

## I. Advanced Organizer

A. **How many of you have been to some sort of family reunion?** How was it? For as long as we've been married, every year or two Jason and I have had to undergo some major travel to be with members of our extended family. The years we lived in the midwest, we'd usually travel every couple of years to visit my family in California; that was always an ordeal. Now that we're in California, it's easier to visit with my family, though still takes some coordinating as we're spread across the state, but to visit Jason's family in the midwest of East Coast takes a lot more work. Jason has four siblings. Besides us in California, he has a sister in Wyoming, two brothers and a mother near Chicago, a father in Michigan, and a brother in North Carolina - so we're spread out all over the country.

### 1. **Coordinating to spend time with extended family is a worthwhile pursuit, but it's never an easy endeavor.**

- a) We have all these factors to balance:
  - (1) We have to consider where everyone is coming from, and what could be a reasonable location that people can travel to.
  - (2) Navigating different family budgets and different families' capacity to pay can be a challenge.
  - (3) We all have kids but different numbers and different ages, so finding things that work for all families on that front is hard.
  - (4) Then there are issues of personality and preference. We have some very strong personalities who like different things. Some folks want trips that have a lot going on, where there are interesting things to do or place to go, with a lot of together time. Others are way more introverted and want to make sure there will be sufficient time alone, without a lot of activities.
  - (5) And then there are various styles of communication. Some people are more direct, some people less. A lot of the family is not good at just regularly staying virtually in touch, and so the time together carries the relational weight, which can make the stakes of every conversation high.
- b) In the end, I have found that while I'm always grateful for the times we have with extended family we don't see often, I rarely go away feeling completely one way or another about the experience. It's generally a mixed bag.
  - (1) There are meaningful conversations and there are frustrating ones. There are places of genuine deep connection and there are times when I feel like my family members and I are speaking past each other. There are pockets of people I am closer to, and folks I feel more distance from, and **when we're all together, these dynamics are all the more in play, bringing joy and stress, anxiety and deep affection. It's Complicated.**

B. **I start with this story about family reunions because I think it reflects just one example of a social system that many of us are a part of that has its degree of messiness, even as it brings us life.** This is front of mind for me this week because I just returned a few days ago from a trip to New York City, where I spent time connecting with folks in another system that I, and by extension, Haven is a part of. Jill, our other staff pastor, and I both flew to New York to be with other pastors from most of the Blue Ocean churches around the country. It's been about eighteen months since I've seen most of these people in person, although I connect with some of them in various calls from time to time online. And this family reunion of sorts was similar to reunions of my biological family. **It reminded me, in a similar way, that life in systems is complicated.**

- C. **This feel like as appropriate a topic as any to consider during this teaching series I've named "It's Complicated."** I started this series a couple of weeks ago on Easter considering the complexity of the resurrection story - that it's not as simple as just victory over death. That there is loss inherent in resurrection, as well as new life. They are tangled together.
- Throughout the next couple of months we will explore other places of tension in the life of faith where there seems to be a "both/and" experience rather than "either/or".** Some of these teachings may be more theological. Today is less of an academic Bible teaching and more of a personal reflection, sharing some thoughts from my trip, and bringing you into my own thinking this week as I consider the social systems like Blue Ocean, that I'm a part of, and how they function. How they bring life, how they also have the power to bring harm. And where Jesus might be in the midst of all of it.
- D. In summary I'm calling this teaching **"Systems are the Best/Systems are the Worst."**
1. What specifically am I talking about in regards to "systems"?
    - a) **In the West, many of us have been socialized to think of ourselves primarily as individuals who happen to interact with other individuals or groups.** We might perceive a group as just a collection of individuals. However **"systems theory" recognizes that any group is more than just the sum of its parts.** Systems theory reminds us that whether you're talking about complicated machines or biological organisms, or human relationships, you can't fully understand something by simply considering the individual components: **you also need to consider the ways those individual components are connected, and the dynamics those connections foster.** When individual entities come into relationship with one another, on an ongoing basis, they relating takes on a life of their own, that's distinct from any individual stakeholder. **The individuals together become a system.**
    2. Specifically, today, I'm thinking about social systems, systems of people interacting together.
      - a) **Our families are a kind of social system.**
        - (1) They have various stakeholders. They have some sort of organizing principals. There are structural elements. There are ways that the individuals function together, and all kinds of dynamics that introduces.
        - (2) **There are other social systems we are a part of: our work is a social system, if we're involved in a school that's one, or a social organizations we're part of. Haven is certainly a social system.** And there are larger scale social systems we are stakeholders in as well. **Systems of commerce** that we interact with every time we shop. **Systems of government**, from the local to the national level.
      - b) **I think at the core of these social systems we find ourselves in is the need we all have for connection.** As people of Jesus-centered faith, the stories we tell suggest that we actually believe that **as humans we are made with a need for connection both with other people, and also, ultimately with God.** Our stories suggest that at the core of God's very self is connection as God connects in God's own being with other parts of being - **there's a relational system in the center of the universe - a Trinity or relations: Divine Parent, Jesus the Son, Holy Spirit.**
      - c) And so **just as the Divine has a social system within itself, all of us are called into various systems at different points in our lives.** We're born into families. We go to schools. We may be in faith communities. And all of these allow for certain kinds of interactions to happen that have the potential of bringing blessing and connection that we all need. They bring order to chaos. All of this is to the good.

