

## I. Advanced Organizer

- A. Throughout the winter and spring of 2021, there was a **common conversation that was happening around the country** - on Zoom calls, in re-opening cafes and restaurants, in line at the store and in countless other spaces.
1. “What did you get?,” the conversation started. **“The J and J, the Pfizer, or the (fill in the blank for me)...Moderna?”** You all remember that conversation? You all participate in it? And just for fun, let’s go ahead and do our own poll. Who started off the whole covid vaccine process with J & J, Pfizer, Moderna?
  2. If you raised your hand for Moderna, you, like myself were one of the millions of people across the country who were receiving a shot from a company that prior to 2020, unless you were in the biomedical research game, you were unlikely to have ever heard of. **Moderna was essentially a start-up**, a ten year old company with big valuations from investors, but prior to Covid, no actual products on the market. And yet, within a few weeks of shots being put in arms in early 2021, Moderna had become a household name.
  3. Now what put Moderna on the map and ahead of other long-time companies was a **new kind of technology for vaccines**, vaccines engineered differently using something called messenger - RNA, or mRNA. In the past most vaccines involved injecting someone with a bit of weakened or inactivated virus, using this to trigger the body’s immune response, so it would create antibodies that could fight off the actual virus when it was encountered. But mRNA vaccines work differently. There is no virus in them, instead they are engineered to teach the body how to make the kind of protein that will trigger an immune response. **It was a completely new model for how vaccines can work, and it’s ended up being a significant powerful tool in battling this ongoing pandemic.**
  4. So how did it happen? How did this startup called Moderna land on this pioneering technology? Many who had not heard of Moderna before the pandemic, assumed it was a story of overnight success. But those who have been involved in the company over the last decade don’t see it that way. For them, the development of Moderna’s ground-breaking mRNA vaccine **was not a lucky lightning strike**, or Eureka moment kind of breakthrough discovery; rather it was the **result of a ten-year process** that had been employed to launch a number of ventures in the life sciences field, all backed by Moderna’s parent company - a venture-creation firm called Flagship Pioneering.
  5. What makes this company Flagship interesting is that they pursue a **different philosophy around innovation** from what many in the corporate world focus on. Often our culture thinks of game-changing innovation as the result of some stroke of luck or total genius - we think that breakthrough innovation is chaotic, random, hard to predict. Flagship believes that **innovation can actually be cultivated over time through a process that they model on how we see growth and change happen in the natural world - the process of evolution.**
  6. Rather than gambling on a number of initiatives and quickly killing all the ones that don’t deliver fast results, like many venture capitalists do, Flagship has taken a different approach, pursuing what they call **“Emergent Discovery”** - a process they model on evolution itself. The technology of mRNA was not discovered in a big “aha” moment. But after a decade of trial and error and many iterations of experiments, when 2020 came, this company who had been slowly refining their understanding of mRNA, including how it could be used in vaccines, was poised to respond. The breakthrough technology that made them an overnight success arrived after ten years of slow, methodical, winding and yet moving forward over time evolution.

B. Well, I tell this story because we are in the midst of a series I'm calling "**Community Evolving**", considering the reality that we are a part of a process of growth and change that happens over time. As we've been considering, this process doesn't just happen in the realms of biology, or the cultivation of technology, but also is a part of our spiritual and communal life as well.

1. **Two weeks ago we talked about how our understanding can evolve** - we can view the world through different lenses over time. Our knowledge hopefully expands as we move through life, and with that expansion, we may come to view things differently. When we think about spirituality, it means that our understanding of the Divine, our theology, is also inevitably evolving.
2. This isn't a process to be feared, but one to be celebrated, with the hope that the Spirit is in the midst of our unfolding understanding, leading us forward into more and more truth; into seeing God more fully as God is. I shared a model of the progression that this unfolding understanding often takes for folks, moving through potentially four stages of understanding the world, and with it faith.
3. As I named in that teaching, **this evolving of understanding is hardly a new thing**. Though he may not have used the language of "evolution" - expanding, adapting and growing our thinking is what I believe Jesus was all about. And that shift and expansion of understanding wasn't just theoretical. It had implications.
4. Today I want us to consider the impact of a change in understanding. **How does our evolving thinking impact the way we live?** Just like new understandings of the immune system have led to new kinds of vaccines, might new spiritual understanding lead to **new ways of embodying faith?**

II. As we consider this question, I'm going to invite us to look at a **passage from the stories of the life of Jesus that we find in Luke**. This passage may be familiar to some of us. Whether you've heard it before or not, I invite you to listen to the story with fresh curiosity around how Jesus may be inviting those he encounters **not just to evolve in their thinking, but to recognize the need to evolve in other ways as well**.

