

I. Advanced Organizer

A. *Begin with an intro conversation - 5 minutes*

1. *Introduce yourself*

2. *Share an example of a time you were a part of a team of some kind and things went pretty well or pretty poorly. This could be a sports team, a work team, a project in the community, etc. If things went well, what made it work so well? If it went poorly, why do you think that was the case?*

B. So I decided to kick things off this morning with this conversation because today I'm starting a new teaching series that I'm calling, **"Let's Collab"**. In it, I'll be helping us turn our focus to another of the priorities I've named for Haven in this season - growing in collaboration. What do I mean by that? My hope is that **as we continue to nurture community and grow in different ways, we will be bringing more awareness to how our community functions collectively, and thrives when there are a variety of people living into their gifts, and serving in ways that bring life.** I've said it before and I feel it perhaps more strongly than ever - this Haven project was never meant to be "the Leah show". It's not just about what I can bring or produce for folks to experience and receive. I may have particular things to bring to the table but so do each of you. The hope and possibility of Haven is not that I or any single one of us can cultivate a safe space for a diverse group of people to connect and grow in relationship with the God we see in the Jesus tradition, **it's that we can do that together.** We create safe space. We grow in honoring the differences between us and the ways those differences enrich our understanding of our Creator. **I am not Haven - we are.**

C. I think in a sense we've long had the aspiration to work collectively, to be Haven communally, and in some ways we have. But **there is still a lot of work to be done to grow** in discerning together and living into what it means for each of us to live and operate in a more collaborative, collective way.

D. No doubt, there are many challenges to that ideal. Our **western, individualistic, capitalist dominant culture often resists it.** We're told to take care of our own; to focus first and foremost on our personal needs and perhaps the needs of our immediate households - our partners, maybe our kids if we have them. Our time, our resources, and so on are often organized around these responsibilities. We may feel the pressure of those responsibilities heavily, feel the weight of them and fear that to expand our circle of concern outside of our own immediate sphere may mean failing to meet those pressing needs. But what we might miss in staying hyper-focused on our own little circles is that this is not the only way to organize life. **Just because it's the culturally dominant way, does not make it the best way.** Growing in collaboration isn't just about the way we organize our time on Sundays, though it should certainly include that. But **growing in collaboration also means growing in the ways we do life together.**

E. I think the challenge of collaboration can feel different for different ones of us depending on a variety of factors, including our own proximity to various sources of social power. **To reflect on this challenge and perhaps the first step in meeting it, I'd like to invite us to look at a story today that comes from the Hebrew Bible,** a story that I think speaks to some of the challenge of working collaboratively, but also to the benefit of it, as well as the way the Divine is present as we lean into this collective spirit. So with that in mind, I'm going to invite us to consider a story that's found in the fifth chapter of the book of 2nd Kings.

II. (The Story)

A. First, some background context on this story. This story takes place in the period of the Hebrew Bible in which the **nation of Israel has been divided into two** - the northern

kingdom that retains the name Israel with one king, and the southern kingdom called Judah. North of Israel is the neighboring nation, the kingdom of Aram. Aram, later known as Syria has more military strength than Israel, and it's essentially oppressing its southern neighbor, though their power over Israel is not absolute. They haven't been able to conquer and fully occupy Israel; Israel still has their own king, but the Arameans are keeping the Israelites on their toes. Along the northern border of Israel, Aram has been victorious in a number of raids where small bands of warriors from Aram have come in and plundered the Israelites, capturing goods, money, and even people that they can use as slaves, then getting out before the Israelite army is able to stop them. And this is the setting for the story we find in 2 Kings 5.

B. Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from a skin disease. 2 Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. 3 She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." 4 So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 5 And the king of Aram said, "Go, then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. 6 He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his skin disease." 7 When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his skin disease? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

8 But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

1. Let's stop there for a moment just to make sure we're all tracking.

- a) The narrator has introduced us to a few characters so far. The primary person we're following is the **military commander Naaman**. The story presents him as a tough war hero in many respects, but one with a challenging problem all of his toughness can't alleviate. He has a skin disease. Some translations say "leprosy" but our translation has opted for a more generic term because in ancient Hebrew, that one word could be used for all kinds of skin conditions, whereas our understanding of it later would be associated with one particular condition, which may not have been actually the ailment Naaman has.
- b) So Naaman it says is suffering from this disease, but his wife's **young servant girl**, who was captured from Israel in one of those raids informs them that in Israel there is a prophet who may be able to help, so Naaman goes to the king and gets permission to travel to Israel and seek this prophet with potentially healing powers.
- c) The **king of Aram agrees** and sends a letter with Naaman to the king of Israel, which he intends to be an act of diplomacy, letting Israel's king know that Naaman comes in peace and seeks their help. Of course Israel's king doesn't interpret it this way. He thinks it's a threat; a pretense for war. Aram, the bully of the North comes to him seeking a miracle and when Israel can't deliver it, Aram could try to claim that as the reason to take more aggressive military action. So the Israelite king freaks out, but

Elisha, the prophet operating on Yahweh's behalf in Israel at the time gets wind of the whole thing and tells the king not to fret but to send this foreign commander his way. Let's continue with the story.

C. 9 So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. 10 Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." 11 But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God and would wave his hand over the spot and cure the skin disease! 12 Are not Abana and Parpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. 13 But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" 14 So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

15 Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." 16 But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" He urged him to accept, but he refused. 17 Then Naaman said, "If not, please let two mule loads of earth be given to your servant, for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord. 18 But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count." 19 He said to him, "Go in peace."

1. OK, so to review the rest of the story: **Naaman is sent to see the prophet Elisha.** Elisha doesn't even come out to see him, let alone put on a big healing spectacle as Naaman expects, but he does send word for Naaman to wash himself in the river Jordan seven times. Naaman is offended at what he thinks is a ridiculous set of instructions, but his servants convince him to give it a try, and when he does, miraculously Naaman is cured. His skin, it says, is like that of a young boy. Naaman is moved and now inspired to worship Yahweh. He offers gifts in thanksgiving to Elisha but the prophet refuses them and sends Naaman on his way.

D. So why this story? What is it about this obscure ancient narrative that seems relevant to our conversation on collaboration? I share this story because I think it illustrates a foundational truth about living more fully into collaboration. I'd summarize that truth this way:

Collaboration begins with humility, requiring the humbling of those with power.

1. To me, this story isn't at its heart about the miraculous healing of a physical ailment or the conversion of a foreigner to faith in Yahweh, though many have interpreted it that way through the generations. What this story speak to me more significantly is the experience of being humbled, and how that experience of humbling can open up new insights, new ways of relating to others, and new experiences of the Divine that make genuine collaboration with others a possibility.
2. The central character of this narrative is Naaman - the storyteller has us follow his journey, but if we see his journey as being about going from physically diseased to cured or from pagan to a worshipper of Yahweh - I think we miss perhaps the way the story can function

most justly. **Naaman must become humbled to participate in the collaborative Divine work happening in his midst.** The mighty warrior, the proud, powerful strongman, must submit to those his culture says have less power than he. He must follow their lead. He must engage in ways he never would have imagined. The great and powerful man must become like a young boy.

3. Now I don't think any of us are military commanders. We may be far from macho embodiments of toxic masculinity. But **each of us to varying degrees likely has some elements of social power.** All of us as Westerners living in the Bay Area, have privileges relative to much of the world. And then there are the various parts of our intersectional identities that confer on us varying degrees of social power based on our race, our education, our income, our able-bodiedness, our sexual identities and so on. In whatever areas we too hold power, I think this story invites us to consider what it would mean to be humbled in that area.

E. What do I mean specifically? **How does being humbled show up in this story?** I'll pull out a few different elements that seem to me to be an important part of getting humble that are touched on in this story, and I invite you to consider how they function for Naaman, and also how they may function for each of us.

