

I. (Advanced Organizer)

A. For about a year, **my kids elementary school didn't technically have a name**. It had had a name when we moved to Berkeley and Elliott was placed there as a third grader. And it had had a name when Junia started there a year later in kindergarten. But by the time I took a stint serving in leadership of the PTA, the school I was serving at technically had been de-named, but not yet re-named. We were **the school formerly known as LeConte Elementary**.

1. The whole thing started with a brewing conversation among parents. **Who was this Joseph LeConte that the school was named after?** It turns out, as some folks discovered, his history was pretty problematic. Though he and his brother had been scientists and major developers of Berkeley, helping establish the University and the Sierra Club, **they were also clear white supremacists who moved to Berkeley after making ammunition for the confederacy among other things**. Our school had recently transitioned to being Berkeley's only bilingual dual immersion Spanish-English school. How did the legacy of the name square with this identity? A petition was circulated. Parents started showing up at school board meetings. A presentation on the history of Joseph LeConte was prepared, and sure enough the school board agreed. They voted in 2017 that the school should no longer be LeConte elementary. But what should it be instead? That was a whole other question.
2. It turns out the district had had some experience with this and learned the hard way that changing the name of a school needs to be done carefully, and with thoughtful planning. And **so a significant process was engaged**. First there was choosing the **task force of community members** - teachers, PTA leaders, folks in the neighborhood, folks from the district who would all work together to create and run the process of choosing the name. Then there were numerous **community engagement sessions**, brainstorming times and submission opportunities where folks with various connections to the school were invited to participate. An online form was created for people to submit their nominations for a new name and in the end **118 names were considered**. The team then had to whittle those down from over 100, down to 20 and then **eventually to seven**. The task force created flyers and curriculum around each of the seven finalists, and information was distributed to students of all elementary grades in both English and Spanish. Teachers taught on each of the candidates, and parents were given information to continue conversations at home. Eventually after several months of process, **it was time to take a vote** with all of the various connected groups invited to participate - students, families, staff, community members, administration. And in the end through overwhelming community agreement, the school-with-no-name became **Sylvia Mendez Elementary**, named after the Latina activist from Los Angeles who, as a child had been at the center of a California Supreme Court case that desegregated schools in our state and was one of the precedents for *Brown vs. Board of Education*. After choosing Sylvia Mendez as the namesake for our school, a fantastic celebration was held, with **Ms. Mendez herself attending as the guest of honor**. LeConte school was no more. In a few months, Gwen will be my last child to graduate from Sylvia Mendez Elementary.

B. I start with this story because today is the last teaching in our series on "Community Evolving". And today, I want to invite us to think a little less abstractly and a little more concretely about how a group actually transforms, like a school changing their name. **What does it take for a change to move from the personal to the collective**; from "I evolved in this way" to "we as a group were there and now we're here"?

