

# Welcome

What does it take to change?

Like... think of a subject you've really changed your mind about. Maybe you're not part of the same political party you were when you were younger.

Or maybe you swore you'd never get married and now you have a ring on your finger. Maybe you're vegetarian now. Or a health nut.

Or maybe you're religious when you swore all along you wouldn't be.

I shared a few weeks ago some of the ways I've changed - politically, theologically, socially.

I'm fascinated by how people change because it's so different from what we think.

We've convinced ourselves that we change when we're presented with new information.

But that's not true. In fact, new facts can have almost the *opposite* effect - causing us to dig in our heels and cross our arms.

The classic example is texting and driving - by now everyone knows that texting while driving impairs us at least as much as driving while drunk. And yet that knowledge has not made a significant impact on the number of people who text and drive.

Or take the people who deny the results of the 2020 election. It doesn't matter that there's exactly zero evidence - for them that's further proof of a sweeping conspiracy! It doesn't matter that the architects of the attempt to steal the election have admitted they lied in order to undermine the legitimate results.

Beliefs are far more fact-proof than we're comfortable admitting.

So if that's true, how do we change? What does it look like for us to change? Particularly when it comes to growing in faith, growing spiritually, if learning more Bible facts isn't what does it, then how do we change?

We're going to explore that very question today, and we'll see that change is grounded not in learning facts, but in repeatedly putting ourselves in spaces where God's Holy Spirit can remake us, little by little, until one day we realize we're brand new!

## 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 with 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.

Last week, we saw how our original Core Value 'Love' evolved into Collective Liberation, a commitment to prioritize the most vulnerable in our society.

Today, we're exploring the value 'Change'. This is an evolution of our original core value 'Grow', which became 'Transformation'.

One of the big mistakes we make in following Jesus is that we think of it primarily as an intellectual exercise. Growing up, I went to Sunday School, which was created and modeled after... you guessed it: public education. Unfortunately, while public education has changed a lot since the 18th century, Sunday School hasn't so much. It's primarily about teaching facts - memorizing books of the bible and bible stories, learning the lessons or morals that accompany each one.

But here at Catalyst, we recognize that faith isn't an exam we study to pass. Faith is a relationship - a friendship with God and with one another. Faith is something we grow into, and it's a process of transformation.

Paul describes the difference as a whole new creation in 2 Corinthians:

**This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! — 2 Corinthians 5:17**

This is really important: a life of faith isn't a tweak to our lives. It's a whole new life. It's so dramatic, it's like being born a second time.

Turn with us to John 3.

This is early in John's story of Jesus. Jesus has just begun his public ministry, and in John's gospel, he did so by performing an act of public, civil disobedience - he cleansed the Temple.

Remember during the BLM protests when people would lay down in malls during Christmas shopping season, or block highways to shut down traffic? Peaceful, but very disruptive protests.

That's a lot like what Jesus did at the Temple. It was during Passover, and he disrupted the sale of animals for sacrifices. He was trying to make a point.

One of the religious leaders wasn't content just to condemn Jesus as a trouble maker or rabble rouser or Marxist (just kidding Marx hadn't been born yet!). He saw something in Jesus' demonstration that rang true to him. But he was in the minority, so he sneaked out to see Jesus in secret.

Here's the dynamic you need to keep in mind as we read this: that scholar, Nicodemus, was about as wealthy, educated and powerful as a Jewish man could be in his day. He was one of the Pharisees and he sat on the ruling council.

Jesus, on the other hand, was from Nazareth, which in that day was sort of like backwoods Mississippi. He was a country preacher from the sticks. Never went to seminary.

Nicodemus was an elite Sunday School graduate. Now let's hear his encounter with Jesus:

Jesus' language here is super-familiar. You don't have to be a long-time Christian to know the phrase 'born again' - though that phrase was actually made popular relatively recently, by President Jimmy Carter.

Try to put aside your familiarity with the phrase and hear what Jesus is saying to this learned, educated man:

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.” Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” — [John 3:1-4](#)

If you want to follow my teachings, if you want to be part of this new thing I’m doing, it’s disruptive. What I did yesterday in the Temple was just a sign, pointing at this deep change. I’m inviting you to a wholesale transformation.

