

I. Advanced organizer

A. **In September of 1837, a question came before the US House of Representatives for consideration.** The question concerned the House's own rules for operation, specifically, whether it was appropriate for the men who served in the US Congress to wear hats on the house floor.

1. **Now this was a time when hats were a part of everyday fashion.** The custom of wearing the hat while governing had **roots in the British Parliament**, where many members of the chambers there would wear hats to make a political statement; to wear a hat in parliament was thought to subtly communicate that one was independent of the crown. And while the United States had a president instead of a monarch, some believed this form of protest toward executive over-reach was still important.
2. But the other historic current was an increasing cultural desire to **clean up the presentation of gentility and respectability in public life**. At the time, not only were congress-persons wearing their hats while governing, they were also chewing tobacco and spitting it out, smoking cigars, drinking liquor and unfurling their newspapers on their desks so they could put their feet up on them during debate. For those who believed this saloon-like behavior was beneath the United States Congress, removing hats from governing became the first point of attack. It took 15 years of debate through various attempts at a rule change, but in 1837, the new rule was adopted. The rule read, **"Every member shall remain uncovered during the sessions of the House."**
3. And for nearly two centuries the rule has remained unchallenged. Congress persons have entered the chamber uncovered. But a few weeks ago **Minnesota's 5th congressional district elected to send Ilhan Omar to Washington to represent them**. Ms. Omar is one of the two first Muslim women elevated to congress this election, and when she serves, she will be the first to wear a *hijab*, a headscarf worn by some Muslim women as part of their observance of faith. Despite what some mistakenly think about Islam forcing women to cover against their will, Omar says this, *"No one puts a scarf on my head but me. It's my choice—one protected by the first amendment."* But as it stands, Ms. Omar is not able to serve in her role of governing with her hijab. And so, as she prepares for her new job as a US Congressperson, Ms. Omar is leading a campaign to change this rule, allowing exceptions to the ban on headwear for religious or medical reasons.
4. Now I don't think this rule was meant to bar people like Ms. Omar from serving in congress. The truth is, **when the ban on headwear was adopted by a group of exclusively white men wearing hats, and sometimes wigs to cover their hair loss**, the men who voted on the rule likely had no imagination that a Somali-born Muslim woman would ever serve in the chamber. But **as long as it remains, the rule in its very mundane bureaucratic existence serves as a structural barrier to entry**. It says to women like Ilhan Omar that they are not welcome. That despite their achievements, their political success, their unique contextual embodiment of what our culture describes as "the American Dream", they do not belong.

B. **This is the fifth and final teaching for now in "reconstructing Faith" series - faith in the company of others.**

1. Many of us have had powerful experiences with the Divine, and often these have been connected to spiritual community. We may have found faith in real ways in the midst of others. But over time, like Ilhan Omar, many of us have also had experiences in community that left us wondering if the group we were a part of could ever allow us to fully belong.

2. Each Sunday we've been hearing from someone in our community about something they've been deconstructing and reconstructing in regards to Jesus-centered faith. Today, we're going to hear from Kim DeWitt. **(Kim shares)**
3. I'm guessing some of you may resonate with Kim's story. And the hard parts of her story might leave some of us feeling like "why bother"? Jesus may be helpful and powerful, but why bother with spiritual community? If organized religion is so problematic, isn't the answer to do away with the whole thing?
4. And yet "going it alone" is challenging, and in some ways, antithetical to the point. **Jesus-centered faith is ultimately about coming into relationship with God and with others.** It's a theme that is woven through the whole canon of Scripture: humanity begins with the Divine concluding that it is *not good* for the humans to be alone, even alone with God. The end of the picture is a diverse collective with people from every culture, every language, every ethnic group, united in celebration of God. And then there's the whole way that the story is communicated. Remember from our Bible teaching: God is experienced not through human texts but through relationships. Jesus came not to write a book or create a killer podcast, but to cultivate communities of belonging, in which the divine could be present and could work from to renew the world.
5. **In recent months, I've been reminded anew how important it is to have a rich network of connection through which to experience the divine.** As most of you know, my sister has recently been diagnosed with stage 4, metastatic breast cancer. Embarking on the new journey of this illness with her has reminded me how vital it is to have people in our corner who can show up for us when we need it and reflect divinity to us, reminding me afresh that going it alone is not really a long-term spiritually nourishing option.
6. So how are we to think about this?
  - a) as I've been pondering that the last couple of weeks, there's one story from the life of Jesus that keeps giving me food for thought. As I've been studying it, I think it's because this story shows very clearly some of the challenges communities have as they set up systems and structures of belonging, and how Jesus interacts with those. So let's take a look.

