

I. Advanced Organizer.

- A. **I want to start today with a bit of a reflection exercise.** Think of a person or two that you really admire. Who inspires you? Who motivates you to be the best person you can be? Who do you look up to? What qualities would you like to emulate in that person? **What qualities are you trying to embody yourself?** If you're a parent, what qualities or characteristics are you hoping to help cultivate in your kids?
- B. **Now I want you to think about people you see in power today.** People who hold power in some of the institutions you are impacted by. Powerful people in our corporations, powerful people in media, powerful people in government. People who fill your news feed. **Do they share the qualities you aspire to? How does that make you feel?**
- C. **I think we live in an interesting time, where many of us would answer "no".** Those in the highest offices in our corporate structures, starting most notably of course with the man in the Oval Office, do not demonstrate the personal character that most of us would hope to embody for ourselves or to teach our children. **And so we may feel a profound dissonance between seeing those who seem to be succeeding, those who are holding powerful levels of control in our lives also being the people who demonstrate character that we find at best troubling, and at worst abhorrent.**
- D. I remember the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that I felt a couple days after news broke that then candidate Trump had been caught on tape bragging about sexually assaulting women. At first, I welcomed the news break of the story. It felt like important truth that was revealing of a candidate for office's character in a way that was so clear, it had to have a consequence. But a couple days later the sinking feeling came as I watched him joyfully dismiss the criticism coming his way, casually calling it all "locker room talk". **The sinking feeling came in the realization that it was clear who this person was but people would stand with him anyway.**
- E. **The feeling has continued in some way over the last fifteen months or so.** It has **chipped away at my optimism in our democratic system.** In its place, at times I have found my heart cloaked in a sad cynicism, as a **skepticism that anyone cares about real integrity seems to sink in.**
- F. And I know I'm not the only one. **SNL recently featured one of the most despairing skits I've seen,** around a fictional TV game show called **"What even matters anymore?"** The sketch is of a game show in which the host asks that question to her guests about various things that have happened throughout this presidency, and then things that she imagines could happen in the future, **wondering if any of them would ever matter in terms of consequences, for our current leadership.** Would any of them making a difference in terms of people's support? The answer is despairingly no. **In the sketch, the host deteriorates, as she become more and more convinced that there is no accountability or even hope for it.** She ends the show just trying to find comfort through hugs from her guests and a bottle of wine.
- G. It is true that if we see leadership that does not reflect our values, or worse, that we feel actually brings harm to others: we're right to be concerned. **It is true that leaders have significant influence.** It's not just the power to enact policies: they can even influence how we think. What our brains become focused on, what we're exposed to regularly, affects the way we frame the world, the way we process information, the way we behave. And sadly, in the case of this last year, we've seen the result of toxic, divisive politics not just in the media, but in all kinds of every day interactions. Southern Poverty Law Center has been tracking things in the last year like a sharp rise in incidents of bullying up in K-12 classrooms. They've noted a

real surge in hate groups identified. The Anti-defamation league has seen a threefold increase in the last year of racist flyers, stickers, and banners on college campuses.

