

## I. Advanced Organizer

- A. It started abruptly and **within a few days, it felt like the world had changed**. To be sure, there had been murmurings about a growing threat for a few months, but then high profile celebrities and athletes and others in business or politics started getting sick. Suddenly within a few days in mid-March 2020, our phones were flooded with cancellation emails - school is cancelled. The office is closing temporarily. This or that event is being postponed. Church will gather for the first time online this Sunday.
1. I'm talking of course about **the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic** - that early stage when within a week the world pivoted hard to Zoom. Stay at home orders were imposed. Supermarkets started queuing people up outside, only letting a few in at a time to shop. Dots were placed on the sidewalk outside the store or by the register, indicating six feet apart. It was the moment where socializing on Zoom felt like a novelty. Let's do a Zoom happy hour, or crafting club, or game night. Folks who hadn't touched their kitchen appliances in months were suddenly stuck at home, so why not try making sourdough bread? Do you all remember that? **The first phase of the Pandemic**.
  2. But of course it wasn't the last. Within months, things shifted again. There was no "going back to normal" but another phase within the new normal began. By summer, **mask wearing became the norm**, when it had not been before. A variety of cloth masks with every cute design possible came on the market. Masks were the new accessory to flaunt your style, protect yourself and signal to others that you cared about community health. We began to move from total isolation to the **strange phenomenon of "Social Bubbles"** - choosing a few others you could socialize with to lessen the isolation. Folks started to **gather outdoors**, but still carefully - still with a lot of distance. Some parks drew circles in the grass, carefully measured six feet apart. Restaurants opened park-lets in the street, allowing folks from the same household, or possibly the same social bubble to dine together, again making sure tables were at least six feet apart. The next phase of the pandemic.
  3. By the following winter, **shots were going in arms and it felt for many like the tide was turning**. There was light at the end of the tunnel. Folks awaited their turn to get their vaccine appointment, eagerly refreshing the appointment websites to snag a precious spot. Social media feeds filled up with photos of people proudly bearing their arms, showing off their bandaids, gratefully suffering the side effects of the shots if it meant the covid nightmare was coming to an end. Proof of vaccination to enter a store or an event space or an airplane started becoming a thing...**along with an emerging backlash against vaccination**, against asking for proof, against mask-wearing in public spaces. **Another phase of the pandemic**.
  4. Of course I could go on - the phases I've just described roughly tracked by my estimation the first year of the Covid pandemic, and in the year and half beyond, we've gone through more phases - more changes, more adaptations in terms of how the world has had to live due to the changes in our understanding, our growing levels of immunity, as well as the tools available to combat the virus we've come to know as Covid-19. I don't need to detail them all - I trust you remember them.
- B. But I start with this example of looking at some of the phases of Covid life, because I think that **considering the phases we've all lived through in the last couple of years highlights for us the overall theme we're in the midst of considering this fall at Haven**. This is the second Sunday in a series I'm calling "**Community Evolving**". In this series, we're thinking through together **how things grow and adapt and change - not just in the natural**

**biological world, but in other spheres as well, including in our spirituality and its**

**practice.** I believe that it's healthy for faith to naturally grow and change over time, and so this fall we're considering together what that might look like for us not only to travel a journey of personal evolution, but also what it means for us to collectively evolve.

C. Today I want to focus on a theme that I think is pretty foundational to this concept of spiritual evolution: **the evolving of our understanding.** What do I mean by that? All of us as we age, as we grow, as we develop, it's not just our bodies that change; the way we think about the world, the amount of information we have accumulated, the way our experiences have shaped us - all of these contribute to our understanding evolving as well. We think about certain things differently than we used to. And this is good, it means we're learning. And this evolution in understanding isn't limited to the realms of what we know about science or history or even the vast work of "adulting". **Our understanding of faith and spirituality should also be naturally evolving.**

II. Now I've been interested in this question of how we socially and spiritually "evolve" in some way for a while, and as such I've paid attention through the years to **a number of different models that have been proposed for various phases or stages of spiritual development that a lot of folks tend to move through in life,** not unlike the phases of covid we all went through in 2020 and beyond; just spread out generally over a longer period of time.

