

## I. Advanced Organizer

### A. Fyre festival -

1. In December of 2016 a group of models, all of whom make money as Instagram influencers, were flown to a remote island in the Bahamas and invited to party and post about it on Instagram. This was the heart of a cutting edge branding strategy targeted directly to millennials with money to spend. It was the first real public sign of the **Fyre Festival**.
2. The brand new festival being broadcast by supermodels and boosted by powerful influencers like Kylie Jenner generated instant buzz. It was purported to be **the next big viral event, an exclusive, immersive experience in the Bahamas** with celebrities and musicians. Blink 182, Ja Rule, and other big acts were announced. All you needed to do to be a part of it was quickly buy a spot. Luxurious beach accommodations and gourmet food were promised, well worth the tens of thousands of dollars you were being asked to fork over to be a part of such an exclusive, elite event. **There was only one problem. The Fyre festival didn't really exist.**

#### *a) Show clip*

3. The disastrous Fyre festival is the subject of two recent documentaries - one on Hulu and one on Netflix, telling the story of this epic fraud pulled by the founders of Fyre. It's a cautionary 21st century tale. Sure, many of us would never fork over thousands of dollars because of a viral campaign, but in what way do we too make choices every day that are responses to the influence of folks in our feeds or on our radios or our tvs? Are we aware of the power of that influence over us, and are we ok with what it might be trying to convince us to participate in?
- B. Doing a series on discernment, **"Hearing Through Noise"** - the goal is to grow in being able to listen to and distinguish the voice and the direction of the Divine from all the other voices and circumstances demanding our attention. To be able to grow in discerning where is God speaking to us, bringing guidance, direction, encouragement, affection and where are we tracking with something else
1. I suggested that the first step was to Turn Down the Volume - making space for contemplation
  2. Then the last time we were together we focused on getting to know our own voices - what we bring to the table
  3. Today I'm calling the teaching **"Check Your Sources"**, and I want to turn our attention to **the question of influence. What are the things that are influencing us, whether consciously or not?** How do the voices we listen to, the shows we watch, the people we follow, the news we consume - how do they impact the way we think? Specifically, **what affect do those influences have on our capacity to hear from and follow Jesus?**
- C. This topic of **considering how our influences impact our practice of faith can feel rather fraught for many of us.** I know that a number of us grew up in different ways that may have reflected our parents varying attitudes around the significance of influences on us.
1. **Some of us grew up in very religious contexts**
    - a) Jason was raised in a conservative Christian home -for most of his childhood they didn't have television. Weren't allowed to watch a number of Disney movies, couldn't listen to secular music.
    - b) At the heart of this attitude was a real **fear of secular culture and its power to lure us from Christian faith**, or the behavior that was associated with being a good Christian.

MTV, pg-13 movies, secular Liberal Arts colleges - all of these were seen as threats to a worldview based on the Bible.

- c) If this was our experience, we may have come to a sense as we grew up that this kind of sheltering was silly at best, and repressive and shaming at worst, and so **some of us may feel triggered by the very notion that we should subject the influences we're taking in to any scrutiny.**
- 2. Others of us may have had very different experiences.
  - a) I watched movies like *Dirty Dancing* and *Top Gun* on repeat as a kid, and my parents didn't really seem bothered by it.
  - b) As an adult and a parent, **I look back at that with a bit of surprise.** While I'm grateful for a lack of hangups like guilt and shame or the fear of corruption I have seen in others, I also am aware of ways in which I was exposed to content that may not have always been helpful for me at the time, and without any guidance on what to do with it. Some of it simply went over my head, but I think other parts of the content may have a shaping affect on me, and **it would have been helpful to have at least thoughtful conversations about what I was taking in.**
- 3. **What do we do with these tensions? Should we really worry about what voices we're hearing, and how they might impact our practice of faith?** If so, what's the metric we should look at for which influences are good for us, and which are problematic? What do we do with the reality that one person's prophet is another person's heretic? I'm not sure I can definitively answer these questions, but I'd like to spend this morning considering a way forward that might be helpful for us as we navigate them.

