

## I. Advanced Organizer

1. I want to start this morning with a **grounding experience**. I'm going to invite you to take a moment and check in with your body. Adjust your positioning if you need to; I want you to be as comfortable as you're able to be. And now I'm going to invite you to close your eyes, or soften your gaze, and take a few deep, slow breaths.
  2. And from that space, I want you to **think of a moment, some experience you've had, where you felt real joy**. That's what we're looking for. A moment of joy - what comes to mind when I say that? It doesn't have to be the most joyful experience of your life, don't feel like you need to justify the moment that comes to mind or work too hard; it can be something really simple - enjoying a good cup of coffee in the morning qualifies. Whatever you picture when you hear "picture a moment of joy" - go ahead and take yourself there.
  3. And I encourage you to **notice the details of the experience**. Let your senses engage. What sights do you see? What colors? What does this moment sound like? **What does it feel like in your body?** What parts of you relax or engage as you consider it? And we'll just stay here for a bit, letting you experience that moment that has come to mind anew, letting the joy be present with you whatever that looks like. If you want to move in some way to experience that moment a bit more, if it's helpful to stand or to stretch, or to hold out your hands, or to put a hand somewhere on your body - maybe on your heart, maybe on your head- maybe you out your arms around yourself and give yourself a hug - whatever posture in your body connects you to the joy experience, go ahead and honor that. We'll just stay in the experience for a **few more beats...**
  4. And when you're ready, I invite you to **come back to the room**. How do we feel? Before we move on, we're going to take a **few minutes to check in with some folks around us**. We'll do a five minute discussion in groups of around four, and then we'll come back to those groups a bit later. So for this, **first go ahead and introduce yourselves** if not everyone knows each other, and as we introduce ourselves, take a moment to state not only your **name**, but also your **pronouns and any access needs** you may have. If you need people to speak up because hearing is a challenge, or you need to stand because of what's happening in your body, you can let folks know. If your access needs are currently being met you can name that. After the intro, I invite you to **share whatever you want to share about your experience of connecting with a moment of joy**. If you want, you can say what the moment was, or you can simply share what it felt like to recall it. What sensations did you notice in your body, if any? How did the grounding experience impact your presence in this space? (Wait 5 minutes)
- B. Well, I started with this grounding experience today, to hopefully set us up a bit as we're starting a new series of Sunday morning conversations, **a series I'm calling "Activated Faith"**.
1. As many of you know, earlier in the year I named three priorities for Haven this year that I was identifying through a number of my conversations with folks in this community. All of them are areas of growth that I think we as a community are feeling called to lean into. And while all of these are connected and things I hope we'll be trying to embody in everything we do - in our Sunday teachings, I've been taking these three priorities one at a time and helping us think about them a bit more together. We started by considering **spiritual connection**, growing as a community in deepening our connection to the Divine. That focus included a set of teachings this spring around prayer. Then this summer we turned our focus to **growing in collaboration** - getting humble with one another, building trust and ultimately living into greater interdependence in our community life. And now this

fall, I'm inviting us to turn our focus a bit to the third priority for this year: **"growing in action"**.

2. What do I mean by that? When I talk about growing in action, I'm speaking about moving from the world of ideas to **embodied response**: putting our faith in action both individually and collectively.
  3. Now if you know me, you probably know **I love the world of ideas**. I enjoy nerd-ing out. This fall I'm starting a certificate program with a local seminary, so I'm going back to school to a certain degree and it makes me so happy, cause my mind enjoys considering new things, learning more. Ideas are awesome.
  4. But Jesus the rabbi, the teacher, wanted his listeners not to just be good students, he wanted them to **live into the things he was teaching; to follow the things he was enacting**.
  5. Perhaps this is why he **told so many stories** - not simple messages. As we've talked about before - with his parables - he was trying to provoke. **He was trying to activate**, and he often used strange, even disturbing images and ideas to get his listeners responding not just in their minds but viscerally. These stories weren't intended to be easy to understand, or uncomplicated. They were intended to make people wrestle. I think Jesus wanted folks to puzzle together, to wonder what he was getting at, to ask each other, maybe even debate, and somewhere in the whole process, become activated in their expression of faith.
  6. As we spend some time this fall considering what it might look like to be more activated in our expressions of faith, both individually and collectively, I thought this might be a good time for **another look at some of these provocative stories we call parables**. We did a parables series a while back, but I thought in these conversations it might be good to look at another handful of them we haven't considered together, at least any time in recent years.
  7. As we do this, as we open ourselves up to wrestle a bit, to be provoked, to notice like we did in our grounding, what's happening in our bodies, **I hope we can be open to how the Spirit**, who we affirm spoke in a meaningful way through Jesus, might want to **speak afresh to us today and activate something deeper in our community**.
- II. To start things off this week, we're going to take a look at two very brief parables spoken together; at least that's how they're related in the **Gospel of Matthew**.
- A. Now it's helpful to remember that most scholars believe that many of Jesus' teachings, particularly parables were presented regularly in different settings wherever he was preaching. Like a candidate campaigning with a stump speech, Jesus probably shared many of his lessons, including his parables again and again in different settings; **so how we encounter them in each of the gospels isn't the way they were necessarily always delivered**, but each of the gospel writers made editorial choices in how things were arranged.
  - B. So Matthew arranges many of the parables into groups, and one of those groups of parables comes in the 13th chapter. All of the parables in this chapter are told to illustrate different facets of what Matthew has Jesus calling the **"the kingdom of heaven"**. Some of these stories might be familiar to you. We hear about the parable of the sower, where someone sows seeds in different kinds of soil, with different outcomes. Jesus talks about the kingdom being like a tiny mustard seed growing into a giant tree. He talks about yeast being worked through dough. And in the midst of all these parables, as Matthew has arranged them, we encounter Jesus sharing these two little stories, a pair of sayings that are easy to dismiss

