

I. Advanced organizer

A. (Story of Ayn Rand)

1. Alissa Rosenbaum was born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1905. The daughter of a Jewish couple of relative privilege (her father was a pharmacist), she had the opportunity to be well educated at an early age and took to it. She enjoyed school and excelled in it. However, at the age of 12, Alissa had a formative experience. In 1917, her father's shop was suddenly seized by Bolshevik soldiers, forcing the family to relocate to Crimea, where they lived in utter poverty. Seeing this play out understandably affected your Alissa, and she developed strong feelings toward government intrusion into individual livelihood.
 - a) Eventually, Alissa was able to attend university to study screen writing. She also had a significant interest in philosophy.
 - b) At 21 years of age, Alissa was granted a visa to visit relatives in the United States, and once there she was confident she would not return to Russia. She moved to Los Angeles where she tried to break into the movie industry. She did have a bit of success in film production, and wrote two plays that were produced on Broadway. But the success for which she'd be known for came with the publishing of her first major novel in the 1940s. It was published under the pen name she had by then adopted and would forever be known: (anyone guess?) Ayn Rand. The book that made her a literary star was *the Fountainhead*. Later would come her magnum opus *Atlas Shrugged*.
2. Now, admittedly, I have never personally read one of Rand's novels but I'm aware they are a favorite of many, particularly teenage boys.
3. Through the decades since her books were published in the 1940s and 1950s, Rand has come in and out of favor; but in recent years she has seen a bit of a resurgence, not just because of her novels but the school of philosophy they communicate.
4. A number of prominent conservative politicians, including our President and our Speaker of the House, consider Rand an important influence, she has been the hero of libertarians especially, and in recent years, the Alt-right has lots of Ayn Rand fan-boys.
5. Tech entrepreneurs have been highly influenced by her - Steve Jobs, Peter Thiel of PayPal and many other ventures in Silicon Valley, Uber's founder Travis Kalanick.
6. At the core of her thought is the idea that man is an island.
 - a) In her words: *"My philosophy, Objectivism, holds that . . . [m]an—every man—is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others. He must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose of his life."*
 - b) I recently came upon a book on the ethics of Rand's Objectivism at the library called. I was looking up books for this Sunday on the topics of altruism, generosity, and so on, when something else caught my eye as well - *In Defense of Selfishness*,
7. Now I don't bring this up because I think most of us are Rand-ian disciples, I'm actually assuming that's not the case
8. Here at a Jesus-centered community of faith.
 - a) You don't have to know much about Jesus to know that he was into things that were pretty counter to the teaching of Rand.
 - b) He was about going the extra mile, giving someone not just your shirt but your cloak, if you wanted to lead, taking the role of a servant,
 - c) Rand herself was no fan of Jesus or the altruism she believed he represented.
9. But even if we're not Rand-ian followers, all of us are continually pressured to consider our own self-interest.

- a) We all face pressures to achieve, to find professional, vocational success, to achieve some sort of financial security, self-stability. And those pressures are held in tension with the needs around us, the needs we may feel called to help serve but are not always clear how much we should take responsibility for. How much self concern is selfishness. When does concern for others, altruism, generosity, become unwise and counterproductive?

B. **We're in a teaching series this Lent called "Character Matters"**, and so today I thought we'd do some reflection on our own relationship to self-interest and the interest of others.

We're considering the character trait of generosity. Because truthfully, this topic impacts more than our politics, or our businesses, or financial bottom lines - it impacts our capacity to engage in the activity of God to extend blessing and care to the world around us. Today, we're gonna look at a story today from the life of Jesus, in which I'm hoping Jesus might actually give us some helpful and perhaps even surprising ways to think about these questions.

- C. This story comes from late in the life of Jesus as Mark tells the story. It comes in the last week of his life, after he's triumphally entered Jerusalem and is spending his last days there doing his final teaching.