## II. Introducing Rene Girard:

- A. Long before people were trying to make a living as instagram influencers, **a French anthropologist, philosopher and scholar named Rene Girard developed a theory about human social behavior** that I find particularly helpful when considering these questions of influence. I've talked about it here before and I won't get into the whole theory today, but if you'd like to know more, that theory along with it's implications for Jesus-Centered faith, are fleshed out beautifully in a book by a couple of good friends and fellow pastors of mine, Ken Wilson and Emily Swan, called *Solus Jesus*.
- B. What's relevant for this conversation is a foundational insight that's at the core of Girard's work: that **humans are intrinsically motivated by what he calls *mimetic desire*.** "Mimetic" is simply another word for "imitative". Girard believes that we all have an innate capacity to observe and mirror one another, to copy one another. You see it in newborn babies, in apes, and its all over middle school. Neuroscientists have identified powerful biological forces at play - like mirror neurons, that seem to hardwire our brains to observe and imitate one another. It's an important component that is foundational to social connection.
- C. Girard asserts that **this mimetic instinct impacts not just our behavior, but our very desire.** We see what others desire, and we desire the same thing. While this may be a natural process, that in and of itself is not problematic, according to Girard inevitably this mimetic desire leads to rivalry. **Two people mirroring one another's desire for the same thing begin to feel competitive. They become rivals, and over time rivalry festers and leads to division and violence.** According to this theory, the very powerful processes that create **human's deepest connections with one another also fuel our most fierce divisions.**
- D. For Girard, **influence is everything.** All of us are being influenced by one another all the time. We can't not be. The question is, **how are we allowing that influence to control us by**

**building in us rivalry and the desire for power, control, “winning” that comes with it?**

What would it mean instead to be influenced in another direction?

III. Let's keep all that in mind and turn from philosopher Rene Girard to Jesus.

A. Matthew has much of the most robust teaching sections of Jesus in the gospels. And several times as he's teaching his followers, **Jesus the rabbi made comments warning his followers about the influences they were taking in.** Specifically, he seemed most concerned for his audience with toxic religious influences. But what specifically were the problem with those influences? Let's take a look at three specific places in Matthew where Jesus warns his followers about the influence of others in their day, and see if we can draw any common themes about what he wanted his followers should be concerned with.

1. Warning 1: Matthew 7 (the end of the Sermon on the Mount):

***Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 16 By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.***

***(Matthew 7:15-20)***

- a) So this first passage, wrapping up the Sermon on the Mount is talking about what Jesus calls “false prophets”. Remember, **prophets in Judaism were the people who communicated on behalf of God, often challenging norms of the day.** Their prophecies often spoke truth to power and served as a reminder of God's priorities when God's people seemed to be getting off track. Here Jesus seems to be saying that **there are folks who claim to share this prophetic heritage, but they're not actually speaking on behalf of the Divine.**
- b) Jesus uses the image of the wolf in sheep's clothing to describe these people. By outward appearance, these people look harmless, even vulnerable like a sheep. But there's something about them that is being hidden from view. **Beneath the vulnerable appearance, something sinister is lurking.** Behind the false prophet's veneer is a dangerous consuming desire, like a ferocious wolf.
- c) Jesus is clear that the **outward appearance, perhaps the very words the prophet speaks, don't reveal whether they are a sheep or a wolf.** Instead, Jesus switches metaphors and **compares these influencers to trees**, which takes longer to reveal their nature, but Jesus seems to think they do so more clearly.
- d) You may not be able to see what's under the mask of a sheep's clothing, but **you can look at the fruit of a tree**, you can examine if it's bountiful or anemic. You can taste the fruit and see if it is bitter or sweet.
- e) Jesus wants his followers to do that kind of discernment when they consider who they listen to; who they allow to tell them what God's priorities are. **He asks his followers to look beyond the appearances of their influencers to the outcomes those people and the messages they speak produce.** Do they bring outcomes that nourish, that sweeten, that bring life? Or do those words and the people who speak them produce something distasteful? Something bitter?
- f) Now you could argue that Jesus does not give us an exact definition of what he sees as good fruit verses bad here. But in another set of warnings he seems to make that more clear.