because they're so brief and may not seem too puzzling, but today I'm going to invite us to reflect on them a bit:

- C. 44** *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*
- D.** *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*
- E. Now these are very brief little stories Jesus is relating, describing the divine kingdom, or as we often prefer to say here, **the kin-dom of God**. Scholars sometimes call them twin parables; they seem pretty connected. But if you pay attention, they're also different.
- F. First off, let's just notice some similarities and differences on a surface level:
1. Both of these stories feature **someone encountering something really special**, and responding dramatically - selling everything they have so they can claim this new found item for themselves.
  2. But there are **details that differ** between the two anecdotes Jesus relates that are worth at least noticing. The first story features a rather anonymous person - a man the story says. The second story is more specific about the character - Jesus describes the person as a merchant.
  3. The first person seems to discover the treasure by accident. The second person, the merchant, is searching for something special, when he encounters the pearl of great value. The first parable seems to compare the kingdom to the treasure, but the second compares the kingdom to the merchant searching for pearls.
  4. Now you might say that these are minor differences, hardly worth noting. And perhaps you're right. Perhaps the most self-evident understanding of these parables is all we need to know. If you've looked at these lines before, or heard them preached, you've probably heard something akin to: “What's the treasure? What's the pearl? It's Jesus, of course.” Or maybe “it's the gospel.” Or even “it's the church”. **These parables are often understood to be simple allegories intended to communicate that when you discover Jesus, the gospel, the church...it costs you everything.**
  5. In her book, *Short Stories by Jesus*, New Testament scholar Amy-Jill (or AJ) Levine, says this, *“Allegorical readings can speak to eternal truths and ultimate longings. Yet the point these allegorical interpretations make is also obvious. Such readings rarely produce a challenge and rarely offer a surprise; rather, they confirm standard Christian views.”* As I said earlier, Jesus intended his parables to provoke his listeners, to activate them. **If we're not feeling particularly challenged, perhaps we're missing something.**
- G. As some of you may remember when I've referenced the work of AJ Levine before, I find her particularly helpful because she is a **Jewish New Testament scholar**. She does not identify as a Christian; her reading of the New Testament is informed by her Jewish faith and an interest in centering Jesus and his audience in their own first century Jewish culture. In her book on the parables, AJ Levine focused a whole chapter on the story of the merchant and the pearl. I'm going to share a few insights about that second parable I found helpful, and we'll see if considering them might get us closer to what these two short stories from Jesus were intended to do.
1. The first insight I found helpful has to do with the character of the merchant in this story.
    - a) For Jesus' 1st century largely peasant Jewish audience, beginning the story with the words, “the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant...” would immediately have been surprising. Merchants did not have a particularly good reputation. The Greek word used here is *emperos*, the origin of our English word emporium. **Emperos had the**

**connotation of a wholesaler who buys up stocks of items and then markets to consumers things they don't need at prices they can't afford.** All of the appearances of the term throughout the Hebrew Bible are generally negative and they typically correspond to foreign traders. Dr. Levine says it this way, *"The merchant is thus a boundary crosser, with all the ambivalence that that activity creates—he can be trespassing, or he can be forging alliances. He is socially suspect. He deals in what is not truly of value; his trade is not in land or family or truth; his trade is in moveable, fungible property."*