II. John 9, starting with verse 1.

**A. As he (meaning Jesus) went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. 7 "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. 8 His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" 9 Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man." 10 "How then were your eyes opened?" they asked. 11 He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see." 12 "Where**

*is this man?" they asked him.*

*"I don't know," he said. (John 9: 1-12)*

1. The story starts with a question from the disciples.

(1) **"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"**

- (a) This question reflects **a common presumption of Jesus' day that disability had to be the effect of sin**. The problem is that there was a kind of circular logic around this.
- (b) In Jewish religious life, those with physical differences were often not allowed to fully participate in religious life on account of their differences. And participation in religious life, attending synagogue, making sacrifices in the temple, and so on, was the way the community understood people were made good before God. So because the person in question was seen to be living in some way separated from what it means to be devotedly following God, people would assume that the cause of this condition was some sort of ungodliness. Hence the question, "Who sinned?" For this person to be unworthy of faith participation he or his parents must have been morally unfit.
- (c) **This is a phenomenon we still see today. It's called "blaming the victim."** You understand how this goes; it's all too common: "If that woman didn't want to be sexually assaulted, she shouldn't have worn that outfit." "If that young black boy didn't want to get shot, he should have followed the officer's instructions." "If that man wanted to see, he or his parents shouldn't have lived so sinfully."
- (d) **Social psychologists call this phenomenon of victim-blaming an "attribution error"**. People attribute outcomes to some assumed internal, personal characteristics while ignoring external forces and variables that also might have played a role.
- (e) In our story, no one is asking the question, "What does it mean that we are part of a system that relegates a man without eyesight to second-class status, that excludes him from full participation in our group?" They're simply asking, "who can we blame for this man's impediment; him or his parents?"

(2) **But Jesus sees the flaw in the logic**. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned", he says. *You're missing it; your whole framework for understanding this is wrong*. But he doesn't stop there, just making a point, and using this man as an object lesson. He goes a step further, identifying this encounter as an opportunity to do the work of God. And with that, he spits on the ground and rubs clay in the man's eyes, and then he tells him to go and wash.

(3) These actions are about more than curing the man's lack of sight. This **action is also confronting the wrong that's been done to this man through exclusion**.

- (a) Jesus doesn't open the guy's eyes instantaneously. He doesn't allow his face to be the first face this man will behold. If just the man coming to personal faith in Jesus was the point, maybe he would have done that. But something more is going on.
- (b) Instead of instantaneously healing him, Jesus sends him to the pool of Siloam. For Jews, to bathe in this pool is an act of solidarity with the Jewish community. Scholars believe this pool quite possibly functioned as a *mikvah*; those were pools used for ritual purification. One bathed in them to be purified before participating in religious life.

- (c) Jesus sends this man there. Jesus is not content to see his religious community try to create moral logic around exclusion. He's come to subvert their logic. The man is invited to bathe in this pool, and in this holistically healing experience of inclusion, his physical impediment, which was once seen as both cause and proof for a moral impediment, is removed.
- (d) But the community doesn't embrace the man immediately. Like the disciples of Jesus, those around him see him as an object to be considered, not a human with his own story. They speak about him in the third person, as though he wasn't in the space.
  - i) *"Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" ... "No, he only looks like him."*  
*But he himself insisted, "I am the man."*
- (e) You see, this encounter is about much more than sight granted. It's about **confronting the perceptions of a community, subverting the rules of victim-blaming and exclusion, and empowering the voice of the silenced and other-ized.** The man find his voice. He doesn't let himself continue to be an object for others' agendas. He enters the conversation for the first time, saying "I am the man."