2. **Warning 2: Matthew 15** (This comes in reaction to a group of religious leaders in Jesus day, the pharisees criticizing Jesus and his followers for not washing hands in they way they believed was ritually necessary to remain pure.)

**10 Then he called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. 11 What defiles a person is not what goes into the mouth; it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person.” 12 Then the disciples came to him and said, “Do you know that when the Pharisees heard this saying they were offended?” 13 And he replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father did not plant will be uprooted. 14 Leave them! They are blind guides. If someone who is blind leads another who is blind, both will fall into a pit.” 15 But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” 16 Jesus said, “Even after all this, are you still so foolish? 17 Don’t you understand that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and then passes out into the sewer? 18 But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these things defile a person. 19 For out of the heart come evil ideas, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. 20 These are the things that defile a person; it is not eating with unwashed hands that defiles a person.” (Matthew 15:10-20)**

- a) Here again we have Jesus speaking about what is problematic and what isn’t, and how the true nature of that is revealed. Here rather than talking about fruit coming from a tree, Jesus is talking about words coming from a mouth, but both make clear the same concern. The poor tree produces rotten fruit because of what is festering inside. The defiled person makes clear the ways they are living counter to God’s heart through the words they speak.
  - b) Here Jesus is clear in **identifying the fruit that is bad, or the words that defile**: he calls them “evil ideas, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander”.
  - c) So **what do these things all have in common?** If we consider Rene Girard’s insights, I think we might observe that all of these things that defile, all of these sins we could call them, **are connected to rivalry**. They’re all rooted in that toxic mimetic desire that causes us to want more for ourselves and less for another. We speak falsely of another in order to build up our own image and diminish theirs, we take what doesn’t belong to us, including perhaps an intimate partner that is not ours to have, we dominate, we inflict violence in order to become more powerful. But **it is a spirit in rivalry that fuels all of those poor choices**, all of the nasty fruit, all of the things that defile.
  - d) Interestingly to think about when it comes to influence: Jesus has less concern about what goes in to people. He doesn’t seem to be hyper concerned with impurity regarding what we consume. What he’s concerned about is **the impact stuff has on our hearts, on our character, on the kind of people we are becoming**.
  - e) There is a clear warning here when it relates to following folks who are led by their rivalrous instincts. Jesus sees that **these pharisees are led by their own sense of rivalry**. They need to judge themselves more morally upright than their neighbors, and that righteous arrogance has created a kind of blindness in the pharisees that makes them a bad influence. **To follow them means to fall into the same mistaken path they are taking and to suffer the same consequences of that struggle**.
  - f) The critique of these leaders and the warning against following in their footsteps is made even more clear towards the end of the gospel story, in our third set of warnings.
3. **Warning 3: Matthew 23**

**Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The experts in the law and the**

***Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. 3 Therefore pay attention to what they tell you and do it. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy loads, hard to carry, and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing even to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by people, for they make their phylacteries wide and their tassels long. 6 They love the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues 7 and elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and to have people call them 'Rabbi.' 8 But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher and you are all brothers. 9 And call no one your 'father' on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one teacher, the Christ. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:1-12)***

- a) Again we see Jesus calling out the spirit of rivalry in these religious leaders. They perform religious devotion as a means of building themselves up, but their quest for status and power is counter to the spirit of God.
- b) Interestingly, Jesus makes clear that these teachers, in actually communicating the word of God, are **speaking good information, even if they aren't embodying it**. This is one of the most interesting invitations to discernment I think Jesus offers: *"pay attention to what they tell you and do it. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach."*

(1) Have you ever heard that phrase "do as I say, not as I do?" Here Jesus is applying that to these pharisees and teachers of the law. **You can get good information from bad sources**. But you need to do the work to discern where's the good information, and where do we need to not follow the sources who are sharing it, because they themselves are falling short of what they teach?