1. As I mentioned two weeks ago, I thought it might be interesting as we end this series to look at the season of the early church as it's related in the book of Acts as **a kind of case study on what community evolution can look like**. Two weeks ago we looked at a change involving primarily two individuals and an interaction they had, led by the Holy Spirit. That interaction clearly had implications for the broader movement they were a part of, but it didn't overnight transform everything. **How did the bigger change impacting the larger community take place?** We're going to look at that a bit today and consider what it might tell us as we chart a course for the next phase of our community evolution.
- C. First, some context for the passage we're going to consider today. This story comes to us **five chapters after the one we looked at a couple of weeks ago**, but the timeline between incidents is likely about **eight years later**. So to catch you up a bit, after Peter and his friends visited Cornelius and his friends in Caesarea, they faced some skepticism at first from other Jewish Jesus-followers about why they were visiting Gentiles in their home and baptizing them. But after hearing the story of everything that happened, most skeptics were excited. They seemed to agree that Peter did the right thing and they gave thanks that God's Spirit was also coming to Gentiles. And so that work continued.
1. **Now Jerusalem is the heart of Judea**, the region that was the origin of Judaism, but over the next several years, communities were established geographically further and further away from Judea. While these little churches often started with groups of Jewish people, more and more those communities also began sharing the news of Jesus with those outside the Jewish community. People like Paul and Barnabus start preaching throughout the region and traveling to new cities and establishing communities there, often with **Jewish and Gentile people worshipping together**.
  2. One of the communities that becomes kind of a home base for Paul and Barnabus is a spiritual community that comes to life in one of the **largest and most diverse cities in the region: Antioch**. Antioch was a huge city by first century standards, about half a million people. It was also a very segregated city - it was built initially with a wall down the center to keep the Syrians and the Greeks apart. By the time the church was being established, there were **at least 18 ethnic groups** living in the same city, but by and large they kept to themselves. **Except for this strange new group of Jesus followers** which seemed to mix folks from both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds.
  3. And **the church's leaders were pretty diverse too**. Not only were there Jewish men like Paul and Barnabus, but there were two men from Africa also leading the church, and another guy who grew up essentially as a foster brother to the ruler Herod Antipas, the same Herod that had executed John the Baptist. This blend of people in one group was so unique that **it was in Antioch that observers of the community started giving them their own name**. People called them "Christians", these people gathering together that normally weren't together, because they were all connected to this Jesus "Christ". And it's there in Antioch where we pick up the story in Acts 15.
- II. (The Passage)
- A. Now some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 When Paul and Barnabas had a major argument and debate with them, the church appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others from among them to go up to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this point of disagreement. 3 So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they were**

***relating at length the conversion of the Gentiles and bringing great joy to all the brothers.***

**1.** So this is the setup for the rest of what's to come, but before we read on, I'll just clarify some things to make sure we all understand what's happening. What we're seeing in Antioch is a debate about **what is needed for a non-Jewish person to become a follower of Jesus**. Some folks visiting from Judea clearly believe that Gentiles can join the faith, but they need to practice Judaism to do so, including being circumcised. For them, following Jesus was simply the next iteration of being an observant Jewish person, and they assumed that eventually, whatever their initial backgrounds, any new Jesus followers would need to practice Judaism, observing the dietary restrictions and so on, to really be included in the faith. But clearly Paul and Barnabus and some of the other diverse leadership in this vibrant young community disagreed with what these folks from Judea were teaching, and pretty vehemently. And so it was decided that a gathering of the most senior leaders in the whole Jesus movement needed to get together and sort things out. **A sort of conference was called**, what has become commonly known as "The Council of Jerusalem". Reading on:

***B. 4 When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all the things God had done with them. 5 But some from the religious party of the Pharisees who had believed stood up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and to order them to observe the law of Moses."***

***6 Both the apostles and the elders met together to deliberate about this matter. 7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that some time ago God chose me to preach to the Gentiles so they would hear the message of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, has testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between them and us, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 So now why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? 11 On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are."***

***12 The whole group kept quiet and listened to Barnabas and Paul while they explained all the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.***

**1.** So in the midst of what sounds like a long heated debate, Peter is reminding the community of what had happened in Caesaria some eight or nine years before - **he tells the story once again of his encounter with Cornelius**. And then **Paul and Barnabus** chime in with what they've seen in places like Antioch. And then the mic is given to James. Before we read what he has to say, it's helpful to know who we're talking about. **This James is actually the younger brother of Jesus**. He was not one of the 12, he had been skeptical of his big brother during his life, but according to Paul, after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his younger brother and he came to believe, and not only that, James became a leader in the movement. He eventually was the central leader in the oldest established church in Jerusalem. So now we'll read what he has to say all the way to the end of the passage.