A. Personally I have found these **models of development really helpful,** not because they always map perfectly onto every situation I've encountered, but because I think it's helpful when we think about something as deeply personal but also as intangible as our understanding and our faith, to remember that though we each have our own journeys which are unique to us, none of us are completely in isolation as human beings. We're evolving alongside one another, and actually the ways we evolve can bear a lot of resemblance to how others evolve. When we look at lots of individuals as well as groups and societies, **patterns emerge.** Sometimes I think it's helpful to step outside of ourselves a bit and understand that the process we find ourselves in is actually bigger than just our own unique experience. Our process is shaped by cultural and social forces beyond us, as well as the stages of life we're passing through, and having some broader context for all of that can be helpful, especially when we find ourselves in the process of some sort of significant growth spurt or meaningful shift. It can be grounding to see that shift alongside the shifts that others have experienced in similar ways. **It can help us get a sense not just of where've been and where we currently are, but also where we might be going.**

B. Now I don't have time to consider all of these models of development this morning. I've seen ones that are very simple - with only two or three stages named to ones that are pretty complex. I think potentially the most intellectually interesting model I've come across, called **"Spiral Dynamics"**, deals not just with the development of individuals, but whole societies throughout history, and in this model there are currently at least eight phases identified, with more expected to emerge in the future as humans and their societies continue to evolve. I don't have time to go through all eight phases of Spiral Dynamics today. Maybe in another context in the future I could do that if some of you are interested, but I will share a simpler model for us this morning that has been influenced by Spiral Dynamics, as well as some of the other models I've studied through the years, and I think it does a good job of synthesizing a lot of the main ideas. This comes from speaker and writer Brian McLaren and can be found in a couple of his recent books. He also shared it during the recent ***Evolving Faith*** conference some of us may have tuned into. McLaren's model has **four stages that he identifies people moving through.**

1. The first phase he calls **Simplicity**. - As Brian describes it, this is the stage of **simple binaries** - the stage we start at as children. The world is understood through clear categories that are intended to help us comprehend it and stay safe within it. It's dualistic by nature - things are usually explained as this or that. This serves the child to keep things clear - the milk is safe to drink, the detergent is not. Safe/dangerous, right/wrong, us/them - **this is the way we understand the world in the simplicity stage**. Folks in the simplicity stage tend to be very dependent on voices of authority, like children with their parents and teachers. Those authority figures keep things clear and define the categories. **Faith in this stage is essentially about accepting the categories we're given and living consistently within them**. Some people stay in this simplicity stage their whole life and it serves them well. But as Brian names increasingly more and more of us at younger and younger ages move on. We encounter realities that push us beyond Simplicity to the next stage.
2. This is what McLaren calls **Complexity**. This second stage is where **we begin to deal with nuance** - it becomes clear that black and white alone are not the only categories, there must also be at least some grey. We move from perceiving dualistically (this or that) to **more pragmatically** - in this case we do this, in this case we do that. This phase is **more self-confident and independent** - we become more used to thinking for ourselves and making our own determinations about the best way to do things. **We become goal oriented, problem solving, focused on achieving success or at least avoiding failure**. We may move from putting all of our trust in authority figures to **becoming sources of authority**. **Faith in this stage might be a kind of means to an end** - we're following God's sanctioned and #blessed path to achieve our best life now. Some of us stay and live much of our life in this complexity stage. But many of us at some point find ourselves moving forward further into a third stage.
3. From Complexity we move on to **Perplexity**. This third stage often follows that process of **finding more and more grey between black and white**. Perhaps it comes from an epic failure of what felt like the promises of the complexity stage — the best life now doesn't hold together. When that happens you may look at the setup you've been living with with new eyes - you see the idols in your midst as we've sometimes called them. The constructs that you've been building your world upon seem to collapse under the weight of scrutiny. **Pragmatism gives way to suspicion, skepticism, and cynicism**. In perplexity we see that the binaries of simplicity aren't just incomplete, they're problematic, even damaging, because we see how they are often established through power and privilege, and upheld through oppression and exploitation. In perplexity, we may recognize the harm that those systems to uphold simplicity and complexity have brought to ourselves or those we care about. **Here we learn to question authority, to challenge it, to push beyond the simple popular narrative and look for the hidden secrets, the untold stories, the skeletons in the closet**. We care about authenticity and honesty. But we wonder if any claim of truth can really be trusted. **Faith in this stage can feel like an obstacle to critical thinking**. We may feel a lot more comfortable with doubt than faith. And in this phase we may find ourselves feeling isolated from others, unmoored, and a bit hopeless that we can experience joy and meaning again.
  - a) **I'd guess that a number of us in this room know what I'm describing when I talk about this Perplexity phase**. We've been there. We may be there now. We may have been in this space a long time and wonder if there's any other space to be in. Honestly, I think a lot of our Bay Area, justice-conscious, waking up to the idols of white