- 4. **Rene Girard was not originally a person of faith.** He was an atheist and literary scholar who was fascinated by myths and the cultures they arose in, but as he developed his theory regarding mimetic desire, rivalry, violence, Girard studied the Bible along side texts from all kinds of religions and belief systems, and came to faith in Jesus. For him, it was the uniqueness of Jesus that was compelling. In the story of Jesus, Girard saw something totally different than in any other set of myths or faith narratives. He saw a story about a God who comes to the humans who are struggling with their sense of rivalry with one another and with God, and that God, through Jesus, models something totally different: **a non-rivalrous way of being. Jesus offers a path to living without rivalry.**

- a) in this last passage, Jesus gives his followers directions that communicate this turn from rivalry. You don't need to call one another Rabbi or Father - you're using those as titles to compete with God's own self. Instead, practice servanthood. It's the counter to rivalry. It's the only thing that can disarm it.

- 5. Just a few verses before Jesus is railing on the hypocrisy of the pharisees, Jesus is making clear to his followers what he sees as the center of the gospel - the central theme that everything must be distilled down to, that is at the core of the good fruit he is seeking to cultivate. In response to a testing question from the Pharisees:

- a) **36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 37 Jesus said to him, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:36-40)**

b) This was an **original formulation**, that these two commandments should sit by one another as the filter through which everything else is understood. They were from two different books in the torah, other rabbis had not picked up on their unique significance. But **Jesus came to communicate - this is the heart of it all**. You can't love God in a rivalrous way. To love God is to love others without rivalry. To love others without rivalry is to love God. They are one in the same.

6. **Jesus understood that we are imitative beings**. That we need models. That our desires are shaped by others desires. That we will copy what we see. And so he came, **not only to communicate to us the pure love without rivalry that the Divine feels for us and all of creation, but also to embody that love in a way that can be imitated**. One of the clearest examples was when he disrobed and washed his follower's feet, taking for himself one of the most grunt jobs there was, and then saying to them:

a) ***"Do you understand what I have done for you? 13 You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and do so correctly, for that is what I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example—you should do just as I have done for you."*** (Jn. 13:12-15)

7. **Our capacity to be influenced by and to influence others is part of how we were made, it is what makes us human**. Resistance is futile, we are going to be influenced by one another, and that's not a bad thing. At its best, our mimetic nature is a gift: it means we have profound capacity to connect, to empathize, to share one another's burdens. This, I believe, is what Jesus is inviting all of us into: **to take a journey of growth to direct our imitative nature away from the rivalry, suspicion, and fear that separate us from others, and move instead toward building deep connection and companionship with God, one another and the world around us**.

IV. If there is truth to all of this, then how does it impact the way we think about what influences us? How does it impact our discernment? I'm going to suggest a couple of takeaways to reflect on.

A. First: **consider the various influences in our lives. What influences in your life trigger your own rivalry, making it harder to love your neighbors as yourself? What influences in your life are exploiting your attention to serve their own rivalrous desires?**

1. Are there people you follow on Instagram, things you subscribe to, news feeds you follow, or people in your life that when you talk to them, you recognize that your own frustration with others is stoked? You recognize more hostility in your spirit? You find yourself thinking us-vs-them? Maybe you find yourself mirroring that rivalrous energy in ways that bring greater disconnection?
2. Or perhaps are there social media apps or other people or things you interact with where perhaps your attention is being used to build another's power and serve their own rivalrous needs? Jason reflected to me how recently we went into a mall, something we don't do very often. But just walking through the mall for ten minutes, Jason realized he was beginning to feel miserable. Rather than being content with his life, suddenly he felt like there was so much he didn't have that he could, that there was a life he should want that was different then the one he was living; something that might be more in reach if he'd just turn over his money to these companies with their fancy stores and slick ad campaigns.
3. If its hard for you to answer these questions, perhaps you might consider **taking an influence audit**. Say for a day or two or three - everything you find yourself listening to, reading, and so on, take a moment to check in. Where do you notice that rivalrous spirit

being stirred up? Where do you think your attention is giving someone else power? Make note of those things, and see if there are some common threads.