2. **Takeaway #1: Jesus is very aware of systems of exclusion and how they function. Rather than participate, he seems invested in extending greater inclusion.**

3. The story doesn't end there. Reading on:

**B. 13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. 14 Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. 15 Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." 16 Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?" So they were divided. 17 Then they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet." 18 They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. 19 "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?" 20 "We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. 21 But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23 That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner." 25 He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" 26 Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27 He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to**

*hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"*

*28 Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! 29 We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."*

*30 The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. 32 Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."*

*34 To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.*

1. So the man has been initiated into Jewish community in a real way for the first time. And as part of this, he's brought to the spiritual leaders of the community.
  - a) But that doesn't go so well, does it?
2. **The religious leaders have a problem from the first because a couple of their value systems are in conflict.**
  - a) This guy claims to have experienced a real life miracle, a miracle which by all rights should bring him into community, and cause all who witness to glorify God for the action.
  - b) But the miracle was done at the hands of Jesus, who at this point, is public enemy number 1 to many of these religious leaders. In fact, the verse before our story, a group of them actually tried to stone Jesus, they were so angry with him.
  - c) In this instance, the healing took place on a Sabbath, a transgression by their code, which would mean whoever did it was in the wrong.
3. **This would all be easier if they could cast doubt on the miracle itself.** Maybe it wasn't a genuine healing at all; just "fake news" as they say.
  - a) **So they summon the parents**, the parents would know better than anyone this person's history and whether or not this sight he has is miraculous.
  - b) The parents become aware pretty quickly that **they are being put in a tricky place**. They know better than anyone that their son has never used his eyes before he met Jesus, and thanks to Jesus, he now can.
  - c) But they also know that **to be associated with Jesus is grounds for exclusion, in the eyes of these pharisees**. The writer makes it clear that this refusal to share the full story has more to do with their fear of being excluded than a lack of knowledge about what happened or faith in the one who made it happen. They're scared of being thrown out and losing their community. So they plead the fifth. They stay quiet. "Ask our son; he's an adult."
    - (1) **A number of folks in our community have experienced before the pain of being expelled from faith community**, either because you or someone you loved and allied with was queer. I've heard a number of your stories; I've lived my own. As a pastor, convinced that the call God had on my life was to start a fully inclusive church, **I experienced this pain in my own way**. And what I've seen is that often as this plays out, **there appear people like the parents here**. People who are a part of the community in question, who tell you privately, "I'm with you. I support you."
    - (2) When I was in the process of being expelled from my movement, multiple pastors pulled me aside and said, "I agree with you. It's wrong what we're doing to the queer community. It's wrong what they're doing to you." But when I pressed them

to say that out loud to the leaders in charge; to push back on the system that was willing to exclude me, almost all of them demured. **It was too costly to risk their own inclusion in the group.**

(3) **I understood their reluctance to speak.** But it also hurt, perhaps more than the rejection of those in power who had a sincere disagreement with me. It's one thing if you genuinely believe differently than me; I can understand why you'd reject me. But **to agree with me, to privately support me, and yet to watch from the sidelines while I'm maligned, to choose even to continue to receive benefits from a community that is willing to hurt me, that's uniquely painful.** I think this is something that all of us who consider ourselves allies in the areas of LGBTQ inclusion, racial justice, ableism, etc., need to keep in mind. **Our "allieship" only goes so far if we are ultimately unwilling to put ourselves on the line for others.**

