aren't generally known for being particularly *friendly*. But this is a space where Catalyst has always been different. Folks who visit Catalyst often comment about how friendly people are here, how welcoming and hospitable.

That's not an accident. We think friendship is really important. In fact, when we talk about friendship here at Catalyst, we say, "Friendship is the heart of Jesus' good news." This is where we want to throw our hands up and say, "Wait, wait, wait. I thought the whole point of the Gospel was forgiveness of sin."

And, again, you'd be forgiven for thinking so. After all, for most of us growing up, faith was all about praying the sinner's prayer and getting forgiveness so we could go to heaven when we die.

But that's not how Jesus talks about faith. In fact, the night before he was crucified, during the meal he shared with his disciples, he said this:

**This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. -- John 15:12-15 (NLT)**

Did you catch that? Jesus calls us *friends* now. That was a big deal then - it's a big deal today, in a culture that's so deeply lonely.

Friendship is the reason he came to earth. It's the reason he died on the cross - to restore our relationship with God.

Yes, sin was the problem. Sin separates us from God and from each other. Sin destroys our connection. And Jesus, through his death, put that right.

But it doesn't *stop* there - that's why we don't just observe Good Friday, right? We remember the cross *on the way to the empty tomb*. The Resurrection is the whole thing. New life, together.

That's the idea of friendship that Jesus is talking about here.

God created us for friendship, for relationship. Faith in Jesus is learning to be friends - with God, with each other, with ourselves.

## SONG

Is it weird to ask how Jesus made friends? Maybe, but what we see in the four Gospels is provocative, and I think helpful for us as we consider friendship at Catalyst in the next year.

Let's zoom all the way out and think about the Incarnation. This is what we're getting ready to celebrate during the Christmas season. God becoming human. Jesus leaving heaven and coming to Earth.

But stop for a moment and think about what's happening there. In John's introduction to Jesus, he says it like this:

**So the Word became human and made his home among us. -- John 1:14 (NLT)**

Jesus made his home among us. He *left* his home and made a new home *among us*. He became like us.

In Matthew's gospel, we get another version of this:

**When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he instructed his disciples to cross to the other side of the lake.**

**Then one of the teachers of religious law said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."**

**But Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head." -- Matthew 8:18–20 (NLT)**

Jesus told a religious leader who wanted to follow him, "I don't have a home." In other words, Jesus was putting himself *at the mercy of the people he came to befriend*.

It's easiest to stay isolated, among your own people.

It's hard to reach out. To take a risk and invite someone over for dinner, or host an event at your house.

But Jesus invites us to go even further: Jesus invites us to become the guest. To put ourselves at the mercy of others' hospitality.

What happens when we're not the host, but the guest?

Believe it or not... some really cool stuff can happen.

MEXICO TEAM interview w/ JR.

Friends, we live in a deeply lonely culture. And we have received a model from Jesus of what friend-making looks like.

As we move through this series, we're going to keep friendship as the center of what we do. And I want to encourage you to join me in praying that God would open your eyes to who in your circles is lonely? Would you join me in praying for the grace and the courage to follow

Jesus out of the spaces where we're comfortable and into *their* spaces, trusting that the Spirit goes ahead of us and with us?

Will you join me in praying that Catalyst would be a beacon of friendship in a world that desperately needs to be loved?

## Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us here to know and be known

How have you been a good friend in the last week?

How have you ignored God's call toward friendship?

How is God calling you to be a friend in this coming month?

## Assignment + Blessing