



Community Catalyst

Acts 11:1-18

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June 14, 2020

Over the past few weeks, while reflecting on and responding to God's Word as it speaks into the current cultural climate, we've also using this book by Rev. Michael Mather, called *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*, to seek an answer to this broad and very generalized question, "What makes us the church?"

We've named already that part of what makes us the church is acknowledging the image of God in each person, and seeking to allow each person to live out the gifts they have been gifted. We've named our identity as the church as having an eternal mission, but also learning that the eternal mission can look very different in each temporal moment of life. And we've named that this work is essential work – it's work that is necessary for us to honestly proclaim a belief in God's will for "thy kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven."

In the midst of these past few weeks, as we've sought to answer this question, "what makes us the church?", I've had this phrase in my mind. I keep coming back to these two words, *Community Catalyst*. If God's desire is for the shalom – the well-being – the wholeness – of creation, and that shalom is desired for the whole of the community, then the work of the church should be, at least in part, to care for the community – to be present in community – to live in to its community. In each of these ways, I find myself coming back to the Pentecost story where the disciples were led into the streets by the movement of the Spirit, and their presence of proclaiming God's glory helped form this new community – this growing entity – this expansive collective we call *ecclesia*, or "the church."

As I have been reflecting on this call of the church over the past few weeks, I've had to take a step back. In talking this out with others and trying to put meat on the bones, if you will, of this phrase *Community Catalyst*, there are some troubling aspects that have stuck out in the work of "creating community." I want to process these with you today, to name where I find myself struggling for the right language. ... Jen often calls me "red pen," because I am often found editing people's language. I have a deep belief that words matter, and how we use them is often indicative of internal values or beliefs – even unconscious or implicit values or beliefs. Many times, we use words without understanding their impact, as if others must hear them with the same intent that we offer them. This isn't always how it works. Our intent does not always have the same impact.

So this morning, I'm going to "red pen" myself. I offer these thoughts in the framework of personal repentance, to say, I've not always gotten it right – and no, I still don't always get it right. (I hope you can appreciate how much energy that takes to say out loud for self-

proclaimed perfectionist.) Yet, in my belief of the call of the church, in my belief in the church's call to be part of God's work in the world, I invite you to help me discern what it means to be a *Community Catalyst*.

In reflecting on Mather's work, which calls us to "find abundant communities in unexpected places," he invites the reader to shift their perspective, to go from seeing the poor, or the low-income residents of the community, who are often thought of as having little to offer, as being filled with an abundance of gifts and graces. His invitation to the reader is to stop looking at the community as if it is nothing by the compilation of individual needs, and to re-frame your mind's eye to see the community as a population of individuals blessed by God and created in God's image. The invitation for the church is to shift from the savior mentality, which says we are going to "help" everyone who has need – to seeing the inherent good in each person, and to help them live into the fullness of the image in which they have been created. By doing this, the needs are still met, but the focus is on the gifts, not the needs. Mather frames this idea by using the work of John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, as they offer a framework called, "Asset-Based Community Development." Mather says, in this "ABCD" framework, we develop the community, not by highlighting all of the needs, but by highlighting all of the assets the community has to offer.

So, as I was reflecting on this work and how we might engage as a church to highlight people's assets, I offered the idea that we, as a *Community Catalyst*, should figure out how to make space for the gifts of those who have never had their gifts acknowledged. What would it mean for us to create space so that others might have space to use their gifts?

And here, I pull out my red pen.

Beneath my words, beneath my well-intentioned thoughts, is this hidden and unconscious belief that for someone else to have the space to use their gifts, I have to gift them that space. For those who have so long been silenced, in order for them to have a place to have their voice heard, *I* have to create that space for them.

Now, hang with me, because I think I know why my thoughts lead me down this path of processing.

But it's important to name: this kind of thinking – this kind of belief that for someone else to have space, I have to gift it to them ... for someone else to have the opportunity to use their gifts, I have to give them such an opportunity ... for someone else to have the chance to express their gifts, I have to create a space and invite them into it ... these are no different than the savior mentality thinking that says, someone can only receive help if I give it to them. It says, you cannot be who you were created to be, unless I allow it. It's, quite frankly, the same toxic thinking that has long dominated our national race relations. White dominant culture – perhaps best defined by the term white supremacy – has long held that unless the white community, who has historically held power, offers a job, or offers housing, or offers education, or offers a seat at the table to anyone of the Black community, or another Person of Color, the job, the

house, the educational opportunity, the seat will not be available. And don't think that framework of supremacy is something of the past. Even our best educational institutions, like Northern Virginia's Thomas Jefferson High School, still offer gatekeeping which limits the number of black students. Sadly, the history of the church, especially here in America, is too wed to such oppressive practices.

