

I. Advanced Organizer

A. **There's a word that's often heard maybe more than most parents would like in any home with young children.** My kids all went through a phase starting not long after they learned to speak, they discovered one of their favorite things to say. **"Mine"**. That toy truck is mine. That cookie is mine. The blanket is mine. Even if I haven't played with that doll for a year, if you come to my house and pick her up, I'm gonna let you know nice and loud that **doll is mine**. It can be a frustrating stage, especially if you have more than one child, and they all "mine" the same things...but scientists say that as challenging as this may be for parents, it is a sign of a developing mind in the child who hits the possessive phase.

1. **Development Psychologist Susan Gelman explains it this way: "It suggests that she is grasping the abstract concept of a person's invisible tie to a thing."** A child's sense of self is emerging and as it does, the child starts to express themselves through their connection to the things around them. When a child learns that something is theirs, that it belongs in a special way to them, **the object takes on extra importance, becoming extra valuable.**
2. Studies show this as two and three year old children are shown a number of toys and then told one of them is theirs. The toys are all mixed up and after this happens, most children show an attachment, even with all the mixing, to the thing they perceive as their own. Even when you substitute a toy that is theirs for a block of wood that is theirs instead, next to a number of cooler toys that they are told are not their own, children are much more likely to say they love the wood block. **I love the thing that's "mine"**.

B. Well I start with this because **this is the second conversation we're having in our start-of-the-year teaching series, one I'm calling "Habits for Health"**. In this series, we're considering together some practices or habits that we might do well to consider or re-consider as this new year and new decade begin, and many of us are taking some time after the holidays to bring fresh order to our lives.

1. Today, I want to take a moment to think about **habits that touch on something that can feel very personal to many of us, just like it does to those young children: our stuff.** Our resources. Our possessions. Our money.
2. It's a topic we don't talk about a lot here, at least not in a prescriptive (telling you what you should or shouldn't do) kind of way. **Here at Haven we are actively trying to create a safe, spiritual home for a diverse group of people oriented around Jesus, a home that recognizes that churches can and often have been places of harm and even spiritual trauma for folks.** Understanding that, we are trying to cultivate places of healing for those areas of trauma, and also be working to, as best we can, not create more pain. And one of the ways I think that sadly people have experienced the toxic harm of communities of faith the most, is how churches at times have talked about money.
3. **Many of us have felt manipulated by faith communities who insisted in direct or indirect ways that faithfulness to God meant giving a significant portion of our income to this particular church,** and if we were unable to do that, or didn't feel right doing that, that were made to feel less welcome or included in what God was doing there. Sensitive to that, it's something I work hard at Haven to be careful about, while still wanting to invite people to generously participate in giving to the work we're doing here. And many of you have, which has been amazing to see.
4. But we can't throw the baby out with the bath water. The reality is **Jesus had a lot to say about resources.** You might argue that was a core part of what he was here to do: to challenge what he saw as unjust and immoral ways of humans allocating their resources,

and to bring, as he called it, “good news to the poor.” Sometimes that meant challenging larger systems of power that were concentrating wealth in the hands of too few and leaving too many hungry, thirsty and unsheltered. But it also meant talking to individuals, families, communities, whatever their socio-economic station, about the ways that they interacted with material resources and how those interactions impacted their spiritual health. The truth is, **if I’m gonna look to Jesus for direction on living healthy holistic lives, I need to consider what Jesus would say about the things I consider “mine”.**

II. The Passage.

- A. So we’re gonna look today at Luke 12, one of the main teaching passage in the gospel of Luke, where Jesus is doing a lot of preaching. And the setup in Luke is that he’s talking to a lot of people. The chapter starts saying, “When many thousands of the crowd had gathered so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak...” So we’ve got an unruly crowd here and in the midst of Jesus’ preaching to it, this happens:
- B. ***13 Then someone from the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”***

14 But Jesus said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator between you two?”
15 Then he said to them, “Watch out and guard yourself from all types of greed, because one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

16 He then told them a parable: “The land of a certain rich man produced an abundant crop, 17 so he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ 18 Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to myself, “You have plenty of goods stored up for many years; relax, eat, drink, celebrate!”