- H. **It is true that we have a real crisis on our hands in terms of the current cultural climate. But it is not true that history then shows us that all is lost; that if our leaders don't model kindness, compassion, empathy, justice, integrity - no one will.**
- I. **As people of Jesus centered faith, we have actually inherited a tradition in which people of faith have had very different understandings about what it means to be human, what it means to live in community, and how we ought best to conduct our lives to promote human flourishing, then those in power around them.**
1. **Jewish faith arose in a world in which the surrounding cultural perspectives on personal character was very different that what many of us consider acceptable: many neighbors of ancient Israelites practiced child sacrifice, patriarchal abuse of women, ritual prostitution in the name of worship.** In the laws of neighboring nations, the wealthy were permitted to harshly execute the poor for petty crimes like theft or even receiving a stolen good. Women could be executed for humiliating their husbands. **The law of Moses was quite progressive in it's care for the vulnerable and restraint in punishment by comparison.**
 2. Jesus also was born into a world where leadership was corrupt and held all the power, maintaining law and order through brutal violence. Israel was under Roman occupation, and those in the leadership of Rome did not reflect Jewish values: they did not worship Yahweh, they did not value marriage in the same way, they did not practice care for the widows and orphans. **But Jesus didn't call his followers to play by the same game as the Romans: to overthrow the government through violence, and political manipulation. Instead called them to a different kind of insurgency. A different kind of revolution. A revolution of character.**
 3. Jesus' sermon on the mount was a classic example of a call to an alternative way of living. **To actually focus on personal character, not just on outward behavior: (how we speak, how we spend our money, what we do with our bodies), but what was happening internally too, and trying to bring those things into alignment.** In his teaching, Jesus was encouraging his followers to live differently than the cultural models they saw in people of power - both the political power holders, and the religious elites - **seeming to believe that that kind of morally connected life, that commitment to character had the power to change the world.** Unlike the Romans, Jesus described his followers, **his revolution, not as a band of conquerors, but as influencers.** He described them as **salt that could flavor and preserve the world.** He described them as **light that could illuminate dark spaces.**
- J. One of the most interesting voices I've found inspiring this year comes from the Reverend **William Barber**, a black pastor and activist from North Carolina. He came to prominence in recent years as the leader of the Moral Monday movement in North Carolina, a racially diverse coalition of demonstrators fighting back against attacks on voting rights, living wages and health care for people in North Carolina. **He also leads an organization called Repairers of the Breach that is calling people of all faith backgrounds, as well as no faith backgrounds, to join together for what Rev. Barber calls a "moral resistance". By this he means an active resistance to systems of oppression, rooted in a moral vision for the world.** Repairers of the Breach describe their vision this way: "we declare that the moral public concerns of our faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, women, LGBTQ

people, children, workers, immigrants, communities of color, and the sick. Our deepest moral traditions point to equal protection under the law, the desire for peace within and among nations, the dignity of all people, and the responsibility to care for our common home.” They are organizing with all people who share this moral vision across the country; in fact Ginny and I will go see Rev. Barber this week in Berkeley.

- K. This idea of moral resistance seems completely in line with the work of the Jewish prophets, and the work of Jesus, as well as the early church leaders who followed after him.
- L. **Now when I talk about becoming concerned again with issues of character or morality, I’m not talking about legalism or moralism.** Often “Christian morality” has gotten tangled up in systems of power and been used to control and even oppress rather than to bring freedom, joy, and life. **But Jesus’ goal in inspiring people with a moral vision was not to bring oppression, it was to bring freedom.** Yahweh was not giving the people law to bring slavery and bondage, but to **bring life.** Jesus, as a fulfillment of that law came to live and embody it and empower his followers to live differently not so that they would be enslaved to a legalist framework of rules, but so they could have a path for living that brings life to themselves and to others in their community. **”I have come that you may have life”, Jesus said, “and have it to the full.”**

- M. **I’ve talked about this year as being a season of “re-forming”. Re-forming in our structures and communal practices at Haven.** Re-forming communally in terms of some of the people involved. But also **re-forming personally.** Over the next couple of months, as we enter the season of Lent that approaches and head towards Easter, my hope is that **all of us can go on a journey with Jesus of considering our own spiritual formation, take a deeper look at the forming of our own character.** How might Jesus be calling each of us to consider our own formation as people of faith? How might the character we’re developing in ourselves help us participate in Moral Resistance?

- II. As we open up this conversation for the next couple of months, I just want today to take a look at some things Jesus had to say about why this concern with how we live matters: **why character matters from his point of view.** It comes at the end of a chunk of teaching in which Jesus is calling his followers to bring their actions and motives into alignment with the heart of God, and influence the world around them through the way they live. Let’s pick it up in Luke 6, starting with vs. 39.

- A. ***“39 He also told them a parable: “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? 40 A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. 41 Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 42 Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.*”**

- 1. We need to attend to our own character before we try to influence anyone else’s.