4. The parents aren't the only ones who fear exclusion from the system. **The man born blind hits a nerve and exposes this deep fear in the Pharisees themselves as well.**

a) When, after being unable to discredit the act, they turn to discrediting the actor, Jesus, they again call upon the man who's been healed. *"Tell us again how he healed you"* they demand, and he responds, *"Why; do you want to be his followers too?"* This is too much. **By even implying that these religious leaders, should actually follow Jesus, he triggers all of their own fear of exclusion.** To be in league with Jesus is a clear red line none of them can cross and remain a part of the group.

b) And so **the previously divided group of faith leaders finally becomes united.** *"We are disciples of Moses"* they say. And seeing that this man who was born blind is unwilling to join them in demonizing Jesus, they resort to attacking and discrediting the man instead. *"You were steeped in sin at birth"* they say, and they expel him from their presence.

c) Once again, he has been excluded from community. But this time, **he is rejected not for his lack of sight, but for his capacity to see so clearly.** What he sees is threatening to these religious leaders, and so rather than incorporate this new information about Jesus, they reject the information and the one who brings it.

5. **Takeaway #2: Systems of exclusion harm not only those excluded, but those within the system, as their ability to respond to new circumstances is limited by their own need to remain included. If anyone is unsafe in an anxious system, then no one is truly safe.**

6. There's one more little episode in this story. Let's see how it ends.

C. **35 Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"** (a term for the Messiah)

**36 "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."**

**37 Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."**

**38 Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.**

**39 Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."**

**40 Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?"**

**41 Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."**

1. Here once again **we have the language of sin** - it's where the story starts and where it ends. The Greek word for sin, "*hamartia*" literally means missing the mark. The story began with an assumption that this man or his parents were in sin. But Jesus ends the story talking about himself bringing judgment or discernment, and revealing that the pharisees themselves are the ones who are missing the mark.
2. But it's not just the spiritual blindness of the pharisees that has been revealed here. We also see that Jesus is affirming that this man who was born blind, encountering Jesus after they have both been excluded, has the clearest vision in the story: not just physical vision, but now spiritual as well, as he confesses faith in his healer and worships him. This brings us to our last takeaway.
3. **Takeaway #3: It is often in the wake of rejection that we have the clearest view of Jesus, because with him, we recognize the error of systems that separate, shame and exclude. Seeing God clearly means also recognizing the ways our human systems can miss the mark.**

a) In my season of expulsion, I had a **particularly helpful moment in prayer**; a sort of mystical experience. I had a picture of Jesus walking the road to Calvary, hearing the people along the road calling out "crucify him." As he carried his cross up the hill he looked each person in the eye, recognizing many of them. These were the folks Jesus had been doing ministry with for years. Each pair of angry eyes held a story for him: "I ate lunch with you last week." "I prayed for you." "I healed your daughter." And yet here they were now, calling for him to be killed. Going through my own experience of rejection from people I thought were my spiritual family, this vision was really comforting. In it, I also thought I heard Jesus say these words, "it was in my rejection, that I was victorious." When I think back to that moment, I sense that some of the wisdom that Jesus was naming was that he felt victorious in his battle with exclusionary systems. Rather than submit to the strong social pull of them, he had revealed them for what they are: communities that in their rejection, miss the mark.

III. **So where do we go with all of this?** If we still believe that there's some Jesus-centered value to embodying faith in the company of others, how do we do that in ways that don't intentionally or unintentionally create systems of exclusion that miss the mark? I want to end with just two suggestions to what this look might like.

A. **Remember the metaphor of centered set.** (Show image)

1. As a Blue Ocean community, one of the distinctives we've maintained from the beginning is that our primary metaphor is centered set. Remember this essentially means we don't define ourselves as a group by some set of shared characteristics: praying a certain prayer, worshiping in a certain way, certain aspects of our identity, but rather we identify ourselves as all pursuing relationship with a shared center, in our case, Jesus. We don't see ourselves as gatekeepers of an exclusionary system, rather we see ourselves as fellow travelers, trying to make space for a diverse group of people to safely navigate their way to Jesus.
2. I believe this kind of orientation is exactly what Jesus was trying to prescribe. If we had time to keep reading in John we'd see that what comes directly after this story is Jesus describing to the pharisees how he is the leader of a **different kind** of community. It's a community in which he plays on the agrarian metaphors of their world to call himself a shepherd. This passage in John 10 is one of the most clear centered-set images I think we have in the Bible. In it Jesus describes gathering sheep unto himself who are all defined not by where they were born or where they came from, but the fact that they recognize the shepherd's voice, and are following him.