***C. 13 After [Barnabus and Paul] stopped speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon (another name for Peter) has explained how God first concerned himself to***

**select from among the Gentiles a people for his name. 15 The words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written,**

**16 'After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the fallen tent of David;  
I will rebuild its ruins and restore it,**

**17 so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord,  
namely, all the Gentiles I have called to be my own,' says the Lord, who makes these  
things 18 known from long ago.**

**19 "Therefore I conclude that we should not cause extra difficulty for those among the  
Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but that we should write them a letter telling them  
to abstain from things defiled by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has  
been strangled and from blood. 21 For Moses has had those who proclaim him in every  
town from ancient times, because he is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath."**

**22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to send men chosen  
from among them, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leaders among the brothers, to  
Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. 23 They sent this letter with them:**

**From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in  
Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings! 24 Since we have heard that some have gone out  
from among us with no orders from us and have confused you, upsetting your minds by  
what they said, 25 we have unanimously decided to choose men to send to you along  
with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul, 26 who have risked their lives for the name of  
our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas who will tell you  
these things themselves in person. 28 For it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us  
not to place any greater burden on you than these necessary rules: 29 that you abstain  
from meat that has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been  
strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from doing these things,  
you will do well. Farewell.**

**30 So when they were dismissed, they went down to Antioch, and after gathering the  
entire group together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they read it aloud, the people  
rejoiced at its encouragement. 32 Both Judas and Silas, who were prophets themselves,  
encouraged and strengthened the brothers with a long speech. 33 After they had spent  
some time there, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent  
them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and proclaiming (along  
with many others) the word of the Lord.**

1. So there we have the rest of the story. After much debate at the Jerusalem council, **consensus is reached**. Jesus' brother James puts forward a proposal and apparently the whole crowd agrees. A letter is crafted and Barnabus and Paul, along with two others named Judas and Silas return to Antioch with the way forward in hand.
- III. So what might we take from this story? What might be helpful for us as we end this series on community evolving? I want to suggest a few things.
  - A. First, **organizational evolution needs an organizational process.**

1. Often I think evolution starts somewhat organically. Individuals through some lived reality might understand or begin to voice something differently. Perhaps a small group has a unique experience, and they are impacted by it together. Maybe they meet up with others who report similar experiences and something unique begins to grow.
2. That's **a beautiful impetus to change happening**. Think of activists on the ground beginning to name what they're seeing up close on Twitter, and movements growing as hashtags go viral. Peter and Cornelius each having a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit that brings them together and something miraculous and life transforming happens as a result.
3. But as the setup of this story shows us, eventually those organic experiences can become **frustrated if there's not a coherent way for change to happen more broadly**. In a small group or a family unit it might be possible to evolve together without much struggle; you can stay in step with each other to some degree. But as groups get a bit bigger, as groups become groups of groups - things get more complicated.
4. In the early church, for the first several years it seemed that **folks were generally operating on their own or in small teams as they each saw fit** and as they understood the Spirit to be speaking to them. It was organic and pretty loose and for a season, that seemed to be working. Peter and Cornelius, Paul and Barnabus, and clearly these unnamed folks from Judea are all doing their own thing that they believe is true. All of them are in the same movement, they're in the same general organization of Jesus-followers, but **there hasn't been any structured process in the movement to contend with what is changing in their midst**. And so as different people are moving out in different ways, things starts to get messy. There's confusion about what's needed or not - and when we're talking about something as physically consequential as first century adult circumcision, the stakes are real. **Confusion can lead to interpersonal conflict**, which was reaching a tipping point at the beginning of the story. In order to move forward, a structured process was needed.
5. Here at Haven I think **we may also be in a place where without a more formal structure in place for evolution, things at times can feel kind of messy**. In the beginning, when we were meeting each week in my living room or around my dinner table, it wasn't that hard to find consensus on an issue that came up or to deliberate a new thing we wanted to try. But through the years, we've grown some. Though it may not always feel like it on a Sunday morning, there are a variety of people, around sixty or so, from all over the Bay Area and beyond who are a part of this community. Some are here in person today. Some are joining us online. Some are waiting for the next small group to start gathering, or the next Connection Sunday. Some are kids and youth hanging out with Jeanne now. Particularly I think in this post-Covid era, different folks are connected in different ways and with different hopes and needs to keep in mind, and so evolving together looks different than it used to.
6. On top of all that, **we are a community who is trying to build something new**; something beautiful and redemptive, a spiritual community, as we have said that values safety, diversity, and centering around Jesus. But if we're honest, we as individuals and groups are evolving out of systems ourselves that have **not always been safe places or diverse places** or places that were particularly centered on the values and spirituality embodied in Jesus. So we naturally **bring with us our own histories and cultures** and ways of doing life and church, and though we may desire to be something beyond what we have known, **the becoming of that can at times feel challenging and elusive**. We