supremacy and heteronormativity, and capitalism world is in this stage right now. **But perhaps the very fact that we're here at Haven, in a spiritual community, participating to whatever degree we are, testifies to the fact that some part of us still hopes for something more.** Maybe we still hope that there is meaning beyond cynicism, connection beyond isolation, faith beyond doubt. And to us, teachers like McLaren would point us to another stage that more and more folks are starting to inhabit.

4. Stage four McLaren calls **Harmony**. In this stage we begin to integrate all the stages we've passed through. We become perhaps a bit cynical about our cynicism and begin to find something on the other side of it. Our relationship to certainty and uncertainty shifts, and we become more comfortable with what McLaren calls "**intelligent unknowing**". We also can appreciate the journey and the role all of the stages have played along the way. We understand that **they have all belonged**; that they were all somewhat inevitable. They were all necessary parts of our evolving.
  - a) We can have compassion on ourselves and on the journey we've been on; we see that **Simplicity** served us in some way and it was the best we could do at the time. The same is true for **complexity** and **perplexity**. They can all exist now in harmony with one another.
  - b) In this stage we **no longer feel the need to despise and reject everything that has come before** or look at **stages that may come ahead with anxiety and fear**, but we can recognize that all of the stages matter because they all have the capacity to make us wiser, more critically thinking, more open to mystery kind of human beings. Brian describes **faith in this phase as "a humble, reverent openness to mystery that expresses itself in non-discriminatory love."** We see how we carry with us the strengths and the weaknesses of the stages that have come before us - we notice at times our tendency to think dualistically, or to become super-pragmatic, or to fall into hyper-criticism and cynicism, but we can accept those parts of ourselves, along with the gifts that each of those stages has brought us. We see authority figures in a new way - as flawed human beings, just like we are, in their own process of becoming, and can accept their imperfections as well as appreciate their strengths.
  - c) In this stage we can finally live into the phrase that Ken Wilber of Spiral Dynamics spoke of - we can "**include and transcend.**" We recognize that core parts of all of our stages of understanding can come forward with us, and as we continue to evolve, we build on what we've learned - including the beautiful pieces and partial truths that each stage offers and transcending the limitations of the stages that no longer serve us. We **include and transcend.**

III. Ken Wilber and others like Brian McLaren following him may have popularized the phrase "include and transcend" but they weren't the first to live into that way of being. They weren't the first to integrate understanding from a previous phase of development, to build on it and also develop it further - to include the core good truths that that understanding revealed and transcend the pieces that no longer serve. I believe this was what made Jesus such a unique and dynamic teacher, one who mesmerized audiences with his preaching. I think **Jesus was speaking to folks from an integrated place**. His audience may have been primarily in stage 1 and 2, but I think he was speaking to them from a stage 4 kind of place, calling them forward in understanding.