3. ***14 “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.***

a) The shepherd is calling his sheep into community around himself. He says he has come so the sheep may have abundant life, life to the full. He is committed to shepherding a diverse flock, bringing together sheep from all kinds of sheep pens, united by their shared commitment to listen to the shepherd and to be a part of his flock.

**B. As we grow, regularly examine the structures in our community, and be willing to adapt them as needed to provide greater accessibility and inclusion.**

1. Our board has actually chosen to do this recently in regards to how we think through membership.
2. When we incorporated as a church nearly four years ago, we were a handful of people in my living room; none of us had any experience running a church. And one of the first things you have to do to incorporate is form a board of directors and adopt bylaws. So we adopted bylaws based on other Blue Ocean churches we knew or had been a part of. And all of these churches, even though they were centered-set in ethos, had a bounded set when it came to church membership.
3. They expected that people who became part of the community at some point should formally commit in a deeper way. They should agree to do a number of things: commit to attending regularly, commit to serving on a Sunday morning team, commit to giving financially. People would take a pledge before the church affirming that they were officially committing to do this. And so, like the churches we modeled ourselves on, we adopted this model. We codified it in our bylaws, along with the complimentary expectation that becoming an official member of Haven would be a prerequisite for serving on our board of directors.
4. There is much about this membership model that I appreciate. The truth is, for our community to exist, we do need people to show up, we need people to serve (set-up the chairs, play in the band, make the coffee), we need people to give generously of their finances, because all of this takes money. We need people to be intentional about their investment in this project, and I believe that those intentional ways of investing are often an important component of our moving towards Jesus in a centered-set life of faith. I hope wherever you are at you'll consider this an invitation to consider with Jesus and invest in Haven in any or all of those ways.
5. But in the same way that those congressmen in 1837 weren't aware when they passed their rule of someone to come like Ilhan Omar, I and the other Haven founders weren't quite aware of the level of spiritual trauma that so many who'd become part of the Haven story would carry with them, nor were we aware of how those experiences for some would shape how it feels to formally join an organization in the way we were identifying. We've heard feedback from some folks who've been hurt in other communities, that while they feel called to serve, to give, to show up, to lead here, something about the bounded set of membership feels triggering.
6. So recently our board has begun to name that while we want to invite everyone to regularly consider how Jesus is calling them to invest in Haven, we don't want the bounded set of membership or any sense of pressure or obligation around it to be a motivating factor. We've already taken the first step toward a total rethink of our structure in regards to membership. Our board recently voted to remove the restriction that people

in Haven have to be formal church members in order to be asked to serve on our Board. This effectively allows us full freedom to invite anyone we deem sufficiently invested in our community and capable of leading to serve, and to help us shape our structure going forward.

7. My hope is that in our rethink with the board and the broader community, our outcome will be a community that demonstrates not just in our ethos but in our systems and structures that we are fully committed to embodying a faith in which there is no in-group or out-group. Everyone is a member because everyone fully belongs just as they are.
- C. Of course, community is complicated. Human groups have a way of bringing hurt, as well as help. But I believe our hope is ultimately in the good shepherd, who calls us each by name and, as we listen to his voice, bringing us into a safe, diverse gathering, centered around himself where we can find abundant life. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. How have you experienced spiritual community to be life-giving? How has it been challenging?
2. Have you been a part of communities of faith that had stated or unstated expectations or qualifications for inclusion? What were they?
3. What do you think the challenges might be in growing community without creating another exclusionary system?