1. The first one is this: **Listening to perspectives that challenge our own.**

- a) The story starts with the actions of someone who is presented by the storyteller in stark contrast to the character the narrator is focusing on. Naaman, the text tells us, is "great" and "large". He's a man of power in a patriarchal world. But his healing experience would not have happened **had it not been for the words of someone at the other end of the social ladder:** an unnamed small young servant girl.
- b) Our storyteller doesn't give us her name, but it is the courage of this girl to speak with care to those who hold more social power over her and tell them what she knows that propels the whole story forward. Everything else that happens happens because she shares her insight about the prophet in Israel. This is the first challenging perspective Naaman must hear, that **the neighboring nation he has been bullying may hold the power to cure him;** that the girl he abducted for his wife may know more about how he can be cured than he does.
- c) But this isn't the only challenging perspective Naaman is invited to consider. Throughout the story we continue to see Naaman wrestling with points of view that are different than his own; having to attend to the voices of those who hold less social power than he does.
- d) Elisha the prophet does not present himself in ways that conform to ancient cultural expectations of masculinity. Whereas the work of men in this time was understood to take place outside of the home, **Elisha remains indoors, generally understood to be the sphere of the less socially respected females.** Elisha does not put on a show of strength, promenading in front of a crowd with a miraculous spectacle, but he sends word from inside his home for Naaman to wash himself. He gives a messenger the task of delivering the prescription, forcing Naaman to hear the instructions from the servant of an Israelite prophet, someone he is likely to feel is several social rungs beneath him. And when he is angered by the prescription, it is again the **courageous words of his servants that convinces Naaman to give Elisha's treatment a try.**
- e) Though Naaman resists it, throughout the narrative, he only experiences help when he is willing to listen to voices that speak with the wisdom of living with less social power, perspectives that challenge his own understanding.

- f) Though our cultural context is very different, today we too can see plenty of examples of people who hold social power because they are **part of a dominant social majority feeling threatened by alternative perspectives and reacting defensively instead of opening themselves up with curiosity to the challenging view**. Many of the fights happening around the country about what can be taught in our schools come from this place of feeling threatened by perspectives that challenge our own - whether they be perspectives about race, about sexual identity or about gender. Books are being banned, curriculum shaped out of fear of these alternative perspectives instead of welcoming the expansive understanding they might bring.
 - g) It's against this cultural backdrop that we at Haven are trying to cultivate a counter-cultural space that can hold safety and diversity, believing Jesus is in the midst of us as we do. For this to be a possibility, it means we must continually be doing the work collectively of **supporting and empowering folks who experience marginalization in our social reality to speak their truth, while those who come from places of more relative social power are encouraged to listen with curiosity and a desire to learn**, particularly from perspectives that challenge their social norms. It's not easy work, it's not fast work, but I think it is an important process to be continually seeking to labor in if we are going to live more collaboratively. It's a part of our being humbled.
2. The second step I see in being humbled here that I think is relevant for us is **Engaging with embarrassment and awkwardness**.
- a) Naaman eventually does what's being asked of him, even though he feels embarrassed and awkward. He clearly thinks bathing in the Jordan is beneath him; and to do so in order to pursue potential cure puts him in a place of awkwardness. Personally, **I wonder if this is why Elisha instructed him to do it seven times**. While it's true that seven represents completion often in the Bible, and that might be one layer of meaning, it's also real that seven washings requires more commitment than one. **For Naaman to experience change, he needs to go all in**. To really commit, to feel as awkward as he is, until the fear of doing it all wrong or looking foolish or becoming less in anyone else's eyes is not blocking his participation. He has to let that go.
 - b) Most of us come into the ways we show up in the world over a long period of time. We may be raised from birth to speak a certain way, to walk a certain way, to worship in certain ways, to laugh at certain jokes and so on. But when we begin to be shaped by other perspectives, particularly ones that are different or challenge our own way of showing up, it can feel awkward to try to do something different. We may feel super self-conscious, hyper aware of our capacity to do it wrong. We may feel fear of foolishness, of losing the respect of others. Perhaps more seriously, we may feel legitimately fearful of harming others, especially if we find out our actions have already caused harm. And while hopefully this concern makes us more aware of the impact of our actions, **if we get stuck in the fear of doing it wrong, we never have a chance to learn to do it better**. We need to cultivate brave spaces of courage and grace where together we can be willing to try and fail, to be embarrassed, to be awkward, and over time to become more practiced and more proficient of operating in safer ways for those we collaborate with.
3. This brings me to the last component of getting humble in this story that I think is relevant for us: **Letting go of self-sufficiency**.
- a) Some scholars rightly suggest that this story might not really be about leprosy or any other skin ailment at all. Perhaps the skin disease represents something less concrete,