20 But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded back from you, but who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ 21 So it is with the one who stores up riches for himself, but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:13-21, NET)

- C. So here we have this parable: a story that Jesus told in regards to resources. And for some of us this may seem like a curious story. Because Jesus in it seems to be chastising someone for making what sounds, at first hearing, like a wise financial plan. Someone comes into resources, and rather than blowing it all on frivolous spending, they make preparations to save their income, to shore it up and then they get to live off of that wise investment for years to come. But the story makes clear that God doesn’t see the investor as wise at all: quite the opposite. The man in Jesus’ story is called a fool. **But what is it that makes him so foolish?**
- D. To answer this question, we’ll start by going back to the setting. Jesus is speaking to an unruly crowd of thousands. There are likely a myriad of people trying to get his attention: imagine a White House press conference kind of vibe. And in the middle of this chaotic scene, one of the voices in the crowd rings out and Jesus responds to it. **It’s not a particular respectful ask, it’s a selfish demand.** “Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”
1. Now in the ancient Israel, older brothers inherited control of an estate, and their portion was twice their younger brothers portions. The ideal is that the siblings work together and jointly manage things, but. If they cannot and there’s a dispute, the torah tells them to take the matter to a rabbi for a decision about what to do.

2. Clearly this is what this guy is hoping for. He must be a younger brother, otherwise he'd have control over the estate, and it sounds like **he's frustrated his older brother is not giving him what he thinks he should have**. So he shouts it out. Never mind the thousands of people this guy is ignoring to get what he wants. Never mind that he has no real relationship with Jesus or anything to demonstrate that he respects him as a rabbi. **It's a transaction** and Jesus can help him get it done so he calls out to him.
 3. But **Jesus refuses to give him what he's looking for**. He's not gonna make a ruling on his behalf; instead he calls him on his expectation that he is entitled to Jesus participating in his self-interested scheme. "Who made me a judge or arbiter between you two?" **Not my job**. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He uses this personal situation that this man has brought forward, interrupting the crowd on his own behalf, to **make a broader point to everyone gathered there**: "Watch out and guard yourself from all types of greed, because one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."
 4. And this is where I think Jesus reveals the first important thing he wants his listeners to understand about resources, and how they should think about them. **How we handle our resources reflects what we believe life is ultimately about.**
- E. **The parable makes this point more clearly.**
1. Jesus introduces us to a rich man. Now, remember, in this day, wealth inequality was stark. Only two or three percent of the population were people of means: they were the landowners. They were rich. The rest of the population - like 97% - were quite poor, day laborers, subsistence farmers, peasants. So this person Jesus is talking about is already in an elite class.
 2. Jesus tells us that this already rich landowner has a windfall. His land yields a particularly abundant harvest, so big that the barn he has, a barn that was likely built for just this event, to store excess grain, it's not big enough. And now this guy has a problem - what to do with all this extra grain? **It's the ultimate first-world problem.**
 3. To solve the problem, the guy doesn't go consult with his wife. He doesn't talk with his foreman or his other workers. He doesn't consult with his kids or his fellow landowner or his rabbi. **He consults with: himself**. And the little soliloquy he recites reveals what he's ultimately concerned with. In this speech of around sixty words, a fifth of them are "I" or "myself". Everything is centered around his own self-interest, his own well being, his own agency.
 4. This is why the solution he comes up with makes perfect sense. My storehouse isn't big enough for all my wealth? Well, I guess I should have my workers tear it down and build a bigger one! Why not? I've been successful. I deserve to have it all and spend the rest of my life just enjoying it. Because that's what life, is about, right? **How we handle our resources reflects what we believe life is ultimately about.**
- F. This brings me to the second lesson I think our story is trying to teach: **what we center our lives around matters**. It's not neutral. It's not simply, to each their own, "if you want to be a selfish jerk, and you can afford to do it, why not? Good for you." No. Jesus speaks for the Divine, saying God calls this man **a fool**. He's not foolish because he has money. He's not foolish because he saves it, that itself is not the problem. What makes him foolish is the fact that **he is building his life solely around his money. Around what he perceives to be "mine". He's centering his life on his own security and self-interest. And God calls a life oriented around materialism and self interest to be foolishness. Clearly Jesus believes that what you put at the center of your life matters.**