It’s as radical as starting over from scratch. It’s like you go back to being a baby and learning everything all over again - how to walk. How to talk. How to relate with the world. *Everything* you think you know is wrong, insufficient.

How often do we imagine that all Jesus wants to do is tweak our lives? That if we go to church every now and again, maybe give a little money and say a prayer before we eat, that Jesus will bless us with the American Dream?

It’s much more challenging to realize that Jesus has come to flip all those tables and invite us into something much more revolutionary. That Jesus wants to make changes that are the difference between life and death.

Do we welcome this level of disruption?

## Song

Nicodemus came expecting Jesus to offer a new perspective on some common disagreements of the day. Jesus insisted Nicodemus has to be reborn, to start over from scratch.

No wonder Nicodemus is incredulous.

Can you imagine being a person of his stature? The respect he commands? The power he wields? People look to him for advice, wisdom, insight. They crave his company. He’s a guest at all the most desirable tables.

And Jesus is telling him none of that matters. He’s missed God completely.

Again, to Nicodemus’ credit, he doesn’t just reject Jesus out of hand. He asks for an explanation. Jesus elaborates - though it remains confusing for poor Nicodemus:

Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual

life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." — [John 3:5-8](#)

Jesus insists we must be 'born of the Spirit', which he warns is unpredictable. Because the one at the heart of this transformation is none other than the very Spirit of God. Jesus is using language here that echoes the creation story in [Genesis 1](#), where God's Spirit blows like a wind across the primordial waters of chaos, shaping and forming them into a world God can share with us.

So too, Jesus insists, we must allow God's Spirit to blow through our lives, recreating us - that new creation Paul promised the Corinthians.

As we are reforming around a new model of church, we're centering change more than ever. We want to be a people who learns not to be content with complacent, who is always asking what the Spirit is doing in our hearts, in our community, in the world around us. There's no formula for that.

And, as Nicodemus demonstrates, knowledge isn't the path to Jesus. Love is. Relationship is. And we can know an awful lot about God without actually *knowing* God (in the same way I spent a lot of time as a kid studying the moon without ever going to the moon).

So what we focus on in our preaching here at Catalyst is invitation to transformation. We make space for reflection and response. We work to create a space for you to say Yes to God's Spirit blowing through your life.

It's why our c-groups aren't bible studies. Instead, they're relationally-driven. We discuss the sermons or a book we're reading together or books of the Bible. But the focus isn't on all getting smarter, learning more information. It's about learning from each other, hearing what the Spirit is doing in your life - and maybe learning a little more about how the Spirit is working in and around me.

And it's why we have our spiritual practice guides - if you've used them, you know they're pretty light on information. They're designed to be very practical how-to guides to the spiritual practices that help us make space to sit with God's Spirit.

If I'm being honest, I wish a lot of times that the Spirit were more predictable. I wish I could say, "Here are five steps to a happy relationship," or "This is the clear path to your calling."

But as Jesus warned Nicodemus, the Spirit doesn't work like that. The Spirit is a wind, blowing wherever she wants, not asking our permission.

We live in a world obsessed with transformation. We fill our lives with books and gurus and plans and memberships all designed to help us become the person we think we should be.

It seems like the last thing we'll do is stop and clear space to sit and listen for the small, gentle voice of God's Holy Spirit inviting us to be changed.

The same Spirit that blew across the waters of chaos still blows today through the chaos of our world. If we will pause and turn into that holy wind, we find peace and hope.

The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead still works resurrection in our lives today. What might happen if we stop and open our hands and our spirits to receive God's life-giving power?

## Communion + Examen

This practice keeps us together as we make space for God's Spirit to change us.

When in the last week have I made space for the Holy Spirit?

What has kept me from making space for the Holy Spirit?

What might be a barrier in this next week to the Holy Spirit?

How can I make space to sit with the Holy Spirit this week?

## Assignment + Blessing

Spiritual Practices