but actually more vital. Naaman goes from being “great” and “big” to like a small child. He becomes like the girl who spoke to him in the first place, the word that’s used to describe the nature of his skin at the end is the male version of the word that’s used to describe the girl at the beginning of the story. The word has connotations not just of children but also of servants. In order to experience change, **Naaman has to become like that young maid at the beginning**. He has to let go of the myth that he can take care of himself. He has to embrace his need to live in collaborative connection with others.

- b) Perhaps this is why Elisha refuses to accept his payment. Elisha doesn’t want to give Naaman the satisfaction of believing he bought his healing in any way. **If he made a significant financial gift, he might walk away feeling justified in receiving this care** - the myth of capitalism that says that his spending power entitles him to the good things in life still in place. But for Elisha, it was never about the skin; the problem Naaman needs to be cured of was the superficial air that Naaman wore that separated him from others, convincing him that with enough power, power that came unjustly at the expense of those he exploited, he could take care of himself. **Elisha would rather Naaman stay humbled, recognizing how powerless he is to save himself**, and how much he is in need of the Divine and all who the Divine bring him in contact with.
 - c) There’s an **epilogue that seems to make this point further**. If you read the rest of the chapter you’ll see a reverse of our story. After Naaman departs, a servant of Elisha named Gehazi decides it’s a shame to refuse the riches Naaman is so willing to part with. So he follows Naaman, he catches up with him and feeds him a story about some other prophets who’ve come to visit Elisha, causing the prophet to ask for funds after all - not for Elisha of course, but for these fictitious visitors. Naaman happily agrees and loads Gehazi up with some clothes and 150 pounds of silver. Gehazi greedily takes his loot back home and hides it before returning to Elisha, who asks him where he’s been. Gehazi denies having gone anywhere, but Elisha makes clear he knows what Gehazi has done. **“Is this a time”** he asks his servant, **“to accept silver and to accept clothing, olive orchards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves? Therefore the skin disease of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever.”** Gehazi, in seeking to enrich himself, has given into that same spirit of self-sufficiency that justifies the exploitation of others. This is the ailment Elisha has successfully cured the foreign commander of, only to have the same ailment caught, like an infectious disease, by a member of his own household.
 - d) If we are to live collaboratively, it means living with an understanding that **we all need one another**. None of us are truly self-sufficient. The self-sufficiency that lies at the heart of our contemporary idols: the idols of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, ableism harm all of us. They isolate us and make us think it’s on us alone to make our destiny, or that God “helps them who help themselves”. What this story and the whole life and ministry Jesus point us to though is that the path to freedom and connection with the Divine and one another comes through humility and honoring our need of one another.
- F. I want to end by sharing something personal about the ways that the insights of this story are **connected to my own journey and the ways I’m trying to grow as a leader** and a follower of Jesus in this season. It’s been about a year now since I returned from sabbatical, and truthfully this past year has been tougher than I expected.