A. Let's look at the heart of what he is saying in perhaps the most famous block of teaching we have - a passage in Matthew that's become known in the Jesus tradition as the Sermon on

the Mount. We don't have time to look at the whole sermon, but we can look at some highlights. We'll pick things up in Matthew 5, starting with vs. 17.

**1. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."**

a) Jesus is making clear that he's not interested in simply replacing what has come before with something totally different. He's not here to dispense with the way his fellow Jewish community members understand the practice of faith, through obedience to the Torah. He sees his own work to be a development of what has come before. He is fulfilling the goals of the Torah. He is helping accomplish what those laws set out to do. You could say he is meeting simplicity and complexity where they are at, and moving things forward. He's not abolishing, as perhaps one in stage 3 perplexity might do, he's integrating and developing, and we see that as he makes a series of contrasts between what has been spoken and understood and how he is inviting his followers to consider and understand.

(1) **"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment...** (or a few verses later).

(2) **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ...**(and again in a few verses)

(3) **31 "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.**

(4) **33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' 34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all...7 All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one....**

(5) **38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also....**

(6) **43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**

b) Six contrasts in a row between what has been understood before and what Jesus is inviting his followers to understand. And in each of them, he's reaching beyond the law itself; he's reaching to the **intent behind it**. He's developing it. He's asking his audience not simply to focus on the dualistic "right and wrong" but on the moral reasoning beneath the understanding, allowing it to take us forward.

(1) So "don't kill people" is certainly a helpful corrective in a violent, tribal world that often believes might makes right. But even better is to understand the violence of the heart, the way that our anger with one another, our disrespect for our fellow

human beings destroys our capacity to connect with them, to see the Divine image in them.

- (2) And in a patriarchal culture where women's rights and protection are secured through marriage, "Don't sleep around" is a helpful corrective to the men who hold the power in order to protect vulnerable women and children. But even better is teaching those men not to objectify women - to begin to see them as whole human beings and not simply sexual objects there for men's pleasure.
  - (3) "Don't break your oath" is an important corrective in a world where it's hard to check the facts and your word is your bond, but it's better not to need to be bound by a contract or an oath. It's better to cultivate integrity and trust through a personal commitment to truth and honesty.
  - (4) In a world where violent retribution was the norm, "an eye for an eye" was actually a helpful corrective. It told the injured party not to respond with uncontrolled vengeance, but to be proportional, to not give more pain than you received. But even better, even more evolved is to not give pain at all, to respond not with retribution but with restoration. To not simply love your friends but also demonstrate love to those who are not loving to you.
- c) Now if we stay within the framework of stage 1 and 2, we might feel like Jesus is just adding rules on top of rules - putting up impossible standards that no one could keep. But from an integrated point of view, from a harmony point of view, Jesus is transcending and including. He's moving his followers beyond the limitations of the past stage: beyond the divorce certificates and the oaths and the violent responses and as he moves forward he's including the best from what has come before in the ethics he's teaching - values of non-violence, respect for women and the vulnerable, integrity and peacemaking. He's inviting his followers to develop in their understanding. He's encouraging the community to evolve.
2. Later in Matthew, Jesus is doing more teaching. He shares depictions of the loving, cooperative order he calls the Kingdom of God through a series of stories we've come to call parables. And at the end of sharing story after story, he asks a question of his closest disciples.
    - a) **51 "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.**  
**"Yes," they replied.**  
**52 He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."**
    - b) Jesus wants his disciples to do as he has done, to integrate. Hang on to the essentials of what has come before- these are the treasures of old. Receive the unfolding understanding that is coming now - these are new treasures. What a gift, what a bounty we can experience when we can allow ourselves and our communities to appreciate and enjoy that which has come before and that which received today. What promise life holds when we can **look forward to new treasures emerging tomorrow, as well.**
  3. In Brian McLaren's model of development, similar to the Spiral dynamics model, **evolution doesn't end when you reach the fourth stage.** For McLaren, integration means you recognize new spaces of growing and changing. **Harmony gives way to new areas of simplicity that eventually become complexity and perplexity,** and you can appreciate the gifts along the way as you move forward in an ever-expanding spiral of growing understanding. You can embrace the journey of evolving and expect that it will always be

