

Welcome

One of my best friends lives in Portland - known to be one of the most left-leaning, progressive cities in the US.

I had the chance to visit him in late 2020, not long after George Floyd was killed by police officers in Minneapolis, during the time a fresh wave of Black Lives matter protests swept the globe.

I remember being struck that everywhere we went in Portland I saw BLM signs. Every business, nearly every yard. I was struck; here in Dallas, BLM has been a much more contentious movement. It was strange to see an entire city that so fully embraced the movement.

I mentioned that to my friend and he laughed and said, "Well yeah, do you know how many black people there are in Portland?"

I didn't, and when I admitted as much, he told me it was 5% (Dallas, by contrast, is 23% Black). That's not accidental - the lack of black citizens in Portland can be traced directly to a number of discriminatory housing policies enacted by the city and state several decades ago.

It made all those signs feel... a little gross. It's great for these business owners to put the sign up. Black Lives *do* matter, after all.

But for a nearly all-white city to so ardently claim to support Black Lives without doing anything to repair the actual harm that same city has inflicted on actual Black people... well it feels like the purest form of virtue signaling. Because, aside from the paper and ink used to make them, those signs don't cost anything to post.

In his book *All the White Friends I Couldn't Keep*, author and activist Andre Henry says:

"If corporations, educational institutions, religious organizations, and nonprofits don't change the racist cultures and institutional structures that make them hostile environments for Black people, they'll prove that their Black Lives Matter statements from 2020 were little more than institutional virtual signaling." — Andre Henry

Friends, I want to consider with you today how we as a church can learn from those virtue signalling institutions. Because we want to be a place where marginalized communities really do matter. That's the example we see from Jesus, who always lived out what he preached - even when it cost him everything.

What does it look like for us to be a church like that?

Message

It's been a long-standing tradition here at Catalyst to set aside the last weeks of the church year to explore our core values. What sets us apart as a church? What makes us unique, different from other congregations?

When I first came to Catalyst, our core values were Love, Grow and Serve. Those weren't particularly unique - one of the churches down the street has the same three core values. As God continued to work among us, and as the culture around us changed, our Leadership Team discerned that God was instilling a new set of values among us. Those were Friendship, Diversity, Discipleship and Pilgrimage.

Those were our core values for several years, but of course now we're on the cusp of a major change yet again. And yet again, our core values are shifting. So for the next month, I want to explore with you the values that are shaping us moving forward.

This series is called "Next Level" because we don't see this as a fundamental shift. We're not tossing out our old values and getting brand new ones. Rather, we're building on the values that have shaped us for the last several years.

Not unlike a video game, where the first levels let us practice the basic skills that will be necessary in later stages, all that's come before us has prepared us for this new incarnation of our church family.

[Slide] So this month, we're exploring Friendship, Collective Liberation, Change and Curiosity.

We began last week by looking at Friendship. We explored how our culture so easily turns people into products, how that has created a loneliness epidemic, and how we as a church can be a site of healing rather than part of the problem.

Today, we're exploring our second value, Collective Liberation. This one used to be 'Diversity', which itself is a clarification of our original core value "Love".

Love is a good value for a church. But the idea that 'everyone is welcome' is challenging. On its surface, it seems easy enough. But simply having a welcoming, non-judgmental atmosphere is only the beginning.

[[Peck's Stages of Authentic Community](#)] Psychologist M. Scott Peck outlined the stages of developing authentic community.

Every community, every relationship, begins in what Peck calls Pseudo-community. Right in the name he tells you: it's false community.

The reason it's false community is because we're all hiding parts of ourselves - the parts we think might not be socially acceptable. Think about when you meet someone new: the rule is we don't discuss religion or politics. Why? Because those are divisive issues, and we want to get along. Make a good first impression.

We want to get along, so we hide those parts of ourselves we think others may not like. *That* is what's false about pseudo-community.

And look...there's nothing *wrong* with this. Peck points out this is a totally normal part of a growing relationship. Criticizing a community for beginning shallow is like criticizing a baby for not being able to talk or not having object permanence.

So don't rush to feeling bad if you recognize some of your communities or relationships are in that pseudo-community stage. It's normal. It's natural. And there's something really beautiful about that impulse to welcome everyone.

Turn with us to [Luke 4](#).

This story comes earlier in Jesus' ministry - right at the beginning, in fact, he's been traveling all over the northern part of the country announcing his work, and now he's come back to his hometown of Nazareth. He does what has become his custom - to teach in the synagogue. Much like we do today, he began by reading a Scripture, then gave his interpretation.

This particular day, he chose a passage from Isaiah, when the prophet imagined what it was going to be like when God's promised champion arrived. Listen to how Jesus interprets it:

Then Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit's power. Reports about him spread quickly through the whole region. He taught regularly in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures.