A. So a little bit of context: this episode is located pretty early in Jesus' ministry. He has just begun preaching, calling followers, and performing miracles. Right before this story in each of the gospels, he performs one particularly amazing healing, in which a person who is paralyzed is lowered from the ceiling of the home he's speaking in, and Jesus both pronounces the man's sins forgiven, and heals his paralysis, instructing the man to pick up the mat he's lying on and walk, which he does. And from there, we pick things up at Luke 5, vs. 27.

**B. 27 After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth. "Follow me," he said to him. 28 And he got up and followed him, leaving everything behind.**

**29 Then Levi gave a great banquet in his house for Jesus, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. 30 But the Pharisees and their experts in the law complained to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" 31 Jesus answered them, "Those who are well don't need a physician, but those who are sick do. 32 I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."**

**33 Then they said to him, "John's disciples frequently fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours continue to eat and drink." 34 So Jesus said to**

*them, “You cannot make the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? 35 But those days are coming, and when the bridegroom is taken from them, at that time they will fast.” 36 He also told them a parable: “No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old garment. If he does, he will have torn the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. 37 And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. 38 Instead new wine must be poured into new wineskins. 39 No one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, ‘The old is good enough.’”*

1. So the crux of this passage, as I read it, is **Jesus doing something new**. He has an understanding of the sacred, an understanding of what God is up to in the world, that looks a bit different than what has come before. His understanding has evolved from what preceded it and that’s creating some dissonance with folks that Jesus is encountering.
2. What does that evolution look like? In this passage, it clearly includes an evolving understanding around who the Divine connects with. **Jesus seems to think differently about who God includes and shows concern for**.
3. We see this first as Jesus approaches Levi, also known as Matthew, whom the text tells us is a tax collector.
  - a) Now if we think of tax collectors and we picture the IRS, we most likely think of annoying bureaucrats, maybe a bit stuffy and annoyingly scrupulous, but hardly scandalous people. But that’s not what being a tax collector meant in 1st century Palestine.
  - b) **Remember Jesus lived in a society that was under occupation**. The Roman army occupied the Jewish communities in Palestine, and extracted taxes from them, but they did that by working with locals in the various regions of the empire. Jewish tax collectors were often then seen as traitors in their communities. They are the ones who are complicit with the occupying empire. They work to extract funds from their fellow community members, often with aggressive tactics, and regularly taking more than they owe the Romans so they can pocket the profits for themselves. You might think of them as the mob-bosses or gangsters of their day. In the ancient Jewish text the Talmud, tax collectors were classified by ancient Rabbis in a category with murderers and robbers, and the resources they acquired were considered so tainted by violence and deceit, **that their money was considered unfit to be accepted for charity**.
  - c) And yet here Jesus is, not only inviting Levi/Matthew to follow him, to become his disciple, but **he seems to have no problem feasting on the fruit of those ill-gotten gains**. Jesus also allows Levi to throw a party for Jesus and his friends, and they all mix it up with Levi’s tax collector crowd. And the religious people of Jesus’ day don’t get it. ““Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” They ask.
4. Jesus speaks to his evolved understanding; that **his mission is to reach those outside the present spiritual community**. “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” he says. I don’t think Jesus actually is trying to say that his new friends alone are sinners, but he does show that he’s concerned with those who know they have need. The religious people think they’re the righteous ones, they think they’ve got it figured out, and they don’t need any help from Jesus. But these folks like Levi and his friends see in Jesus’ acceptance more than an invitation to friendship, they see an invitation to take a journey of faith with someone who meets them where they’re at, who cares about them, who includes them in his evolving spiritual path.