- d) **But there's another side to the story that needs to be considered, which is where the "complicated" comes in.** Sometimes when systems take on a life of their own, **that life can advantage some within the system over others.** That's the **groundwork for oppression.** The more that I've learned about how oppression becomes systemic, the more cautious I've found myself feeling about the systems I participate in. That's an awareness I want to hang onto in my own consideration of the systems I participate in, and particularly the ones I have capacity to help shape.

E. Let me tell you about Blue Ocean Faith

1. **One of the most powerful spiritual experiences I've ever had happened at a conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts about ten years ago.** I don't have time to give you all the details of the miraculous moments that occurred that week. But I can give you my **three big takeaways.**
  - a) 1) I came out of that trip to the Boston area confident **that I had connected with people who would profoundly shape my view of ministry and be partners in the future.**
  - b) 2) **I had a sense that someday I would find myself beginning a similar community in a college town like Cambridge, specifically Berkeley, California, and**
  - c) 3) **I believed that Jesus was inviting me to see LGBTQ inclusion in church in what felt at the time like a radical new way, and I agreed to partner with Jesus in starting a more inclusive kind of church.** All of this was my introduction to the people involved in **what would become Blue Ocean Faith.**
2. Four years ago, I was being forced out of my movement of churches for holding true to that conviction about starting an inclusive church. I was now more deeply connected to these other pastors and churches who had similar convictions and a way of doing ministry that resonated with me. This network had started to call itself Blue Ocean, and we functioned as a loose affiliation within a much larger system. **But the larger denominational system we were apart of had begun to turn on our group.** I was one of the first to be affected, but I had friends who were facing a similar fate. **We gathered in New York City in early 2014 to consider our options.** We grieved that the season of functioning as a company of like-minded friends within a bigger system was ending. But we also looked ahead with hope. **It seemed like perhaps the beginning of a new thing for all of us, a new system was forming.**
3. Later that year, I moved to Berkeley. **By September, we had a little system of our own, nine adults and some kids, meeting in my living room,** considering what it might look like to form a new faith community. That little system eventually named itself Haven. It has taken much of my time and energy in the last three and a half years.
4. **But during that time more pieces have come into place in the origin story of Blue Ocean faith.** There was about a year of churches each leaving the system we were previously in: each in their own way, and affiliating with this fledgling network. Some of the exits were brutally painful. Some were more peaceful. Some larger churches lost many members as they took a stand for full inclusion, and some of them are still trying to find their footing. The church I used to work at in Iowa actually grew after making the move, and is stronger now in terms of resources, numbers of attenders and staff than it's ever been.
5. **And through the years, this little system of churches has been evolving.** There've been some lovely developments. Eventually every system needs some structure- and this

one is no different. **A formal leadership team was named, values have been articulated.** The Senior Leadership Team took several months to thoughtfully craft the six Blue Ocean theological distinctives - a set of categories of thought that give language to how Blue Ocean churches tend to think through Jesus centered faith in various ways. I preached on them a couple of years ago - you can find the teachings on our website - and I cover them in the Haven 101 class we're doing next week. I have really appreciated the thought that went into those distinctives - all of which I have found helpful, clarifying and inspiring.