inevitably make mistakes. And when we do, if we even unintentionally hurt others in our community, it's not always clear how that hurt could be named or repaired.

7. Many of us are likely having a host of feelings around the news that our Connections Pastor for the last three years has **decided to move on from Haven in this season**. I know that I do. I love Jeanne dearly and I am so grateful for all of the ways that she has shared her gifts, her dreams, and her very self with us in recent years. And though I'm sad not to partner with her in the same way, in love and respect I also **honor her decision** to move on at this time, and I want to send her forward with blessing into the next season of her journey.
  8. Now Jeanne's reasons for moving on are her own. They're not mine to speak to, but I do think **her transition is an opportunity for reflection for all of us around what this little Haven system** we're a part of is, how it works and how we want it to work. How is power shared here? How are decisions made? Are there ways we could make things clearer or more in line with our values? Are there places where we're missing a procedure, a structure or a process that we would be better served by? I'm not talking about adding bureaucracy where it doesn't need to be there, but I do think it's important that we take the opportunities for learning when they come. And that means noticing where and when, like the early church, we may need **clear processes for course correction, and growth and change to happen**. Because I believe sooner or later **organizational evolution needs an organizational process**.
- B. The second thing I notice from the passage comes from what happens once the early movement gets to the process work. **A collective change process often includes struggling together to find the right outcome for the group**.
1. So a process is put in place, the first Jerusalem council is called, leaders from throughout this burgeoning organization come together, and it sounds like for a while, **it was a struggle**. The text tells us there was "much debate". People clearly felt pretty passionately and not all in the same way. They had different life experiences, different spiritual experiences, and different takes on how they should move forward. There was a time of struggle where at times they probably had to check themselves, take some deep breaths, stay present, stay humble, listen to what Peter or Paul or one of the pro-circumcision folks from Judea was saying.
  2. It was hard work. And perhaps for us, too, having conversations around our organizational culture, what informs it, what systems do we want to have in place to address things and to create pathways for change - **that also might be a bit of struggle**. We might miss each other sometimes. We might have to work to see things in another way. **Particularly those of us whose identities have historically been privileged** - those of us who are white, or heterosexual, able-bodied and so on - we may at times have to work **extra hard to consider things from another perspective**. Because let's face it, we've been socialized from birth to understand our own perspective as the only one. When that's the case, we may not even see that others feel or understand things differently unless we stop and listen and consider and are willing to struggle together to find what works best, not just for ourselves or those who share our lived experience, but for the collective. No doubt, it's hard work. **Collective change is hard work**.
  3. I also want to name that it's work we're **invited into together but not compelled into**. Sometimes folks may need to tap out from the struggle or have a breather or take a step back, and part of doing this together is having grace for one another in honoring that.