5. **So Jesus practices his faith in a different way** than the Pharisees and other well-meaning religious Jewish folk of his time, like John the Baptist, and his followers. Jesus eats with a different crowd. He doesn't coach his followers to fast twice a week like many of the others did in that time, though he certainly acknowledges fasting has its place.
6. And he uses two little parables to explain why he does things differently than many of those around him.
  - a) The first is referring to using **fresh fabric to patch an old garment**. The idea here is that new fabric can be liable to shrink, and when this happens, it will tear the garment, making the problem even worse.
  - b) The other parable is about the **making of wine**.
    - (1) In Jesus' day, wine was often fermented in goatskin bags called wineskins. The goatskin was somewhat flexible, a fresh one had give in it, allowing it to expand as the wine fermented and released gas, as it did. It had enough flexibility to absorb the shift.
    - (2) But a used wineskin had already been stretched, so it was inevitably more brittle. If you poured unfermented wine in, when the gas was released, the goatskin would crack or break, ruining both the skin and the wine.
  - c) Both of these little parables seem to illustrate the truth that Jesus recognized - **the old and the new aren't always compatible**. When the Divine is doing something new, like reaching a new population with a new understanding - it may not fit within the old model. New models, new expressions, new wineskins are needed.
7. When I think about the point Jesus seemed to be making with these little stories, they seem particularly interesting to me, when viewed through the lens of evolving. Jesus tells a story about "new wine". He's not talking about a totally new kind of beverage - he's not switching from wine to beer. He's working with a known quantity - wine, but a fresh version. Something that is in the vein of what has come before but is also original. It's a new generation, you could say it's part of the evolution of wine.
  - a) As Jesus said in the passage we looked at a couple of week's ago - Jesus hasn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. **He's building on what has come before**. He is bringing a new expression of something which has existed before, but this new expression has implications. Embracing God's invitation to the tax collector and his buddies means letting go of some of the habits and customs around what it means to be spiritual. New understanding leads to new practice. And this transformation that Jesus demonstrated would continue in the era to come as the early church continued to explore the ways that the newer wine that was being cultivated in their midst also needed newer containers.
  - b) For those of you who are familiar with the stories from the early church, isn't this the kind of work we see? **New wineskins being created when Philip baptizes a eunuch from Ethiopia** on the side of the road. New wineskins when Peter visits the home of a non-Jewish person, a Gentile named Cornelius and shares with all of his friends good news about Jesus. New wineskins when Paul argues that the faith they are practicing no longer requires men to be circumcised to connect with the Divine and be filled with the Holy Spirit. **All of these were like innovations in wine making, new wineskins being crafted for the new wine the Spirit was fermenting in their midst**.
8. Of course, as Luke tells it, Jesus understood from the get-go that **not everyone was going to appreciate this new wine**, nor the wineskin it came in. We hear this in his last statement, "No one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is good enough.'" Some translations say it even stronger, "the old is better".

- (1) What's interesting is that this line doesn't really criticize those who want the old wine. It seems to understand where they're coming from. They're happy with what they have; it's good for them. These folks see no need for anything different.
  - (a) Think about it from the perspective of the framework we considered 2 weeks ago - those in stage 1 or 2 may be quite content where they are. They see no need for the concerns of stages 3 and 4. But for those for whom stage 1 or 2 no longer brings life, the wine has turned bitter, a new, fresh wine is needed, and with it new containers for it to grow and expand. From this point of view, both wines have their place, one doesn't have to negate the other, but **Jesus' call in that moment was to bring the new, and to connect with those for whom the new brings life.**