- a) Jesus is affirming that character in our leadership matters. We have the power to influence others who are following us. This is true for any of us in various places in life: work, family life, church. The more influential we are, the more important it is that we are self-reflective.

- (1) **One of the most painful lessons of parenting is how much I struggle personally.** I’m trying to cultivate patience in my kids, and then sometimes I epically lose my patience. My kids are the first to notice the hypocrisy. After almost twelve years of parenting I am still regularly confronted with the reality that I need

more maturity, more wisdom, more patience, more kindness. I need to be in touch with those things, to practice them on a moment to moment basis, particularly because they are the things I'm trying to influence my kids in.

- b) In the same way, if you're like me, **you have strong opinions about the hypocrisy of some of our leaders**, and feel the need to see an alternative kind of leadership arise to help shape and influence the world. **But my critique is only as solid as my own willingness to humbly deal with my own stuff.** The ways that I mess up; that I fall short of the ideal. **I need to become aware of the logs in my eyes and to regularly work with Jesus and the loving, accepting, gracious people that Jesus has brought into my life to keep my own eyes clear, if I want to have any integrity or hope of participating in demonstrating a better way.**

B. 43 "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; 44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. 45 The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

1. What's inside will come out eventually. Conduct follows character.

- a) If we want to produce good fruit, we need to be tending it from the beginning. You can't "fake it till you make it". Eventually what's really in you will be evident to everyone.
2. What kind of fruit are we talking about? How do we know it's good?:
- a) The apostle Paul said it this way (Galatians 5):
"22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law."
- b) Are we producing these things or something else? Love or mistrust and suspicion? Joy or fear? Peace or conflict? Patience or striving? kindness or cruelty? Self-control or volatility?
- c) If we can't testify clearly that that fruit is being born in our lives, there may still be some work to do internally.
3. Think of the people that came to mind for you in the beginning. Why were they admirable to you? How would you say the fruit that you see born out in their life reflects the character they've been cultivating inwardly?
- a) New came out this week that Tom Hanks has been cast in a film being made about Fred Rogers, the man behind Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. The film will specifically focus on the story of the friendship that was formed between Mr. Rogers and journalist Tom Junod, who was writing a profile on the 70 year old television star in 1998, and found his life changed by it. Junod went in cynical, in another age of cynicism - this was the year of the whole Clinton impeachment drama - but Junod's cynicism about the man was broken down by spending just a little time with him. The profile he wrote, which you can find online, is stunning. Fred Rogers was a man of deep faith who believed to his core that all people were worthy of care and love. In his time with Mr. Rogers, Tom Junod saw the way he interacted with people and could feel that what he emits on the TV show, - the astonishment, the kindness, the curiosity about the world - is entirely consistent with who he is. It's not a show. Fred Rogers was a person of deep humility, consistency and character. He woke early every morning and prayed for two hours every day for the many people he cared for, or the people who wrote him emails. He swam every morning. He didn't drink or eat meat. He weighed the same 143 pounds

his whole adult life. And he approached everyone he met with genuine gratitude and care. It was contagious. Here's one little anecdote Junod shares: *"Once upon a time, a man named Fred Rogers decided that he wanted to live in heaven. Heaven is the place where good people go when they die, but this man, Fred Rogers, didn't want to go to heaven; he wanted to live in heaven, here, now, in this world, and so one day, when he was talking about all the people he had loved in this life, he looked at me and said, 'The connections we make in the course of a life—maybe that's what heaven is, Tom. We make so many connections here on earth. Look at us—I've just met you, but I'm investing in who you are and who you will be, and I can't help it.'"*

C. **46 "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? 47 I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. 48 That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49 But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house."**

1. Here we have the third and final metaphor:

- a) **two builders. One digs deeply.** He takes his time, he's diligent in his work. Doesn't cut corners; doesn't worry about just getting something up quickly. Wants to make sure it's done right.
- b) That's different than the **second builder**. He seems more interested in having something admirable that everyone can see as soon as possible. He wants it to be huge. The best house ever. He wants it admired tomorrow. Taking the time to dig deep and find a solid foundation: who needs that? And so his house might get done quicker. It might be impressive to look at. It might be celebrated more quickly, and more cheaply done, as well. The second builder feels like he caught a bargain. That guy over there wasted his time and money on something that didn't really matter.
- c) But this second builder **wasn't taking into account what may be coming**. He wasn't ready for a flood. When the river swelled and the water rose around his house, it couldn't withstand the flooding. The first house stood strong, it had a foundation that was solid. The second didn't.