So, the red pen correction is not only necessary, but worth exploring deeper. What kind of internal and unconscious belief leads to this kind of external and voiced application?

Honestly, I'm still wrestling with this. But my wrestling leads me to Acts 11.

See, in the theological framework of high Christology, I have a strong belief in Christ as the instigator of the work of the church. For example, in Luke 9, the gospel says that Christ gave the ability to heal people to the disciples, who then went out to offer the healing of Christ to others. Christ is the one who called the disciples to go forth and make disciples of others – instructing the disciples to baptize others in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the Ascension, Christ said as I leave you, I am imparting you with my power, that you may do greater works than even I have done.

Even before the creation of the church at Pentecost, there has been this hierarchical path, where our ability to do the work of God in the world comes first from Christ, the head of the church. The invitation of Christ, the instigation of God in the gifting of the Spirit, was for the church to lead the way in proclaiming God's goodness in the world – as those first disciples did at Pentecost, to literally speak the truth of God's goodness and power in the world.

In this path of understanding, one could say that the community needs what the church has to offer, because the church has the promise of God's goodness. This is glory that offers hope. This is love that offers affirmation. This is justice that offers peace. This is what the church has to offer the world – and it's something the world needs.

Yet, knowing they had what the world needed, the church has not always offered these things. Even early on, the church failed to understand its purpose. Instead of seeing ourselves as being gifted by Christ to offer to the world what the world needed, the church saw itself as an indispensable gift who held on to what the world needed, saying, 'if you want it, you must become one of us.'

This structure, which says, you must acclimate to receive these gifts, is about as far from God's vision of the church as the Biblical text could offer. The Spirit gifted the disciples the ability to proclaim to others in a variety of languages so that others might receive the good news – the Spirit did not ask others to hear in the disciples' native tongue. Even at Pentecost, we see no acclimation was necessary.

And yet, acclimation is what the church often demands, to the detriment of humanity, go so far as to kill those who refuse to acclimate. It's acclimation that led to the crusades of the 11th,

12th, 13th, and 14th centuries, during which millions of people were killed because they didn't believe in Christ. It's acclimation that led to the inquisitions of the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, during which tens of thousands of people were killed due to their failure to acclimate to the church's belief. It's acclimation that led to the global witch trials that led to the death of some 50,000 people who failed to acclimate to the teachings of the church. It's acclimation that led to the death of millions of indigenous persons in our own country, who failed to acclimate to the religious teachings of the first European conquests.

It's acclimation that says, I have what you need, and in order for you to get it, you must come to me – you must accept that it is mine to offer – you must subscribe to my way of living so that you can be accepted for your gifts, for your thoughts, for your personhood. If I don't gift it, you don't have it. Frankly, that's terrible thinking, and antithetical to the Biblical text, but it's how the church has operated for most of its life.

Yes, God gifts the church with the power of Christ, with the sustainer of the Spirit ... but God *doesn't* gift us with control over others, or control over space, or control over gifts, or control over grace.

The early church struggled with this when it came to accepting the Gentiles. We have, even in the Biblical text, examples from which to learn. ... Acts 11 tells us the story of the church's early struggle with acclimation. The leaders of the church, all Jewish converts, felt strongly that any who wished to be welcomed into the church community – into the Body of Christ – needed to acclimate to all the traditional Jewish teachings first. Peter, who had been travelling and preaching, was in Gentile territory. While there, he felt the leading of God to go and proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. Peter sat at the tables in their homes and ate with them. He told them about the good news of God in Jesus Christ. In doing so, the Gentiles began to believe – they accepted the word of God, and Peter baptized them.

But the Gentiles did not become Jewish Christians. They became Gentile Christians. The leaders of the Church, who were all Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem, took issue with this. Not only did they take issue with the converts not becoming Jewish, they took issue with Peter – a leader of the church – sitting down and eating with them. In fact, it seems this was their biggest concern. In verse 3, we find the leaders asking Peter, "Why did you go to the uncircumcised men (the Gentiles) and eat with them?" It seems their biggest frustration is not with the Gentiles believing, but with one of their own going into non-Jewish homes and dining on non-Jewish foods.