- G. There's a word play that our reading of this in English misses a bit, but its worth highlighting because I think it speaks to what's really at the heart of what Jesus is naming. It shows up in verse 19. In Greek, the man says something to himself like, "Soul, you have plenty of goods." He uses the word, "*psuche*", the origin of our word "psyche". He's speaking to his very soul, the deepest part of himself, what is essentially *him*, the core of his living self telling it to be at ease for he now has so much wealth to enjoy.
- a) But right then, God comes to him and calls him out, using that same word. "Tonight your *psuchen* will be taken from you." Your soul will be taken away. And all that your soul has invested itself in, all this that your *psuchen* has been fed by, has been living toward, everything your soul values - all of that will be gone.
- H. There's a metaphor that many of us who've been around Haven awhile have found helpful to describe the life of faith, and it's called centered set-theory. In this theory we posit that **perhaps the goal of the life of faith is to orient our lives in a particular direction** - in the direction of God, or in the direction of Jesus. It's not to follow a set of rules. It's not to pick the right group or religious club, what we call a "bounded set". But it's to navigate a journey in which, if your life was like a dot on a page in which all the dots were in motion, that **your dot would orient itself in the direction of the Divine**. With this metaphor we say that perhaps the goal of spiritual community is to help folks, from whatever direction they're coming, whatever their background is or individual story, to help folks turn their trajectory arrow toward that center point of God. To give into that gravitational pull. To do the work everyday of recalibrating, reorienting, in religious terms "repenting" so as to direct oneself ultimately toward that divine center.
1. This metaphor seems to me to be exactly the underlying idea that Jesus is pointing to in this story. **The problem with the rich landowner in the parable is that the landowner has put his resources at the center of what he is orienting his life around.** But in doing so, he neglected to live into something with deeper lasting value. Jesus ends his story by making the point explicit, "So it is with the one who stores up riches for himself, but is not rich toward God." **If all you are invested in is riches, if all you do is hoard and scrimp and tightly grasp with the child's insistence of "mine!" everything that comes your way, in the end, you'll have nothing.**
2. Tomorrow is a national holiday, in which we as a nation are meant to recognize the work and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King. Well, Dr. King preached a sermon on this very passage. And over fifty years later, his analysis still rings true for how this passage speaks today. Here is how he spoke about the folly of this rich landowner and what it means for us:
- a) ***"A victim of the cancerous disease of egotism, he failed to realize that wealth always comes as a result of the commonwealth. He talked as though he could plough the fields and build the barns alone. He failed to realize that he was an heir of a vast treasury of ideas and labor to which both the living and the dead had contributed. When an individual or a nation overlooks this interdependence, we find a tragic foolishness.***

We can clearly see the meaning of this parable for the present world crisis. Our nation's productive machinery constantly brings forth such an abundance of food that we must build larger barns and spend more than a million dollars daily to store our surplus. Year after year we ask, "What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?" I have seen an answer in the faces of millions

of poverty-stricken men and women in Asia, Africa, and South America. I have seen an answer in the appalling poverty on the Mississippi Delta and the tragic insecurity of the unemployed in large industrial cities of the North. What can we do? The answer is simple: feed the poor, clothe the naked, and heal the sick.

Where can we store our goods? Again the answer is simple: we can store our surplus food free of charge in the shriveled stomachs of the millions of God's children who go to bed hungry at night. ...

In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."