II. Text to look at:

A. Mark 12:38 - 13:2

38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2 Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

- 1. So we have in this passage a story with three parts. They're clearly connected, but as often happens in looking at parts of the Bible, some times when you zoom in close, you miss what's right outside the frame. And that thing outside the frame is actually the key to understanding what's in it. Many of you may have heard these three paragraphs, but perhaps not together. Particularly the middle portion often ends up being the focus of the shot, with the surrounding pieces being what's outside the frame. But today we're gonna take a little time to look at each of these three parts and consider what it means that they actually are all part of the same story.

B. **Part 1: "Beware of the scribes".**

- 1. who is Jesus talking about?
 - a) religious leaders, teachers of the law, but they also hold political power. In Israel, its in some ways one and the same. These are the people of power. The people of prominence. They hold the respect of the people. And they like it.

- b) Jesus is aware of the self-interest of the scribes. They care about how they look. They dress with long robes that remind people that they are the prominent people of power. Everywhere they go they are given special accommodation. Every banquet they attend, every trip to the market place is an opportunity to remind folks that these are their powerful leaders, and it's an opportunity to stroke the ego of the scribes.
- c) But there's a dark side to the self-interest of the scribes. It's not simply neutral. The self-interest is fed by an unjust system that these scribes benefit from and uphold. And nowhere is this more evident than in their relationship the most marginalized people: the widows.

2. Who are the widows?

- a) Widows represent the most vulnerable people in society. Patriarchal culture- women were provided for by being attached to property owning men (either fathers or husbands). For those who had lost their husbands, they had no means for self-provision or to provide for their children.
- b) God makes it clear early in the story the Bible tells, that God deeply cares about the widows and the orphans, or specifically the fatherless, the ones who lose their fathers.
- c) But by the time Jesus comes along, the system's way of "caring for the widows and orphans" has become problematic.
- d) If a widow was fortunate enough to have an estate, the scribes stepped in as trustees for the estate. Widows were not legally allowed to own property. So the scribes came in as "benefactors". Put their names on the deed, allowed the widows and any children to live there. Took a percentage of the estate each year for this service, though they provided no maintenance of the estate. Over the years, more and more of the estate became theirs. They were fleecing the widows instead of protecting and caring for them, all while maintaining an appearance of benevolence.
 - (1) Jesus finds it sickening and makes clear that God will hold these leaders accountable for this reprehensible distortion of their duty.
 - (2) 'They will receive the greater condemnation', he says.

C. Part 2: The offering station.

- 1. A box or set of boxes, similar to what we have the box.
 - a) Now, there was no venmo or PayPal back then. There were not even checks. Currency was in coinage. It was noisy. And you could tell who was giving what, simply based on the sound of coins clinking in the box. Rich people, the privileged, the powerful, would come with bags and bags of coins; they bring a great haul in. And Jesus is sitting there right next to the box, watching them put their bags in.
 - b) And then in comes the widow. The epitome of marginalization. And she takes out these two small coins and places them both in the box. He can hear them softly: clink, clink. And Jesus is struck by it, so much so that he calls his friends to him to show them what has happened.
- 2. Here is what's interesting. I just learned this week from a preaching friend of mine that there are two ways to interpret Jesus comments here.
 - a) **The first you may have heard**, especially if you've heard this story before. **This interpretation says Jesus is praising the faithfulness of the widow.** He is making a comment about how much God values her faith and her sacrificial generosity, to give everything she has, even 100% of her income. She sets her own self-interest completely aside, and in doing so, she's setting an example for us to follow - to give abundantly and sacrificially, recognizing that ultimately everything we have comes from God.