The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD's favor has come."

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!"

Everyone spoke well of him and was amazed by the gracious words that came from his lips. "How can this be?" they asked. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" — [Luke 4:14-22](#)

The people of Nazareth *love* this. Jesus has announced that *he* is the promised champion. He's there to liberate. And not just the rich and powerful. He's there for the most marginalized - the poor, the disabled, those imprisoned and oppressed.

Jesus' messianic mission is for everyone. Everyone.

So again: I want to insist there's nothing *bad* about wanting to be a church for everyone. This is Jesus' messianic mission!

Song

Every Church today would claim to be a loving church. Churches that are segregated and support racist social policies claim to be loving. Churches that claim women were created to be subservient to men claim to be loving. Churches that deny the full humanity of queer people claim to be loving.

Every church claims to be loving in the same way in Jesus' day all the rabbis would say the most important command is to Love God and Neighbor.

BIG DEAL, this scholar says. "Who is my neighbor, Jesus?"

This is where Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, which forces the scholar to identify a Samaritan as his neighbor.

This was radical. That Jesus would insist no one is outside of God's instruction to love our neighbors.

The scholar is deeply uncomfortable with Jesus' answer. It's the same sort of discomfort Jesus faced in his hometown. Remember how all the Nazareth folks were so impressed with Jesus? Well, Jesus wasn't content to leave them there. He presses further with his message:

Then he said, "You will undoubtedly quote me this proverb: 'Physician, heal yourself'—meaning, 'Do miracles here in your hometown like those you did in Capernaum.' But I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown. "Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner—a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon. And many in Israel had leprosy in the time of the prophet Elisha, but the only one healed was Naaman, a Syrian." When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, but he passed right through the crowd and went on his way. — [Luke 4:23-30](#)

Jesus tells the good folks of Nazareth that his messianic work isn't just for them. He cites multiple stories from the Scriptures where God's love was for people considered outsiders, unclean, unworthy of God's love.

And this *infuriated* them. They got so angry they tried to kill him.

When you think you're God's special people, the idea that God might love everyone else too is offensive. When you're used to the world catering to your needs and wants, you find the mere suggestion that other people should get a seat at your table threatening.

But Jesus didn't mince any words: I'm here for everyone.

Shouldn't that be exciting? Shouldn't that be good news? It was certainly good news for the marginalized and oppressed. Somehow, the people of Nazareth didn't think it was so good.

This is a big part of what's wrong with pseudo-community: not everyone is hiding the same amount of themselves. Majority culture people usually have to keep opinions to ourselves - maybe what we think about a particular issue or candidate or something.

But for minority culture folks to be accepted in pseudo-community often requires much more. They must hide parts of themselves, their culture, the particular pains and struggles connected to their marginalization.

They can't be too black or too loud. They can't complain about their lack of access or denial of rights or the countless microaggressions they endure even in this space that's meant to be welcoming to everyone.

We can ignore that and persist in pseudo-community if we want. That's what Andre Henry warned most institutions and organizations do. It's what the good folks of Nazareth did.

But we've seen how Jesus responds to that.

Our other option is to be really intentional - like Jesus is about who our community is *for*. Because the truth is that we're not for everyone unless we're first for the most vulnerable. The very people Jesus said were the heart of his mission.

Emma Lazarus was one of the great American poets of the 19th century. She's the one who wrote the poem that's on the Statue of Liberty. Lazarus was a Jewish woman who didn't really grow up around Jews. Most of her friends were white, wealthy, educated Christians in New York. She heard about the rising wave of anti-Semitism in Germany and Russia - the same wave that would lead ultimately to the Holocaust.

Lazarus realized that her life free from the pain of anti-Semitism was a privilege, and if she wasn't careful, it would cause her to ignore the suffering of real people around the world. This

realization drove her to dedicate her life to fighting anti-Semitism, and in a letter to other American Jews, she wrote another now-famous line:

“Until we are all free, we are none of us free.” — Emma Lazarus, 1883

Until we are all free, we are none of us free. Friends, I can think of no better illustration of Emma Lazarus’ words than God, the one who is ultimately and perfectly free, becoming one of us and living in solidarity with the poorest, most marginalized and oppressed.

If we are truly to be a church for everyone, we must be a church for the most vulnerable. We must be fiercely anti-racist. We must be unapologetically queer-affirming. We must center the voices of all those who are ignored by our larger culture because it’s there we find Jesus!

Communion + Examen

We all have a seat at Jesus’ table!

When in the last week have I looked for Jesus at the margins?

What privileges do I enjoy that might keep me from looking for Jesus?

How is God calling me to leverage my privilege and social power?

With whom is God calling me to live in solidarity?

Assignment + Blessing