3. **There is an alternative to living toward your own security as the center point.** There is an alternative to what Dr. King described as the "cancerous disease of egotism". **The alternative is finding another center point to live toward.** That doesn't mean renouncing resources altogether and living a destitute life: all of us need resources to live. Jesus himself and all of his followers needed resources to live. Rather, I think what Jesus was trying to teach the younger brother he's speaking to, and all who were listening in, was to recognize the role resources have to play in this journey of life: they are a means to an end, not the end themselves.
4. **Our resources can be powerful tools to navigate what he calls a life that is "rich in God", a life that is centered on the things of the divine.** We are not three year olds anymore, who define themselves by the things that they possess. **Rather we are meant to use whatever earthly resources: time, energy, money, inheritance to navigate ourselves toward the things of God** - love of neighbor, care for the community, stewardship of the created world. We can take our windfalls and feed the poor, clothe the naked, and heal the sick. We can store our abundance in the stomachs of hungry children And when we do so, Jesus teaches that we will become enriched in things that endure, that live on, that cannot be taken away, even by death.
- I. As I was preparing this teaching this week I was struck by the resonance it has with a drama that has been playing out here in the East Bay in recent weeks. **On November 18, 2019, three mothers and their children moved into a vacant 3 bedroom home on Magnolia St in Oakland.** They cleaned things up, they washed the walls, they installed a water heater, they paid the gas and electric bills. And they did all this knowing **they had no legal right to occupy the home.** They did not have a lease or a deed. But they were there because they needed shelter for themselves and their children. And they were there to draw attention to a crisis in our East Bay community.
 1. I'm guessing many of you have heard by now of these three women, the founding members of a group called **Moms 4 Housing**. On its website this new organization describes itself this way: *"Moms for Housing is a collective of homeless and marginally housed mothers. Before we found each other, we felt alone in this struggle. But there are thousands of others like us here in Oakland and all across the Bay Area. We are coming together with the ultimate goal of reclaiming housing for the community from speculators*

and profiteers. We are mothers, we are workers, we are human beings, and we deserve housing. Our children deserve housing. Housing is a human right."

2. You see the house they chose to occupy was not simply vacant because its new owner had not yet moved in or it was between tenants. This home had recently been purchased by a Southern California based company called Wedgewood. Wedgewood owns thousands of homes across the country, including hundreds in the Bay Area. Many of these homes are purchased as speculative investments - foreclosed properties often purchased on the cheap. Often these homes are occupied with low-income tenants, and companies like Wedgewood are happy to evict them, clean them up and flip them for a profit. This often means evicting low income people who've been in the community for decades and selling to very high-income newcomers. Sometimes, these companies determine the most profitable thing for them to do is to keep the homes vacant, making homes in the area scarce, and driving up the prices for those they do put on the market. Supply, and demand, right?
3. The housing crisis in the Bay Area with its sky-rocketing rents and home prices is not simply about the influx of new workers to the area and new money from the tech industry. It is also a crisis fueled by developers and corporations willing to decimate communities simply to maximize their bottom lines, and local governments unable or unwilling to stop them. By some estimates there are currently **four vacant homes for every homeless individual in Oakland**, and those numbers are similar in cities throughout the Bay Area. 50 years ago Dr. King asked where should we store our excess food and said the answer was simple: in the bellies of the hungry. In the same way today, Moms 4 Housing provokes us to ask: what shall we do with all of these empty homes? The answer should also be simple: create homes for the homeless.
4. These housing activists took over a home to sound an alarm: they were willing to risk arrest as an act of non-violent resistance, that says this status quo is unjust and it cannot be tolerated anymore.
5. For their part, **Wedgewood was given the opportunity to participate in something besides corporate enrichment.** They were given the opportunity to play a role in an effort centered on something besides greed. With the help of Oakland Community Land Trust, Moms 4 Housing was prepared to pay the developer the same market rate they had paid for the home only months before. The value of the house was 1% of the company's holdings in the Bay Area alone. They could have simply sold it to the women, not even for a loss, and put the whole thing to rest, maybe even earned some good will in the neighborhood.
6. Instead, this week the women were forcibly removed from the home on Magnolia Street. Police in riot gear and equipped with an armored vehicle showed up at 5 in the morning, so as to get around the hundreds of supporters who had tried to block them the night before. They arrested the moms present and some of their supporters. They boarded up the home and threw the children's toys on the sidewalk. **But Dominique Walker, one of the moms and a spokeswoman for the cause, still calls the effort a victory. Why? People like us are talking about it.** We're having conversations about what just housing in a gentrifying community looks like. Hundreds of people who may not have ever considered themselves housing advocates rallied to their side. City council members in Oakland got involved, trying to persuade Wedgewood to sell the women the property. **Whether you agree with the methods of Moms 4 Housing or not, it must be acknowledged that as a result of their direct action, a community is being asked to organize around questions of how growth should happen, what community should**