6. **Over the last few years, I've also really appreciated the chance to connect with people who have similar philosophy of ministry, similar theological journeys, similar approach to interacting with the world around us, and in some cases, are very dear friends that I enjoy.** Starting a faith community can be a lonely business. It's taken us a while to find our people; and many of the people who were initially part of the project have been called elsewhere since. It's nice to have some people to connect with outside of the Bay Area. **For the last couple of years I have been a part of regular online calls where I check in with other pastors. We share challenges, ideas, we pray for one another. It's nice to be able to talk to others who are living through similar challenges and questions. It's helpful to have friends.**
7. **And the circle of friends includes some soul-partnerships: people like Emily who some of you met at our retreat last summer,** and of course, my mentor and the pastor I had the joy of working for for five years in Iowa City, **Adey Wassink.** Adey has become one of the dearest people to me in the world. She has walked with me through some of the most challenging seasons of my life, journeying with me through to the other side, praying, crying, and cursing as needed along the way. She celebrates me and calls out my gifts, as well as identifies my struggles, when I have a hard time seeing myself clearly. I value her wisdom, her care, her heart, her leadership immensely, and I feel a desire to be, as often as life allows, in shared spaces with her. I enjoy partnering with her, whenever possible, and I know she sincerely feels the same about me. Just knowing we are a part of this little Blue Ocean project together is immensely heartening.
8. **All of that gives some context to what I was looking forward to this week.** There were about 20 of us pastors there, representing about a dozen churches around the country. I was excited to reconnect in person with some of my friends, particularly Adey. I was sad that others like Emily weren't able to join us. But even so, **there certainly were some moments of warm connection.** It was a joy to introduce everyone to Jill, and our last day together we had a wonderful lunch connecting with two other children's ministry pastors, as well as Adey. It was wonderful to hear about some of the happenings at some of these churches around the country, ways that people are engaging in partnerships with important organizations in their home towns, or innovative new ways that folks are engaging social issues. **One of the most fun developments was sharing with the group about what we're up to here in Berkeley, and seeing some of their enthusiasm: particularly a group of newer young staff pastors from that same church in Cambridge who really celebrated our work.** I shared about the journey we've been on to become a community that is actively concerned with being safe, diverse, and Jesus-centered - understanding that at times we have to confront the ways the systems we're a part of are oppressive to various people groups, so we can participate in dismantling those systems of oppression. **I shared how we've been on journey to name some of the idols that have taken hold in the church systems we're trying to emerge from, so**

that we can try to foster community that doesn't carry on that oppression, and there were folks who were clearly resonating and inspired by the work we were doing.

9. But, as is true in any system, **as this little group grows both in numbers and in years journeying together, over time, various social dynamics enter in.** There are affinities. Some relationships are closer between folks than others. Some personalities click more than others. This is natural, normal, it is the way of things. **But it also introduces the capacity for dynamics that are complicating. Who holds the floor in a meeting? What conversations are valued in the system? What voices are elevated? What voices are not?** The dynamics and tensions are subtle, and overall, everyone is good natured, but I can't help feel questions and concerns around all of it.

10. This week was an important time of connection, which I value, and I'm grateful to have a system of support for myself and our community. But I also am left with questions about systems in general: **how can we foster systems that bring life and freedom and flourishing to all who are a part of them, without anyone feeling left behind, devalued, or oppressed? How can Blue Ocean be about that as it grows? And even more important to me: How can Haven?**

- F. And this finally brings me to briefly considering Jesus and how he handled these kind of system dynamics. Because in many ways it is true, "there is nothing new under the sun." Let's take a quick look at a story in the life of Jesus about these kind of questions.

II. From Matthew 20: 20 - 28

**20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling down she asked him for a favor. 21 He said to her, "What do you want?" She replied, "Permit these two sons of mine to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 Jesus answered, "You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23 He told them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right and at my left is not mine to give. Rather, it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."**

**24 Now when the other ten heard this, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions use their authority over them. 26 It must not be this way among you! Instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave—28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**

- A. From the beginning, we see system dynamics at play. Jesus has established a little system with his twelve apostles. Among them are this pair of brothers - James and John - the sons of Zebedee. And also in the mix of the relational dynamics - their mom. Mark, in his account, actually gives us her name: Salome. Salome is also a follower of Jesus. She is one of the bigger group that travels with him. She appears with the women at the cross and among the group of women who are the first to witness the resurrection.