1. I came back hopeful for the next season of building community together and eager to hear what Haven had been learning as a community during that time. The **theme of collaboration came up quickly** and I was excited to hear about how this community had collaboratively cared for one another and held the Haven space in that sabbatical season. I hoped that this collaborative spirit would continue going forward and that I could be a part of helping foster that work. And while that has been happening to some degree, sometimes in quite beautiful and unexpected ways, there have been other experiences that have felt discouraging and painful.
2. **Since the beginning of this year we've lost two of our most central women of color in leadership.** I miss their voices in our community and I'm grieved at the losses, just like I know many of you are, even as I also honor and celebrate them naming and pursuing what they need in this season. Each of these women had their own reasons for moving on, some of which are quite personal to them, but their departures also bring up real questions about our community's capacity to live fully into our values of inclusivity and justice. **We would be remiss not to ask questions about how we can continue to grow in anti-oppression work so that all who are part of our community, particularly those with marginalized identities, can feel like they can bring their full selves into our space and be fully honored and loved.**
3. Through much of this year, I've found myself wrestling with in what ways I, as a leader, may contribute to the gap between what we as a community intend and the impact of our actions. I've come to understand that though I have long hoped to cultivate, safe space for diverse group of people with Jesus in the midst, **I still have more learning to do.** I understand that there are times where **I have missed cross-cultural communication,** have failed to hear what someone may have been trying to tell me because **my hearing has been shaped by my whiteness.** Similarly, I may have at times **communicated in ways that made others feel distanced instead of brought close.** I grieve these revelations deeply and when I receive them, when I have heard perspectives that have challenged my own, it's been hard at times not to shut down or get defensive; not to disqualify myself and withdraw from the work altogether because it's just too hard.
4. **But I don't believe that is the heart of the Divine, to let me cancel myself because I've made mistakes.** I believe God is calling me into something that truthfully feels harder but also more raw and beautiful and hopefully redemptive. I believe **I'm called into the awkwardness.** Into the embarrassment. Into the space of saying, "I'm so sorry for the places I've brought pain or hurt, and I am committed to bringing repair where I can." So I say that to all of you. I'm sorry. I'm not going to do this perfectly but I do want to do better. I feel called, like Naaman, to step into the water, not just once, not just twice, but **however many times it takes to experience transformation.**
5. Part of that work, includes **letting go of any places of self-sufficiency,** of believing I can get there on my own. I know I need the companionship and the learning from others, and I'm so grateful for any sources from which that learning comes. To all of you who are here, or listening to this later, particularly to my siblings of color - **I want to name that I welcome your teaching.** I am open to your feedback. If you feel like there are spaces where I may have missed something with you in terms of cross-cultural communication; where something didn't feel good as it landed or like I couldn't hear what you were trying to say, if you are open to sharing that feedback with me, **I would be honored to receive it** in whatever way feels good to you to give it.

6. I also know **it's not the job** of our siblings of color, our queer siblings, our disabled siblings and so on **to educate those of us who are white, or straight, or able-bodied**. This is difficult work, which we must own for ourselves as best we are able. And so I am also trying to expand my learning and do that work on my own as I can. I recently started listening to a podcast Ginny recommended called **"White People Work"** which has some really helpful discussions and resources. I'm going to be continuing to work through these resources and want to invite anyone else in the community who identifies as white to join me if you want. I'm happy to set some times where we can discuss some of what we're learning together. Maybe once a month we gather on Zoom and discuss an episode with none of us coming as teachers but all of us as co-learners together. If that's something you'd like to be a part of, you can let me know and I'll welcome you to join me.
- G. The experience of getting humble isn't generally fun - **Jesus described it as taking up a cross, which he quite literally did**. But I do believe it's necessary for all of us in different ways so that we can truly honor the gifts one another brings and receive them with joy and care. Those of us who have social power in whatever ways we have it, must learn to lay it down; **to understand truly our own need of one another, so that collaboration can actually be safe and empowering for everyone**. So we can join together as a team that works well and not a team that works poorly. So I pray that as we continue to grow in collaboration we will begin with humility, following the one who showed us what it means to become less that we might find so much more. Amen.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. How does the story strike you? What characters do you feel the most connected to?
2. Are there areas in your life you've experienced "getting humbled"? How did that process happen?
3. Which of these tasks of getting humble do you recognize a need to grow in: listening to challenging perspectives, engaging with awkwardness and embarrassment, or letting go of self-sufficiency? What might that look like for you?