It strikes me as ironic – Jesus also got into trouble for sharing meals with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other unwashed people, who were outside the norms of the church. The church – both the church before and after Christ – has always seemed to have a problem with welcoming the presence of anyone who doesn't act, think, look, or believe in the way we believe. And yet, God continues to push us and expand us.

Peter's response to the Jewish Christian leaders of the church was to say, "I didn't have a choice. This was God's doing, not mine." ... Peter didn't always get it – even in this moment, it took three invitations of God for Peter to go. But he gets there. Peter eventually understands. Peter finally grasped the reality, "If God gave them the same gift [of the Holy Spirit] as [God] gave us [the Jewish Christians] ... what power do I have to oppose God?"ⁱ

And here is where I my red pen lands.

We have held this believe in the church for far too long that unless we proclaim God's good news, it cannot be heard. Unless we teach it, it cannot be known. Unless we gift it, it cannot be received. As if, we are the gatekeepers of the good news, and that God has no other way to speak truth, to reveal love, to exercise mercy, or to redeem the world. These are all important things – we should speak truth, we should reveal love, we should exercise mercy, and we believe that God is redeeming the world ... but we have centuries of oppressive church history to move past to living faithfully into God's desire for the church in the world today. Like Peter, we haven't always gotten it right – it's time we get there. It's time for us to understand. It's time for us to grasp the reality, that God gifts others, those the church has long excluded, those our church has long excluded, the same gift of the Holy Spirit God has given us. What power do we have to oppose God?

So, here's where I need your help. As we think about our call as the church, as we think about the gifting of the Spirit, as we think about the imparting of Christ's power ... as we consider what it means to be a *Community Catalyst*, what does that look like in the world today where the church is not the withholder of power, but still proclaims God's power? How does the church not be the gatekeeper of grace, but still proclaims our freedom from sin and death, made possible by grace? How does the church not require acclimation, but still proclaims Christ as the truth and the way? How does the church actively work as Christ did, to free the oppressed, to heal the sick, to give life to the dying, while not claiming glory or attention for ourselves, but giving thanks to God in heaven above?

I ask this question with the framework of the gathered entity, "the Church," but perhaps the question is just as well asked of each of us, as individuals who make up the church. After all, the church is not a building, or a steeple; the church is the people.

So, as we think about our call as the people of God, as we think about the gifting of the Spirit, as we think about the imparting of Christ's power ... as we consider what it means to be a *Community Catalyst*, what does that look like in the world today where I am not the withholder of power, but I still proclaim God's power? How do I live as one who is not the gatekeeper of grace, but I still proclaim our freedom from sin and death, made possible by grace? How do I not require acclimation from others, but still proclaim Christ as the truth and the way? How do I actively work as Christ did, to free the oppressed, to heal the sick, to give life to the dying, while not claiming glory or attention for myself, but giving thanks to God in heaven above?

I would honestly love your thoughts – share them in the chat, or send me an email this week, or join in our book study on Wednesday, where we'll talk more about this in a small group setting.

The world is not ours to give, the community is not ours to create, but we are called and gifted to help the community heal – to be a part of the shalom-making work of God in the community. We are called to proclaim God's love for every person, that they might find freedom from sin and death. We are called to proclaim God's glory. So, how do we do this in a way that ensures that every person is able to live in to who God has created them to be, not because we have given them the space or the opportunity, but because they are gifted by the Spirit of God. Not because we accepted them, but because they are created – just as they are – in the image of God. Not because we are "ok" with their differences, but because their differences are part of the tapestry of God's creation.

I think it's time for us to own our failures – to own where we have placed ourselves in the role of the Creator – in the role of the Savior – in the role of the Sustainer. For these are not our roles. Our role is not that of Creator, or Savior, or Sustainer – our role is to proclaim the glory and power of the Creator, the promise and grace of the Savior, the joy and the hope of the Sustainer – the majesty of God Almighty, who invites us not to manage the work, not to dictate the work, not to control the work, but to be part of the work of seeing, of proclaiming, of working in, with, and for the community, that we might all know the shalom of God, the peace of God's love, and the glory of God's Kingdom.

May we listen for God's guidance, may we hear with new ears, may we live with new intention, because words matter – life matters – love matters. May God grant us grace in our failures, and mercy in our wrong doings, and a vision to see the way to the Kingdom. Amen.

¹ Doug Bratt. *Acts 11:1-18*. cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved June 10, 2020.