look like, and when do our laws favor corporate interests over the rights of humans to be sheltered. We are being asked to consider how as King said we are “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

- III. How we handle our resources reflects what we believe life is ultimately about. What we center our lives around matters. We can choose to live towards the ways of Jesus rather than our own security. If these statements are all true, what does that mean for how we order our resources? I want to end with a few suggestions that I invite you to be discerning today in the days to come.
- A. **Consider your centered-set journey.** What would you put at the center point of the life you are trying to live? Try to think beyond surface answers: career, family, even “God” or “Jesus”. What does living unto that center point mean to you in terms of what you value, what you hope for, what goals you have, what ways you’re trying to grow?
- B. **Take an inventory on how you are allocating your resources now:** these resources should include your finances, your time, your energy, your expertise: any resources you have. Consider what that allocation reflects. Does it match up with the centered-set journey you’re trying to take? Or are there ways where that resource allocation might be pulling you in a different direction?
- C. Finally, **commit to an intentional practice that allows you to regularly invest in what you want to value.** This to me is the value of regular giving to a faith community or other organizations, or regular volunteering, regular service. Serving at the homeless shelter on Saturday nights. Joining in advocacy efforts, calling our city council members to demand fair housing policies. These are practices to invest to put downpayment on the things we really care about.
1. This is why Jason and I have always tried to give a good portion of our income away, even when we didn't have much to work with. We don't give because the practice in and of itself gives us brownie points in heaven or puts us in good favor with a pastor or makes us holy people, but because it regularly reminds us what we're living toward. It's an opportunity to turn that arrow in the right direction every month. Letting go of that “mine” grasp we had when we were kids takes practice. It doesn't happen automatically. It's easy to believe sure, we should be generous, and also to leave that off for another day. A day when we're a little richer, a little more comfortable, a little safer. But as that rich man reminds us, to put off investments in the things of the divine to another day is foolishness. We don't know how much time we have to work with.
 2. **What we do know is that we are a part of a network of mutuality.** Our resource provision is not on us alone. Every time we have given something to someone who needed it more, we have paid into that interrelated network. And I believe personally I've experienced the fruitfulness of that network, the generosity of that network, far more than I have paid into it. I've experienced the blessing of unexpected provision from others through meals when someone's sick, through the gifts of others presence when I need it, through folks watching my kids, moving my furniture, through abundant financial generosity, I've received all of these just as I have also given these things away. There is enough within the network to go around. Sometimes we are giving, sometimes we are receiving, but always we are held by a divine heart who cares for us and wants us to find freedom as we participate in this alternative way of being, this family, community, kin-dom of God.
- D. **Jesus believed we worship a God not of scarcity, but of abundance.** After telling this parable Jesus reminded his followers how God provides the birds with food and the flowers with beautiful adornment. In the same way he said, God knows we need resources and is happy to provide them. But he doesn't want us to be consumed with their pursuit out of fear.

“Instead, pursue God’s kin-dom, and these things will be given to you as well.” May we all hear that invitation and receive it with freedom, joy, and hope for a life of health, meaning, and connection to the Divine. Amen.