III. So what does all of this have to do with us, here in this Haven space?

- A. For me, this conversation about cultivating new wineskins gets **right to the heart of our existence, what it is we're trying to build here.**
  1. Long before I felt compelled to become a pastor, before I felt drawn to the idea of starting a spiritual community, I **struggled with the reality that this powerful faith connection with Jesus that I was experiencing in college was somehow not accessible to my gay friends**, because I knew that the churches and communities where I was encountering Jesus didn't have the understanding or the models to welcome them. New models of spiritual community were needed, not just to welcome and include our LGBTQ family members and friends, but so many others who haven't been welcomed home within the church for whatever reason.
    - a) **We moved to Berkeley and started gathering with folks here with a big "what if?" kind of question.** What if a more inclusive, affirming, expansive kind of church could exist? Overtime, the vision got refined, the questions more specific. What if a community could be built that valued creating safety, cultivating diversity, and centering around Jesus and his expression of spirituality? Could there be new wine that was flavored uniquely by those three values? What wineskins might be needed for that wine to mature and expand?
  2. **The folks at Flagship Pioneering who pursue emergent discovery also believe in the big "what if" question.** The origin of Moderna was a team gathered around the speculative question, "What if you could engineer mRNA to help patients make their own medicine naturally in the body?" Such an idea had never been tested. It was in some ways a wild hypothesis. But the model of innovation they were pursuing believed you have to start there - with a wild hypothesis that you can start to experiment with. **"What if tax collectors are included? What if???"**
    - a) For the Flagship innovators, there's an expectation that **the first "what if?" question you ask may not be the right one**, but it's only in experimenting that you can learn what the better question is, and allow the problem you're hoping to solve become refined. As you experiment you see over time what works and what doesn't and you can continue to follow the trails slowly of what is working, allowing the direction of what is being built to emerge. You may end up answering a totally different question than you started with, but the question and its answer are more powerful as a result of that journey of growth.
  3. **This feels helpful to me as I think about the evolution of our little community;** how we have evolved thus far and how we are still evolving. In many ways we've been running experiments for the last eight years, trying to hone in on what models are helpful; what

wineskins are the most suited for the wine that's being cultivated in whatever present moment we're in. There have been a number of shifts along the way.

- a) We began gathering as a **small group** meeting on Sunday afternoons, sharing a bible study, singing songs, lots of young kids running around, followed by community dinners.
  - b) And after a season we outgrew the house and began **hosting public services**, in many ways structured based on the ways many of us at the time had experienced church on a Sunday. A lot of us, like myself, came from a charismatic evangelical background, so our style reflected that, even if our theology didn't.
  - c) But particularly in the wake of Trump's election, those who came from an evangelical space found themselves with a lot to sort through and dismantle.
  - d) We began honing in on that **vision of safe, diverse, Jesus-centered**. I began preaching about smashing the idols of whiteness, of patriarchy, of heteronormativity, and even evangelicalism. And with the idols smashing around us, came the questions, **how do our forms need to change as this wine is fermenting?**
    - (1) What if we **spent some of our time each Sunday interacting with each other** sharing ideas and responses, rather than simply listening to one person's thoughts? That was a part of the wineskin.
    - (2) "What if we could **embody the reality that we believe that God is not a man**, even though patriarchy leads us to imagine God that way?" Using gender expansive language for the Divine was part of the new wineskin.
    - (3) "**What if we didn't need to have a service every Sunday?**", became another experiment, as we experienced new freedom exploring rhythms of gathering that fit our unique context as a small community that draws a diverse group of people from throughout the Bay Area and beyond.
    - (4) And now after a year plus of experimenting with how to make virtual church engaging, we find ourselves asking "**what kinds of practices and gatherings bring life now after covid changed so much?**" We're a community that overall numbers wise is about the same size as we were before the pandemic, but it feels different because the way people engage has clearly shifted. Some of us today are gathering in person, some are joining us online. Some folks still consider this their spiritual community, but don't generally attend our Sunday services at all, opting to engage in our small groups or connection Sundays instead.
4. In many ways, **we look very different than what we looked like when we started eight years ago**. We think differently, we gather differently, and that points to our growth. In other ways I think we have work still to do, allowing further discovery to emerge. I think there is room to run more experiments, to go further in asking, what spiritual practices, what modes of worship, what styles of teaching, what collaborative projects might we spend our time on? What do we need to let go of, because it doesn't fit the moment we're in and the wine we're cultivating? We haven't arrived at some idealized version of church; and honestly, I hope we never do. We are ever a work in progress as the Spirit moves in fresh ways in our midst. So while we are in progress, may we remain supple, and willing to bend as we need to. May we not allow our containers for cultivating community to become brittle, but may we continue to be open to new possibilities, seeing beautiful, life giving things mature like fine wine in our midst. Amen.

1. Are there areas in your life where new understanding has led to new models or ways of doing things? What was that process like?
2. How do you respond to others who don't understand or appreciate the "new wine" in your life?
3. What new experiments would you welcome in Haven as we grow in creating safety, honoring diversity and centering around Jesus?