1. The three seem to have a little family alliance. With it they are trying to do what? **Secure power within the system.** Now, perhaps intentionally, the presentation had the air of humility and supplication - the mom kneels before Jesus to "ask him a favor". All of us are familiar with this tactic, aren't we? But whatever the presentation, there's no doubt once her request comes forward what this is about. Mom wants to make sure her boys are taken care of. "Permit my sons to sit one on your right and one at your left".
- a) In some ways, this is one of the most relatable mom moments in the gospels. Moms like to see their kids recognized. We do..

- b) As normal and relatable as it may be that this mother wants to help her sons, this dynamic is also problematic. What Salome's advocating for will influence the shape of the system. **She believes that there is power to be had in this system Jesus is establishing and it's a zero-sum kind of game. You either hold the most power or someone else does. The places on the right and the left of Jesus' hypothetical throne represent the places of the most political power next to Jesus. They are the second and third in command.** So this woman is willing to band with her sons to lobby together and pressure Jesus to make sure the significant power and privilege to be had is in their hands.

**B. Jesus has a startling reaction. "You don't know what you're asking! Are you able to drink the cup I'm about to drink?"**

- a) This is where we start to get a sense that the Zebedee family has been misreading the situation. **Jesus is establishing a different kind of system.**
- b) Jesus' system isn't about climbing to the top to get the best perks. Jesus isn't securing lush housing or a generous retirement account, and handing out similar perks to those who are closest to him. Jesus has a different mission ahead of him.
- c) He uses a metaphor to describe what Jesus understands to be his unique destiny, and by extension, the destiny of those who want to share leadership with him. "Drinking the cup". What kind of cup is Jesus talking about? It's not a cup of blessing and bounty. Rather, it's the same metaphor Jesus will employ in Matthew six chapters later when he prays in the garden of Gethsemane, right before he is arrested. "Take this cup away from me." It's the cup of suffering.
- d) In this moment with James and John, Jesus is foreshadowing what is to come and he's asking them if they are willing to suffer with him. Likely the brothers don't really understand what Jesus is saying. "Sure, we'll drink the cup. If you can do it, we can do it Jesus." Jesus recognizes that **even as they don't understand what they are promising, they speak truth that will come to pass.** James is the first of the apostles to be martyred after Jesus' death and resurrection. John will suffer the other challenge, of being the last to live, watching all of his close friends in ministry be killed, one after another, himself be sent to live on an island in exile. In that moment Jesus is aware of how counter-cultural his mission is and how ill prepared his followers are to step into it.
- e) But in his response he also models a different approach to leadership. He models a profound awareness of what authority is not his to hold. "To sit at my right and at my left is not mine to give. Rather, it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." I'm not going to claim authority that I haven't been given. Even if you understood what you were asking for, even if the privilege you seek was at stake, I wouldn't give it to you. That's not my job.

**C. Redefining the System for the Group**

1. Everyone else hears about the request and they become anxious about the power grab. Perhaps they fear the family power block - the alliance within the system and the way it can elevate those two and diminish the importance of themselves. And Jesus seems to sense this dynamic. And he calls out what I think may be the challenge of social systems. He goes directly to it.

**D. Jesus response.**

1. **Acknowledges the way social systems tend to work.** "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions use their authority over them." This always happens in the oppressive systems you've seen and been hurt by. Someone takes control and they use that control to push others down.

