

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. We're going to start this morning with a **moment of reflection and then brief conversation**. I want to invite you to take a beat and think about a rewarding relationship in your life. It can be a long-term or short term relationship, it can be something ongoing or from the past, it could be a childhood friendship or a college mentor, or a family member, but I invite you to think of some relationship that has felt positive and rewarding and enriched your life in a meaningful way. **What was it about that person and the way you related that made the relationship feel special? What lasting impact has that person had on your life, if any? What lasting impact have you had on them?**
1. Break into groups of 3 at the most and share for 2 minutes each on what this relationship was, what made it special and what impacts do you think you've had on each other.
- B. I start with this conversation about relationships because this is the second of three messages I'm sharing, coming out of my three-month sabbatical on the theme of what I'm calling "**Liberating Return**". As I shared in the last teaching in the series, as my sabbatical was wrapping up, I was processing it with the woman who is my spiritual director, and considering returning to the work of Haven. And we talked about how "return" in many ways was the theme of my whole sabbatical, and as I return to the work of Haven, I'm trying to stay connected to the things I was returning to in that sabbatical season, and invite all of us to consider if there is a liberative journey for all of us in making our own returns to these areas in some way in our lives.
1. The first of the three we considered last time was a **return to self**, honoring that making space for and honoring our own needs and the deeper parts of our selves often leads to encounter with the one who made us, with our Source, with God.
 2. But returning to self was not the only important return that was a part of my sabbatical journey. The second return that I noticed and named with my director that day in late July was one we've touched on this morning in our conversation. It was the **return to relationships, specifically for me, the relationships in my marriage and family**.
- C. If the return to self I named before was essentially a turning inward to the core of myself, this return to relationship was also a kind of inward return: a process of going inward to the core of my social world. If my deepest self is the core of me, my family - my husband Jason and my three children - they are the core of my relational life.
1. Now to be clear, **I don't think you need to be married or have kids to have a set of relationships that must be attended more mindfully than others**. A while back I shared a teaching looking at the various concentric circles of relationships that most humans have. This was based on the work of Robin Dunbar who is a British anthropologist and evolutionary biologist and he's well known amongst academics in the social sciences for his research around what's come to be known as Dunbar's number. Dunbar names that humans are really capable of sustaining about 150 meaningful relationships at a time, and those come in concentric circles, with 150 on the outer edge and about 1/3 of those people you actually would call friends and regularly connect with and then multiple circles within that of your more core people.
 2. So social research from folks like Dunbar would tell us that all of us, if we're going to be healthy, connected human beings, need at least a couple of those core relationships, the folks in that inner circle with whom you can be most vulnerable, most real and you can trust you will be held and loved. The folks with whom your own life will be most transformed should something happen to them. For me, these are the members of my immediate family - for you it might be someone else. So when I'm talking about a return to relationships, I'm talking about a return to tending those inner circles.

- D. What's interesting about "returning" to our family or other close people is that **in some ways before the sabbatical it was hard for me to identify that there was any need to return.** It wasn't clear to me that I had ever left. I live with these people, I see them day in and day out. I generally work from home, so even when I'm working, they're often around. Especially during the months of pandemic shut downs, we all were the only people each other saw in person, and frankly it drove us all a bit crazy.
1. But what I came to discover having a season in which I was no longer juggling work life and family life, was that connecting with **Jason and the kids was different** when my attention was not divided. I was reminded that tending these relationships requires more than physical proximity, **it requires real intentionality.**
- II. As I've been considering this return to relationships, I've been thinking about a story from the life of Jesus. It's a familiar one that many of you have likely heard, perhaps many times. But it resonated for me in a different way as I've been reflecting on some of my learning from the sabbatical experience and recognizing the way I feel called to return to focusing my time and energy on some of the closest people in my life in a different way.
- A. **38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" 41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."**
 - B. Now like I said, many of us have likely heard this passage many times before. And often interpretations highlight certain aspects like perhaps a personality difference between the two sisters, or folks might take a look at the story through the lens of gender roles with Martha perhaps conforming in some way to expectations for women in her time, while Mary perhaps defies some gender norms.
 - C. I think there's a number of interesting things to consider and observe in this story. But today, I find myself wondering if at least part of this correction Jesus is speaking to Martha isn't so much about the actions Mary is or isn't taking and how they compare to Martha's actions. Perhaps it's more about **where Mary's attention is focused, and the impact that that attentiveness has.**
 - D. Now it's helpful when thinking about the story in this way to consider some of the broader context. This is one of several stories in which we find Jesus spending meaningful time in the home of this family. **The household, from what we can tell is made up of two sisters, Mary and Martha and a brother, Lazarus.** They're likely all relatively young, since they seem to share a household together and all seem to be unmarried, similar to Jesus himself. The three of them live in Bethany, a town on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and Jesus seems to stop there regularly when he's in the Jerusalem area. **This group of people seems to be some of the folks in Jesus' inner circle, they're part of the hub of his relational life.** We don't know exactly where this story fits in their relational arc, but we do know that these are folks that are significant to Jesus.
 - E. So Jesus is in town and spending the evening at this home in Bethany, as he does when he's in the area. And Martha is the head of the household, and her focus is on being a good hostess. And it takes work to host things; anyone whose hosted a dinner party gets that. All of us who are part of putting on these kinds of gatherings every two weeks get that. I get

where Martha is coming from. And I think ultimately Jesus does too. I don't think he's critiquing her for getting a meal together, the guy needs to eat.