- (1) Does that sound familiar?
 - (2) It is by many scholars and preachers a favored interpretation. You preach the widow's mite and call folks to consider equally radical forms of selfless-ness. The widow is like an antithesis to Ayn Rand. And when you consider this story on it's own, just this little paragraph, the reading makes total sense. But when you zoom out a little, there's more to consider.
- b) The second option to interpret Jesus comments, is not that they are a word primarily of praise, but ultimately that they are a word of lament. **Jesus is lamenting the gift of this widow, a gift given in faith and hope in God to be sure, but ultimately given to a system that is set up to exploit and oppress her.** A system that has told her that faithfulness to God means giving up the last pennies she has to feed herself or her children to the people who claim to be God's appointed, but again and again have failed her and will fail her. She's letting go of self-interest, but those who should have her interests in mind are only concerned with themselves. Jesus laments the corruption of the system that brings oppression and exploitation of the vulnerable, rather than the protection and care of them.
- (1) This interpretation sees the incident at the offering box as being an important pivot between the other two moments of the story: Jesus warning about the corrupt leadership and the system that upholds them, and the final paragraph we looked at: the beginning of Mark 13.

D. Part 3: It's all coming down.

1. As they leave the temple treasury, **Jesus' followers are commenting on the magnificence of the building** - how huge the stones are. They seem impenetrable. They represent wealth and power. They carry the weight of history; Jesus' followers are captivated with the awe...the magnitude of what has happened there. Have you ever visited a place that felt like that? Maybe in Washington DC - seeing the White House, or the Lincoln Memorial, or some place of spiritual significance like the Vatican in Italy.
2. And this is like the final straw for Jesus. It's like his friends just don't get what he's trying to say, and so Jesus let's loose. He goes on a preaching tirade for all of chapter 13. He is in full-on prophet of doom mode. **This system is corrupt.** Its not doing what it's made to do. Yes, Jesus wants people to share their resources, to give out of their abundance, so that everyone has enough, so that they can **be, just, generous communities, but that's not happening.** The system is broken. It's enabling the self-interest of the powerful few and no longer serving the interests of the larger community.
3. **And so Jesus says, "it's gotta come down"**. These unjust systems are counter to the way of God: a God that is community within God's self, a God that created people not to be islands but to share in the magnificence of loving relationship, a God that is ever giving of God's self to the benefit of creation out of care and compassion and generosity, a God that desires God's children to know that they are beloved so much that God entered the pain of their humanity to be in it with them in love, even suffering as they suffer, so they may find love and connection even in the darkness. **This way of God cannot endure injustice, it cannot endure exploration, it cannot partner with oppression.** It must bring the end of it. It must bring down the unjust systems. These temples of inequality ultimately will not stand, for they are counter to the will of God.
 - a) Ayn Rand - saw first hand the corruption and destructive nature of Soviet communism. Her response was to withdraw from the collective. To say "the system is broken; let's get rid of these systems altogether."

- b) In this lament of a system's corruption and prophetic vision of it coming down, Jesus in a sense agrees with Rand's concern: **human systems are corruptible**. Human systems are fallible. Human systems can become unjust.
- c) But what Rand sees as fixed and unchangeable, Jesus sees as flawed, but hopeful. **Jesus comes into the mess, calls it out, and then says, "let's make this better"**. Humans have the capacity to be selfish; they also have the capacity to be empathetic and cooperative. Yes, they have the capacity to be cruel. They also have the capacity to be kind. **Jesus didn't come to abolish the community of God, and start over. He came to reform it. He came to call faith community back to what it was meant to be.**

III. So what are our invitations, in light of all this?

A. Invitation 1: Consider your own balance of self-interest verses the interest of others, in regards to your time, energy and money.

- 1. I'm not going to tell you what percentage of your income you should be giving away. If you're waiting for that, it's not coming.
 - a) But I do think the consistent teaching of Scripture from beginning to end, calls us to an openhanded-ness with material possessions, that is clear. It calls us to share abundantly, to make offerings out of gratitude and recognition of God's generosity with us, for those who have abundance to share with those who have more need; recognizing at any given time the tables may turn. And so many people find the Old Testament idea of a tithe (or 10%) a helpful framework to start from, but if you're in the place of the widow, that might not actually be an appropriate thing to do. If you're paying rent in the Bay Area, it may not be feasible.
- 2. I'm not saying you need to show up at every event that Haven or any other organization you are involved in is having, no matter how important the work.
 - a) There is wisdom in taking Sabbaths - a regular rhythm or rest and renewal, alongside work. Burning ourselves out doesn't serve anyone.
- 3. So I'm not here to prescribe the formula of balance for you in terms of your time, your energy, or your money.
- 4. What I can do is invite all of us into an ongoing conversation we can be having with Jesus and one another about the ways our own self-concern limit our capacity to participate more fully in the work of community building and generosity extending that God's inviting us into. The circumstances of our lives change from season to season - our bottom lines change, the sizes of our families change, our energy levels change, and so on. This is something we need to be continually revisiting with the Spirit throughout the varying seasons of our life, asking afresh, "What are you inviting me into in this season?" "How can I best cooperate with the time, energy, and money I have with your activity in the world?"