C. And that's what brings me to the third and final thing I notice from this story: **Struggling together can bring new outcomes and ideas that weren't previously imagined.**

1. It's through the struggle, through the listening to each perspective, through the debate and so on that **James' compromise solution emerges.** He hears the desire to honor the law of Moses and the Jewish traditions that have been upheld for centuries on one side, and he also recognizes the way God seems to be doing a new thing, bringing in new people with a new set of concerns and experiences on the other. And holding both realities, he offers something that speaks to both groups from where they are at. We don't have time to unpack the specific proposals he identifies and why they matter, but the point is that **he finds spaces of common ground.** He's able to hear everyone and offer a perspective that holds multiple viewpoints together. He even uses a scripture passage from the prophets to support his emerging point of view. And the proposal he puts forward resonates. The **group moves from division to consensus.** In the letter they end up sending, they say that their decision is **unanimous.**
2. They also name in the letter that they don't believe they came to this decision simply on their own. "**For it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us**" they said. They understand this work they've been doing to collectively evolve is the work of the Spirit. The Divine has been present, even in the struggle, and the Divine's presence with them opened up pathways to new possibilities that are a part of a community's evolution. In the end, the outcome of the process and struggle led not only to a sense of connection with the Divine, but new experiences of encouragement and joy for the entire community.
3. **Does this mean it's always smooth sailing in the early church?** No. People are still people. There are still interpersonal struggles and disconnects. In fact, if you read to the end of the chapter you'll see a kind of sad epilogue to our story, in which Paul and Barnabus themselves end up having a disagreement and parting ways. They both continue in ministry, the work they both value continues, but they don't do it together. So of course we're not saying that having systems and structures solves all the challenges. **But I do think working together in some sort of organized way can give us important tools to meet those challenges and be a crucial part of evolving as a community.**

IV. (Wrap-up)

A. **Maurice Mitchell is an organizer and an activist** who has been on the front lines of a number of movements for justice for awhile now. He's been a major organizer in the Movement for Black Lives and is currently the National Director of the Working Families Party. Maurice recently wrote a long essay that has been getting circulation in justice circles about how a number of progressive groups and organizations are having **challenges with internal group dynamics as they struggle to become meaningful spaces for change.** He describes some of the challenge this way:

1. *Movements on the Left are driven by the same political and social contradictions we strive to overcome. We fight against racism, classism, and sexism yet battle inequity and oppression inside our movements. Although we struggle for freedom and democracy, we also suffer from tendencies toward abuse and domination.... We draw from the courage of radical traditions but often lack the strategy or conviction to challenge the status quo.... Many of us are working harder than ever but feeling that we have less power and impact.*
2. Maurice Mitchell goes on to clearly describe several problems that he thinks contribute to this situation, as well as concrete solutions for a way forward in the movement for justice with what he calls "**a posture of joy and victory**". And essentially all of his solutions

center around **the area of organizational development**. He encourages groups to spend real time building what he calls “**resilient organizations**”, **organizations that are, as he says, “structurally sound, ideologically coherent, strategically grounded, and emotionally mature.”**

- B. In the coming months I hope that the various leadership groups in Haven - our board of directors, our vision team, and myself - can work together in engaging our whole community in processes that are part of our next phase of evolving. I hope that we can give each other space to feel all the things we’re feeling now, and then follow those feelings into the work. I hope that in the work, **we as Haven can become more structurally sound, more ideologically coherent, more strategically grounded, and more emotionally mature** than we currently are. At times it might be wearying. In moments there might be struggle, and we may have to give one another space. We will likely need to look outside of ourselves for strategies and tools to engage this work, like the ones Maurice Mitchell has to share.
- C. But I hope as we do, as we engage, and stay present, and struggle together, like we see in the story - **new unimagined possibilities will emerge among us and our community will grow with encouragement and joy**. When I say “grow” I’m not really talking about numbers, though that may happen too. But more importantly, may we grow in wisdom. May we grow in compassion. May we grow in embodied love. Grow in living into our values more fully. Grow in more effectively smashing idols. Grow in embodying the presence of Jesus to the world around us. May we grow into the Haven we feel called to be, a **Community Evolving Together**. Amen.

#### **Questions for Reflection and Conversation**

1. What experiences do you have of a group or organization pursuing change together? What processes were helpful in the change?
2. Have you had experiences within any groups or organizations where you wished for a process or some clarity around structure that wasn’t there?
3. What do you think a more “structurally sound, ideologically coherent, strategically grounded and emotionally mature” Haven might look like?