F. But I wonder if part of what he is naming has more to do with where Martha's attention is. Luke describes her as "distracted". Jesus points out that she is worried and upset. I don't think he's chastising her for having that response, but he is noticing it and reflecting it back to her. Martha is intensely focused on the logistics of the evening, and seems to be resenting her sister for not sharing this focus. **But in focusing primarily on the logistics, she seems to be missing the more beautiful, life-nurturing component of the evening, being present and attentive to the special person in their midst.**

G. I wonder if Jesus is more interested in connecting relationally with his friends Martha, and Mary and Lazarus - hearing what's on their hearts, sharing the challenges of his own recent travels, laughing together, being moved by each other, then what's on the menu. Yes, of course they need something to eat, but he doesn't want the labor of that task to get in the way of the deeper need they each have for love and connection; for knowing others and being known. **Maybe this is what he means when he says only one thing is really needed, being present right now to the people in the room.**

III. I don't know about you, but sometimes I find that **it's with the people I have the most proximity**, the people who I live with or spend the most physical time doing the business of life with, **that I can be the least attentive to what's going on with them.** It's with my husband or my kids or my closest friends sometimes that I can get most easily distracted and be the least focused on attending to the health and robustness of our relational connection. And this brings me to what I found myself discovering during the sabbatical about my own attention to the people in the inner circles of my life.

A. As you may know, **my personality type is one that favors multi-tasking.** I've always been able to and often preferred doing multiple things at once - listening to audio-books while I clean the kitchen, browsing the internet for home ideas while I watch TV.

a) **And in many ways that has served me, particularly in the era of life of trying to live into a vocation as a pastor and a church-starter in the same time I was a young mother.** I remember nursing my babies in the middle of church staff meetings in Iowa City or in the midst of my studies for seminary classes. And then eight years ago we moved here and begun this project of church entrepreneurship. In the season I was beginning Haven I was also the primary caregiver for three young kids, which meant I was doing multiple things at once with a two year old, a four year old, and an eight year old in tow. Pastoral care meetings might take place at the park or in my backyard while kids were jumping on the trampoline. Times of praying for people or dreaming together about this thing we were building were regularly interrupted by requests for fruit snacks or trips to the potty.

b) In many ways that flow of life worked; it enabled Haven to be born in a sense in the midst of young family life. **The problem is that as my kids and the community grew, my own habits of work didn't change.** I continued to answer emails while at doctor's appointments or shopping with the kids. I replied to texts at any and all hours of the day and didn't think twice about it.

2. The truth is, **though there were benefits to my multi-tasking way of life, there were also costs that I didn't appreciate.** I think the pandemic years highlighted those costs more than any other as the blurred lines between Haven and family time became even more obscured. Our relationships suffered under the stress of the pandemic, and while certainly there are factors there that have nothing to do with me, I see now that **my**

divided attention also contributed to the strain. It wasn't until there was a full break from the flurry of work communication, tasks and meetings, that I noticed a difference. **Even though my physical location had by and large not changed, the quality of my presence had.** Having space and time to be fully attentive and present to my husband and kids in a way that I had not been highlighted how helpful and healing it can be.

B. **What kind of changes did I notice?** Many of them were subtle but over time, their impact was meaningful.

1. **I noticed less tension in my responses to others.** It was easier for me to be less reactive or short in my responses and more calm and curious with whatever was going on with my family members when I wasn't focused on other things.
2. I had **more capacity to notice shifts in demeanor amongst my loved ones**, and had space to ask questions and express care that helped them feel seen and validated.
3. There was room to relax together, to play, to enjoy things together - whether that was enjoying a card game, or watching a favorite show, or making a run for ice cream, or experiencing something unique and fun together on one of our family trips. **The pursuit of joy together increased my sense of fondness for my loved ones and I think it did the same for them with me.**
4. As all of these came online, we seemed to **have more emotional reserves for the deeper, harder conversations.** Jason and I could delve into deeper emotional waters with compassion and care than I think we had in a long time, and speak things that we needed to give voice to, but I think had not felt the relational room for navigating. With my kids, I felt like I had more experiences of them opening up to me in meaningful ways, which has at times felt impossible in the teen and tween years we find ourselves in.