4. Once you've identified influences that might provoke you or seek to exploit you, pray and invite the Spirit to give you wisdom and insight on what to do with those influences. It could be that similar to the Pharisees, Jesus is saying, there's good information here, it's just going from a bad source, so filter out the bad, and keep the good. Or you may sense an invitation to limit your exposure to influences that aren't helpful. Perhaps you could take a season off from the problematic source, and see how that affects you positively or negatively. Lent is coming; that's a season you may choose to fast from some sort of influence and see where that leaves you.

B. Finally, **we should consider how much space there is in our lives for Jesus to influence us.**

1. If we naturally copy what we're exposed to, and Jesus intended to give us a model to copy in how he lived, then it follows that we need to make sure that we have regular space in our mind and heart and spirit to be engaging this story again, to be exposed to the desires of Jesus, so that we can be influenced by them.
2. This is part of why it's useful to gather. When we get together with others who are trying to walk a similar journey of faith we encourage one another. We recenter our focus on Jesus and his nonrivalrous way of being.
3. In Deuteronomy, the commandment about loving God with your whole heart also invited this regular kind of habitual reflection on the things of the Divine.
  - a) ***You must love the Lord your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength. 6 These words I am commanding you today must be kept in mind, 7 and you must teach them to your children and speak of them as you sit in your house, as you walk along the road, as you lie down, and as you get up. 8 You should tie them as a reminder on your forearm and fasten them as symbols on your forehead. 9 Inscribe them on the doorframes of your houses and gates. (Deuteronomy 6:5-9)***
  - b) I'm not saying we actually need to have words of Scripture posted all over our house, though that could be useful. But I think what is being named is that we need to have space to contemplate this stuff regularly so it has an impact on us in a meaningful way. If we want Jesus to be what we model, then **we need to regularly give him and his non-rivalrous way some of our mental energy so our mimetic tendencies are directed toward Jesus, or even toward others, Christian or not, who model for us the same selflessness that he was calling us to.**
4. Brian McLaren says this is effectively what prayer does for him. ***'Prayer is the formation and direction of desire.'*** he says. We pray so as to connect with the desires of God and allow those to become our own.
5. I recognize in myself that **there's a difference between knowing something in theory like the story of Jesus, like his love for me, like his selflessness, and having consistent opportunities to put that in the center of my vision**, through consistent personal and group spiritual practices. I also know that there are voices in my life, there are folks I try to tune into, who **may not speak directly about faith at all, but who have a lot to teach me about honoring others**, about listening well to the needs of those who are different me, and setting aside my own comfort in pursuit of justice and flourishing for my neighbors. When I spend more energy being shaped by all of these forces, it helps me to actually better follow Jesus and discern his promptings in my life.

6. The 15th century monk Thomas a Kempis wrote a book that has been a spiritual classic for ages called *The Imitation of Christ*. I thought perhaps this morning we could end by praying one of his prayers. It was a theme he spent a lot of time reflecting on. I'd like to end this morning inviting you to pray one of his prayers with me. Let us pray:

**a) *Grant to us, O Lord, to know that which is worth knowing,  
to love that which is worth loving, to praise whatever pleases you most, to  
esteem whatever is most precious to you,  
and to dislike whatever is evil in your eyes.  
Do not let us judge merely by what we see with our eyes,  
nor to decide based on what we hear from ignorant men,  
but to discern with true judgment between things visible and spiritual, and above  
all to search out and to do what is well pleasing to you; through Jesus Christ our  
Lord. Amen.***

Questions for Conversation and Reflection

1. How have you generally considered the impact of influences on your practice of faith? Has that changed over time?
2. Where do you see influences contributing to your rivalrous desires? Where might others exploit your attention to feed their own?
3. What does imitating the non-rivalry of Jesus look like to you?