- (1) Understanding a bit more about how this character of the merchant would have sounded to Jesus' audience, makes me wonder how Jesus might have couched the parable if he was speaking into our contemporary culture. Perhaps he'd start his story saying something like **"the kingdom is like an Amazon executive" or maybe "the kingdom is like a dealer of cryptocurrency"**.
- b) Of course the story isn't just about any merchant. It's a **merchant who's seeking fine pearls**. That description would have also had a ring of strangeness to it.
  - (1) At the time Jesus spoke these words, most of his audience would likely never have seen a pearl, they probably had only heard of them, or perhaps seen one in a portrait of a King or Queen. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder who wrote during this era said that pearls held the **"topmost rank among all things of price."** Besides the extreme luxury of the item, a pearl would have also been strange for Jesus' audience because they were produced by a non-Kosher animal. Pearls are made from oysters, which observant Jewish people wouldn't have had contact with. Perhaps for this reason, though there are references throughout the Hebrew Bible to various jewels like rubies and emeralds, no pearls are mentioned.
  - (2) So in this parable, we have a strange, potentially suspect character searching for strange items of extreme value, presumably so he can sell them and continue his commercial endeavors. But something happens in the story - **what happens and how does it surprise?**
2. This merchant Jesus describes was looking for pearls, and he finds something, but it's not exactly what he was looking for. This is a pearl, but it's only one. This pearl and its stunning beauty are apparently enough to make the merchant stop in his tracks and change his objective mid-quest. No longer is he interested in acquiring a group of pearls that he can trade; **he wants this ONE pearl for himself, and he's willing to do anything to have it.**
  - a) Some might think this is a story of wise investment strategy; someone who understands the value of things and is willing to do what is necessary to secure himself maximum value. But is that true? **In a world without banks, stock markets, investment portfolios, does that logic hold up?** Is this merchant showing us wisdom or foolishness? Commentator R.T. France seems to better understand the reality of this merchant's decision to divest all of his assets in order to buy the one pearl. He starts by comparing the merchant to the person who finds the treasure in the other story *"Unlike the man in the previous parable, who could presumably live off his treasure once he had secured it [and I'll add... he can live off the land itself], this dealer, though initially a man of some substance, is apparently impoverishing himself to acquire something supremely valuable which he could admire and display but could not live off unless he sold it again."*
  - b) The story is not about how a merchant flipped a pearl like someone today might flip a house, maybe impoverishing himself for a day but then turning a profit. No, this story

asks Jesus audience to consider a **merchant selling off his whole business, his home, his clothes, everything he has for one really pretty pearl. It's definitely a provocative idea.**

- c) Now throughout the ages, this parable, along with the one about the treasure before it have often been read in terms of **sacrifice**. "Discipleship means being willing to sacrifice everything in order to follow Jesus." But reading this act of divesting the assets as a sacrifice - that's an interpretation that the story itself doesn't name. The treasure-finder does not seem to experience selling his goods to buy the field as sacrificial; he's joyful as he sells things so he can make the purchase. In the same way, the merchant doesn't seem to conceive of his divestment as a loss. He's giving up things he values less to possess something he values more. **For the merchant, it's a worthy exchange, not a sacrificial one.**
- d) As AJ Levine points out, the actions the merchant takes don't just transform his bank account, they **transform his very identity**. What is a merchant without any merchandise? In selling it all to buy the pearl, he seems to be quitting the commercial business altogether. This merchant seems to have walked away from the business of acquiring and selling. Dr. Levine says it this way, *"Whether what he does is risky or wise, foolhardy or dedicated, he has gained a pearl of enormous value. In the gaining, he has not only fulfilled a desire he did not know he had; he has also changed his identity. He had been looking for fine pearls, but he buys only one. By finding that pearl of ultimate worth, the merchant stops being a merchant. Thus he redefines himself, and we must see him anew as well."*

#### H. **So what are we to make of this merchant turned possessor of a beautiful pearl?**

Stepping away from simple allegory and hearing the story closer to how Jesus' audience heard it, how might it have activated his listeners? How might it activate us?