the way of things. As Brian says, **“Far from feeling we have finally arrived, in Stage Four we finally begin to understand that arrival has never been the point.”**

B. I think many of us might feel at times like we haven't known how to reconcile the places of beauty or power or transcendence we've experienced in our earlier phases of life with the painful realities we've become acquainted with in a later phase. Our experiences of faith and hope have at times felt like they crumbled, along with the structures we had to tear down as we emerged from simplicity and complexity into what came after. And this can lead to a lot of pain. **It can be hard and lonely to live in the fog of perplexity, and yet we cannot skip over it either.**

1. Right now I have three kids in my household living through various phases of the **perplexing state of development we call puberty**. And I can see in each of them the challenges of that stage in different ways - their bodies are all doing what they are intended to do. They are growing quickly at times, their hormones are saturating them in new ways. Emotions run high at times and feel so big. The world can feel inviting and exciting one moment and terrifyingly disappointing in the next. **And all of it belongs.**
2. As a parent I feel at times both **helpless**, as the one whose been used to the earlier years where problems seemed easily solvable with a hug and some fruit snacks, and also **empathetic**, as one who has survived puberty myself and lived to tell the tale. I cannot make this all better for them, that won't actually serve them. **They need to go through it.** They need to live it in their own bodies, in their developing brains, in their own emotional centers, in their own spirits. I can't take it away, but **I can be a loving presence on the other side of the perplexity**, encouraging them along the way and calling them forward toward something harmonious.
3. When I look at Jesus and the way that he relates to his disciples and others he connects with, **I see such compassion in him**. I see him reflecting **the Divine Parent, looking with understanding at their perplexed angsty teens, affirming in them all they have learned in their development thus far, and encouraging them in all the ways they still have to develop**. In his last moments with his closest followers, Jesus again and again promises that though he has to physically leave them, he sees his earthly life is coming to a close, he is not abandoning them. **The same wise compassionate presence of the Divine Parent they have experienced in him will be with them too, and that presence will accompany them as they evolve, helping them hold onto what was and grow into what will be.** I'll share these words of Jesus, using feminine pronouns for this divine presence we call the Holy Spirit. ***“12 “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. 13 But when she, the Spirit of truth, comes, she will guide you into all the truth. She will not speak on her own; she will speak only what she hears, and she will tell you what is yet to come.”***
4. Friends, I believe that **same compassionate presence of the Divine Jesus called the Holy Spirit - she is here with us too**. She is witnessing our evolving, even when we're in the most perplexing of phases. Even when we don't know how to reconcile the past with the present, she **walks with us through the fog, calling us onward to one another and encouraging us that there are places of harmony to travel to.**
5. Haven, we are a **community evolving**. We have within us many stories. We have within us much wisdom. We have within us many wounds. **We have much to transcend and much to include**. May we be a space that encourages that harmonious work in one another. May we be a space that pursues that harmonious work together. And may we be a space

that receives the voice of Jesus encouraging us that there are treasures new and old to discover, and, as we allow her, may the Holy Spirit continue to guide us into all truth. Amen.

**Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Are there places in your life where you can identify yourself in any of Brian McLaren's four stages: Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, Harmony?
2. What has been most difficult for you about moving from one phase of understanding to another? What has been most liberative?
3. What might the Spirit be inviting you to "include" as you evolve? What might She be inviting you to "transcend"?