B. Invitation 2: As a church, consider the ways we use the resources entrusted to us to bring life to our community.

- 1. There's a warning here that I personally feel as a faith leader, to be wary of our own temptation towards self-interest. There's a reason so many people are mistrusting of church - because sadly, churches at times, like the religious community of Jesus day, have been exploitive.
- 2. How many times has this very text been preached apart from it's context in ways that are exploitive? Encouraging people to *give till it hurts*? Without recognizing the irony that in preaching this story of the widow as a call to action, at times faith leaders have actually become what Jesus is lamenting?

3. But again, it's not about walking away and saying let's divest from this whole endeavor altogether, Ayn Rand style. I think Jesus is calling us to do better with our resources. To be open, transparent, thoughtful, wise stewards of all that has been entrusted to us. To care for the interests of the community.
4. One of the reasons I believe this move to two services a month was a move in alignment with this was it was a recognition that are resources could do more if concentrated efficiently. Before, a large percentage of our resources went into Sunday gatherings: the room rental, the bagels, the coffee, the childcare help. Whether we had twelve people show up or forty, the cost was the same. By concentrating these gatherings to a time that most of us can all be here together, we also freed up resources to invest in what's happening in the other room: we can hire a pastor for our children and families. Over a third of our church is under the age of twelve. Are they not as deserving of the opportunity to grow in safe, diverse, Jesus-centered community as we are? They don't have any income to contribute, they can't pay for the service, but isn't it worth it for our community to share what we have resource wise with them? Isn't that what the one who said, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" would encourage us to do?
5. All of you are stakeholders in this. This thing isn't happening because of outside forces or people pulling the strings. Its the people in this room who are making this happen. So I invite you to be considering specific ways the Spirit might be inviting you to hold your stake. Is God inviting you to participating financially in this endeavor for the first time or in a new way? Is God inviting you to become a member, to take the step of being more officially aligned with the project of Haven? Is God inviting you to pray for the wisdom and work of our board and pastoral staff? Might the Spirit be inviting you to at some point serve on our board? Our board is essentially a group of Haven members who have volunteered to help steward the resources of Haven in responsible ways that try as best we can to help Haven become a more safe, diverse, Jesus centered space? Are any or all of those something Jesus might have blessing for you to step into?

IV. Invitation 3: Consider the systems you are invested in. How can you help them move away from self-interest and oppression towards greater equity?

- A. Think of the systems you participate in everyday. What power do you have? How might you use it promote systems that bring freedom and consider the interests of the community, particularly the vulnerable?
 1. Think of your workplaces
 - a) how are they set up to serve the needs of the community vs the needs of the shareholders?
 2. Think of where you shop and what you buy.
 - a) How does your money participate in systems that harm or systems that benefit marginalized people in our communities?
 3. Government.
 - a) If you don't approve of how your tax dollars are being spent, if you do not believe the powerful are fulfilling their duty to the people, organize. Team up with others who see the same thing. Engage in acts of non-violent resistance. Be a part of calling the systems you are a part of to embody justice for all.
- B. Let's take some time to pray for the Spirit to speak to us about all of those things. (*walk through community with Jesus. Ask Jesus to point out to you the unjust systems around you, show you the people who are being exploited. Ask Jesus to show you what specific things he's inviting you to do about it. It maybe stop investing here. It may be stop focusing on your*

own interests there. It may be about investing in something new through time, energy, and money.)

V.