2. **And then he issues this corrective, “It must not be this way among you!!”** Don’t be like every other oppressive system. Don’t join the zero-sum game.
  3. Jesus is calling them to a different way - “Instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave.”
  4. **Jesus is contrasting the striving for power with an open-handed posture of grace and concern for others.**
    - a) **His system seems to be centered in renouncing power, and uplifting others through service, rather than concentrating and securing power for oneself.** Its the kind of thing he preaches over and over in different ways:
      - (1) “The last will be first and the first will be last.”
      - (2) “To enter the kingdom (the system) of God, become like little children.”
      - (3) When you feed the hungry, when you clothe the naked, when you visit the imprisoned - when you extend yourself on behalf of the vulnerable, you are serving me. If you want to be about what I’m about, that’s where you should focus.
    - b) This is also what Jesus himself modeled through the end of his life.
      - (1) Modeled through the way he took the role of the humblest servant and washed his followers feet, encouraging them to do likewise, to serve one another in that same humble manner
      - (2) Modeled through the way that he poured his life out even unto death on a cross. **The cross is a renunciation of human systems of power that harm and oppress.** Jesus refuses to fight power back with more violent political power. **Rather, he identifies with the powerlessness of those who have been oppressed by the systems that harm. In the face of systems that oppress, Jesus doesn’t become another oppressor, he stands with the oppressed.** And when he rises, declaring that the oppressors do not hold the final victory, he brings hope to all who also suffer through oppression, that this suffering is not the end.
  5. Jesus in this passage is inviting his followers to imagine a different kind of system; one that is not base on a hierarchy of power, **but a system that helps all to flourish, by creating communities of service and care, rather than concentrations of strength.** This offering is here for us, too, reminding us each to look to the concerns of the community, even when that requires our own egos to recede so the group can flourish.
  - E. **Sadly, two thousand years of church history reminds us that just because Jesus spoke these words and we have preached them, doesn’t mean we’ve understood the lesson.** Many of our church systems are intensely hierarchical in ways that don’t bring life to all, but have concentrated power in the hands of few and brought harm to many others. Jesus has continued to need to meet the oppressed people of the world and comfort them in their oppression, but sadly many of those oppressors have been generally white Christians.
- III. This leads me back to our starting conversation. **How do we think about the systems we participate in?** The systems we form? How can we bring about the best ins systems and minimize the tendencies that make them the worst?
- A. I don’t have a clear set of answers, but I think **awareness of the concerns around the concentration or sharing of power is a starting place.**
1. IN our time with Blue Ocean, I shared this concern. I’m grateful that this sincere group of Jesus followers is at least listening and proceeding with that concern, at least in front of them as they consider what it means to build more of a system. It remains to be seen how that will be lived out.
  2. It starts with awareness that this is an issue

- B. The second meaningful step seems to be **finding ways to share with or yield power to a diverse group of people, particularly those who have historically been denied power.**
1. It can't end with awareness. **Our awareness should ultimately lead to cooperative action.**

#### IV. Reflections on Haven.

- A. **Our structure is currently set up in a way that concentrates power in my hands, as well as the board's.** This is often how it goes with start-ups, whether they're churches or companies. Having a clear leadership structure provides expediency; it helps us to be able to actually move on things, like changing our service structure from 4 Sundays a month to 2 without a whole bunch of committee meetings and endless bureaucracy first. But I, and the board, also aware of the dangers of the model. But we are calling upon the community to hold us accountable in this to servant leadership. I want your involvement. I want your voices. I want your shaping. I need it. It matters to me that you feel heard and cared for and that you are being served, not harmed by the way we lead.
- B. **And I look forward to having more partners in leadership to share power with. Having a partner in Jill is a good first step.** But I'm still praying for other staff and leaders, particularly **those that can give voice to a more diverse set of life experiences.** Our staff and board should be racially diverse, should feature queer voices, should be under balanced, **should reflect power being shared amongst a diverse group of people if we are to be committed to being a community that values safety for a diverse group of people unto Jesus.**
- C. It's a work in progress for Blue Ocean. It's a work in progress for Haven. But I do have hope that as we grow, if we maintain a posture of service unto the community, and concern for how we share power, there is hope that Jesus will meet us and lead us by the Spirit into embodying that counter-cultural kind of system he envisioned. That is my prayer. Systems may be the worst sometimes. But I'm praying they can also be the best. Amen

#### V. Questions for reflection and conversation.

- A. Consider the systems you are a part of. What roles do you play within them? Where are you tempted to concentrate power for yourself? What would it mean for you to use your power in ways that uplift and empower others?
- B. Where have you been hurt by system that could not share power well?
- C. What places of concern or encouragement do you have in Haven's system development?