2. Jesus tells us who these two people are supposed to be. He interprets the little parable of us:

- a) **The first builder is *who?*: the one who hears Jesus' words and acts on them.** This person recognizes that Jesus has the words of life, and they want life.
- b) The second builder: is the one who hears and doesn't act. The one who thinks he doesn't need it. He doesn't need forgiveness. He doesn't need character development. He doesn't need to make any adjustments. And in the end, it costs him.

3. **Hearing about character is not the same as living it. Being exposed to truth is not the same as being impacted by it. Truth only benefits us if we take the time and do the work to respond accordingly.**

D. All three of these passages, one after another, are taking another angle on this point:

Character Matters.

1. It may not seem to matter in the short term. You may see what looks like victory from those who have poor character. It may seem like they win. But those wins are short term. This is short-term thinking. **Character development is a long-term game.**

- a) The leader whose vision is blocked looks like a good leader until he falls into the pit and it's obvious that he's blind.
- b) The fruit on the tree may take a long time to be nourished from the root, to blossom, to grow, and then to ripen, but overtime it becomes obvious if it's good or bad.
- c) The house with the foundation takes longer to build. And on a sunny day, it may not look any different than the house without a foundation. But in time, the **truth will be revealed**. Once the storms, that inevitably come hit, only one house will be left standing.

III. So if this is true, if we would do well to take some time to attend to our character in a revolutionary assertion that it actually matters, how do we move forward?

A. Pay attention to who is influencing us.

- 1. Who are we following?
 - a) My news consumption of late: NPR podcast junkie. Can be unhelpful, giving too much power and voice to forces that aren't what we want to be influenced by. How do we stay aware, stay woke, without being sucked in and becoming like the thing we want to resist, just because it has such a presence in our life and in our brains space?
 - b) Important to have alternative influences. This is where meditating on the teachings of Jesus can be super helpful. Not from a legalistic reasoning, but from a wisdom one. Centered set. How do we consistently find ways to turn our arrows more to Jesus and away from other sources of power shouting for our attention?

B. Cultivate an Interactive connection with a living God in the midst of our daily challenges.

- 1. How was Jesus able to so calmly live this? How was he able to cultivate such integrity? How were those who followed him able to? People like Paul who were able to maintain cheerfulness in Jesus in the midst of oppression and persecution, imprisonment at the hands of corrupt leadership.

C. What we're going to be focusing on this Lent:

- 1. In our Sunday Gatherings, a few teachings on classic Christian disciplines - faithfulness in relationships, generosity, temperance with practices we can be doing to live the things - not in a legalistic way but in an effort to turn our arrows and build on our foundations.
- 2. A couple of daily guides from our friends in the Blue Ocean World. You can see what works for you. The River will be doing a Lenten series on the Sermon on The Mount, with reflections on various readings each day that you may find useful.
- 3. Blue Ocean Arbor is doing a guide related to praying the Sarum Prayer, which is a traditional prayer (may be as old as the 8th century) that is very much connected to the cultivating of interactive connection inmost of daily life.
- 4. Go back and forth between thee two: use one, use both. Or something else altogether that helps you do those things of reorienting your following through the season of Lent in very practical ways in regards to your character on Jesus.

D. End praying the Sarum Prayer which I believe is an invitation to God to lead us forward:

1. *God be in my head, and in my understanding.*

God be in my eyes, and in my looking.

God be in my mouth, and in my speaking.

God be in my heart, and in my thinking.

God be at my end, and in my departing.