C. The whole experience highlighted for me that there are tasks for which multi-tasking is helpful and efficient. **But tending relationships is not ultimately about efficiency** - it's about bringing our awareness and attention to another and that's difficult to really do when our focus is being pulled in too many directions. I wonder if Martha might have been able to relax a bit more if she had given herself permission to slow down and turn her focus to Jesus, as her sister had done. Perhaps they would have eventually all prepared the meal together. Perhaps they would have let some of the dishes go. Maybe they would have connected meaningfully, and then she would have excused herself to finish the meal, but **her attention and her energy in doing so could then be redirected to the purpose behind the meal; ultimately the gift of nurturing meaningful relationships.**

IV. Whether or not we're frequent multitaskers, or work from home and struggle to balance work and relationships, I think **all of us who live in our contemporary society are challenged in the area of attention.**

A. We live here in the Bay Area in the Mecca of global technology, an industry that is actually built in large part these days on **turning the scarce resource of human's mental attention into a commodity.** Our devices, the apps we use, the websites we visit, our social media platforms, our streaming services: **all of them are built on increasing engagement, commodify-ing our attention**, keeping us focused as long as possible on their device or their app or their site where they can target us with their advertisements or the ads that other companies have paid them to service us as our attention is focused on them. Now I'm not a luddite - I'm not trying to say that these tools are all totally evil and we need to cut them out of our life - but we do need to recognize the insidious way they can capture our mental energy and hold onto it for as long as possible; that they actually designed with incentives to do that.

- B. And that's setting aside all of the other distractions, often good and necessary ones that compete for our attention - work, school, exercise, laundry, and like Martha experienced, getting a meal on the table.
- C. Of course we can't all be completely focused on the relationships in our lives, but there are some things I think all of us can be more intentional about to increase our attentiveness to one another and return to some potentially neglected relationships. As we end, I'm going to name two that I am trying to maintain even as I now have been back to the work of Haven for the last several weeks.
- D. Protect time to focus our attention on others.**
- a) This feels like another one of those conventional pieces of wisdom that's easy to name in theory and harder to regularly practice.
 - b) As I named earlier, this isn't something I've always understood the importance of or done very well. I think part of me even falsely believed that if I wasn't always available to all the people and all the needs in my life, things would fall apart. Haven would fail or my kids would feel neglected. But being on call to everything all the time meant I was less present and available to anyone at any time.
 - c) So for me, I have found protecting time means sometimes creating artificial boundaries where there aren't clear hard ones.
 - d) I don't go to an office. I don't have a clear nine-to-five schedule so that's not a clean boundary for me. But I can be mindful of when my attention is directed to work and when it's not. When I came back to Haven after the sabbatical, I was concerned about the blurring of these lines taking over again, and so I did something simple, I installed an app on my phone that's a time tracker. It's intended to track hours that could be reported for work, but at this point, I'm just using it for my own personal accountability. I clock in when I have emails to answer, teachings to write, meetings to attend. And then when it's time to attend to my kids or my partner or do the grocery shopping, I clock out.
 - e) I've start to rearrange my work habits to include less evening meetings. The nature of pastoring is that I do sometimes need to be meeting in the evenings or of course on weekends, but I am being more careful about what I schedule in those time slots, making sure there is also space for family time and one on one times regularly with my kids. Jason and I have honored a weekly date night nearly every week for the last few years at least, and that continues to be an important practice for us as well.
 - f) A benefit of this is that protecting boundaries for my family also helps me protect boundaries around my ministry. My kids seem to respond better to the news that I can't be interrupted, I have a string of meetings coming up, because they know when those are done, I will be available to them. This helps me be much more attentive to the folks I'm meeting with too.
 - g) Now each of us have different lives, so your habits will likely be different than mine, but I invite you to consider what protecting time to focus your attention on important people in your life might look like for you. And that brings me finally to the last takeaway I'm trying to hold on to, and I'd invite you to consider as well.
- 2. Honor the sacredness of meaningful human connection.**
- a) At the heart of the Christian tradition, is the idea that the center of the universe is a network of loving relationships. God within God's own self is loving relationship. Our tradition has called this set of relationships things like the trinity: Father, son and Holy Spirit. Some of us may find it more helpful to just speak a simple truth: God is love. When we attend to loving relationships, when we focus on the *one thing*, as Jesus

saw Mary doing, **we have the capacity to experience something bigger than whatever the activity is we're doing.** Perhaps you've had those moments of true encounter with another person, where for a moment time seems to pause and you're in touch with something more. Something beyond.

- b) I think of a moment we had this summer: **my family was riding on a speed boat through the crisp, cool Lake Tahoe waters.** Sun sparkled off the water and warmed our shoulders. Jason and I took deep breaths of mountain air, listening to the laughter of our kids as we bumped against the waves below. And as I looked at each of them, I shared these moments of eye contact that were so rich. Our petty announces dropped away. The squabbles between the kids were silenced for the moment. There was a sense that we all shared of feeling grateful to be in the experience with one another, that there was nowhere we'd rather be. If that isn't a kin to what we talk of when we speak of holiness, of beauty that is set a part from the rest of life, I don't know what is. I believe the Divine was present in that moment and I think that same presence is there for each of us as we connect with those we love. May we each cultivate more room to notice, to pay attention and experience a liberative return to one another. As we do, may we also experience the joy and freedom of returning to God among us. Amen.

In groups of 3, room for about 1 minute on each question. (10 minutes total)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does it feel to focus your attention on another person? Is it easy? Is it difficult? Do certain contexts make it easier than others?
2. How does it feel to be the focus of another person's attention? Does it feel good? Does it feel uncomfortable?
3. Is there a relationship in your life that might benefit from adjusting your level of attention? What might that look like?