1. At it's heart, perhaps this story, like the story of the treasure as well, is about the **process of discovering what we ultimately value, and the radical actions we're willing to take when we find what we care about**. Perhaps the "pearl" itself isn't the kingdom, nor is it the merchant. Perhaps the Kingdom is the whole thing - it's what happens when the merchant discovers the pearl, and naturally divests. **In other words - what if the kingdom isn't the pearl, or the person? It's the process**. Perhaps the kingdom of heaven in the process of discovering what's vital and making a change as a result.
2. Perhaps the loving, vibrant expansive activity of God that Matthew calls the "kingdom of heaven" is present when - whether we're seeking it or we stumble upon it by mistake - **we find the thing our heart is most moved by, the thing we would be willing to go all in for; and in some meaningful way we do**. We allow our identity be reshaped as a result of uncovering our true passion. I think of my dad selling his precious acoustic guitar so he could buy an engagement ring and propose to my mom. Perhaps the kin-dom of heaven was in that process: that discovery that this relationship of love and commitment was more important than any item of value, even his precious acoustic guitar. **Perhaps the kingdom is present whenever we discover what we truly long for, and we live differently because of it**.
3. Perhaps these parables are asking each of us individually, as well as collectively, to consider **"what is it you really value"? What's most worthwhile to you? What is your treasure? What is your pearl? And what are you willing to do for that?** How might being really honest about what stirs our hearts connect us to the one who made us, and inspire how we participate in God's expansive loving presence in the world?

4. This is different than what some of us may have heard before- that we need to choose our allegiance: Jesus or our job, Jesus or our family. With this reading, **God is not a commodity competing alongside other things in a marketplace of what to value. The kingdom cannot be bought or sold.** Perhaps instead, the Divine creator is present in some way in all things. Not over and against any of them.
  5. I do believe these stories prompt us to consider **how we live based on what we prioritize.** Some things may need to go so we can hold on to what we realize really matters to us. Or perhaps when we discover what we have been truly valuing, we realize that's not what we want to order our lives around after all. Perhaps like the merchant, we realize we've been seeking after things that ultimately don't satisfy, and then discover what will. By this reading, that work of discovery and realignment itself is sacred. God is in *the process*.
- I. This week was a bit of a developmental milestone in my home as Elliott and **I took a trip to LA to tour a number of colleges.**
1. Elliott's a high school senior preparing to apply to schools over the next couple of months. As I think many of you know, Elliott's an enthusiastic musician, hoping to go to school to study jazz drum set. We've been talking for months about various schools and all the tasks that are going to be needed to apply, to submit the screening videos most of the schools require, material to perform at the auditions themselves if the school likes what they saw in your videos. There are a daunting amount of details to attend to. But this week, **taking some time to actually go and be on a few of these campuses made the whole thing more real.** As part of the trip, Elliott had the opportunity not just to take the campus tours, but he also got to attend rehearsals for a couple of different jazz bands. He got to chat with some of the students and hear from them about their experiences. He had the opportunity to take a couple of lessons with instructors at two different schools. There was even **an incident oddly like our parable.** During one of the lessons, Elliott found himself admiring a particular cymbal that one of the instructors had. The teacher told him he was actually thinking of selling that particular cymbal. Before long, like the merchant, Elliott had enthusiastically emptied his whole Venmo account for a shiny piece of metal.
    - a) I don't believe the cymbal itself is Elliott's pearl of great price, but **I do think he was getting in touch with it this week.** The excitement and joy I saw him experience attending those rehearsals and imagining himself in the drum chair, taking those lessons, connecting with the teachers, buying a unique instrument that could further his craft, discovering his own preferences for what a program could look like, and through it all starting to move from dread at all the tasks and fear of rejection to hope that whatever it takes, this is something worth living into: that looked like the presence of the Divine to me. I believe I felt some of God's kin-dom there in the midst of the experience, and I look forward to seeing more moments of that kind of grace as we move forward in this process.
- J. Friends, I started by naming that this series is about being Activated in our faith. There are so many ways we can live out connection to the Divine - so many activities we can participate in that embody God's loving presence in meaningful ways, and further the work of justice - it **can sometimes paralyze us, because we can't do them all.** But I don't believe any of us were meant to. I wonder if in telling these stories, Jesus might be inviting us to **be present to those places of discovery,** those moments of recognizing what we truly value, what brings us lasting joy, and consider how those might be a clue as to where to activate and how. Think of the grounding exercise and ask yourself, **where might God have been present in that**

**moment of joy?** How might that presence speak to you about what to follow the Spirit into next? In the coming weeks I hope we can do this work of discovery individually and collectively. To discern together, **what do we as a Haven community truly value?** What is our pearl? What might we need to shift in how our life is set up so we can live into that more fully? I pray that as we grow in understanding that, we too will find our way of selling it all, and see the kin-dom of heaven come to life in our midst. Amen.

*If time - second reflection moment. What is your pearl? What is your treasure? Where is God in that?*

**Questions for conversation and reflection:**

1. How do these parables speak to you? What, if anything, do you find provoking?
2. What comes to mind when you think about your own “pearl”? How has your life been shaped around what you truly value? Or how would you like it to be?
3. If Haven had it’s own “pearl”, what might that be? What actions might that pearl lead us to?
- 4.