

I. Advanced organizer

A. **I didn't have a great experience of church growing up, but there was one event that really impressed me.**

1. It came in the wake of one of the most grievous events I had witnessed in my young life. The home of my best friend, another family from our church, burned to the ground. We were actually on a camping trip with a number of families from the church when a ranger came to our campsite saying he had the fire department on the phone. My friend's house was on fire. Other families took charge of my siblings and I while my parents drove their family home to survey the damage. But the time they reached the house, there wasn't much left to see.
2. It was a tragic event, but one in which I saw powerfully the impact of community in the midst of pain. The family parked their motorhome in our driveway and lived with us until they could get into a second home they owned and rented out, while their house was rebuilt. Soon our tables were filled with clothing, toys, and household items that church friends were bringing by. Before long the items could no longer fit inside the house, and were being temporarily housed in our back yard, as furniture, more toys, more clothes, and everything a family of four could need was supplied by caring people in our community. On the day they moved into their rental house, the whole church showed up to move them in, clean up the house, and do all the handyman projects around the house that needed doing to really make it their home.
3. I was strongly impacted by how our community came around this family to support them. As a young person I didn't connect spiritually to the church of my upbringing, I didn't feel alive to their liturgy or their theology, their conversation about God. But seeing that church respond in the wake of the fire, that was something real. That was something special.

B. In recent years, in Western developed countries, at least, there's been a move away from traditional religious experience. Religious survey after survey relate the decline of churches and the growth of the "none"s, or those who claim "no religious affiliation". And for many, people leave the faith for good reason.

1. Sometimes has to do with Spiritual PTSD - a lot of us in this church
 - a) folks who've been hurt by some of the things we talked about in the fall - the idols of whiteness, androcentrism/patriarchy, heteronormativity and so on.
 - b) Sometimes the move we need to take for growth is to leave it all behind. But there's a real loss there.
2. Story of Christian Wiman
 - a) Grew up in a conservative Southern Baptist home in Texas. The world in which he was immersed, everyone went to church and confessed faith in Jesus. It was also a violent world, with a turbulent family history that was tangled up in the culture of Texas, and reinforced by the fire-and-brimstone faith. College provided his escape where he found himself leaving behind much of his life in Texas, including the faith of his youth, while he immersed himself and found himself in poetry.
 - b) Wiman became an accomplished poet and eventually the editor of Poetry magazine. And then in his late 30s, a strange thing happened. He'd been happily living a secular existence for decades. And then he fell in love. Like real love, which he'd never truly experienced. It changed him. It made him alive to reality in a new way, and the same was true for his secularist beloved, who'd become his wife. They felt in encountering one another a gratitude to the universe that they didn't know how to express or cultivate. They found themselves hovering outside churches staring at the people coming and going, but not quite brave enough themselves to go in.

- c) And then on his 39th birthday, a year or so into marriage, Christian was given a devastating diagnosis. He had an incurable blood cancer that could either take him quickly, or spare him for decades; there was no way to know. Christian described the experience of processing the news like this:

(1) *In those early days after the diagnosis, when we mostly just sat on the couch and cried, I alone was dying, but we were mourning very much together. And what we were mourning was not my death, exactly, but the death of the life we had imagined with each other.*

Then one morning we found ourselves going to church. Found ourselves. That's exactly what it felt like, in both senses of the phrase, as if some impulse in each of us had finally been catalyzed into action, so that we were casting aside the Sunday paper and moving toward the door with barely a word between us; and as if, once inside the church, we were discovering exactly where and who we were meant to be. That first service was excruciating, in that it seemed to tear all wounds wide open, and it was profoundly comforting, in that it seemed to offer the only possible balm.

- (2) This began a season for Christian of not “conversion” but of acknowledging a faith he would come to believe had remained latent within him all along. The practice of faith again, and involvement in church became again an important way of being in the world. It wasn't that all his questions were answered or his doubts resolved, his faith is very different faith then that he was given in his youth, but he has found that the act of practicing faith with others was essential for living into the deepest parts of himself; the joy of finding love and the fear and grief wrapped up in the knowledge that it would not last as long as he'd hope.

- C. Started off this year calling Haven to a year of “re-form”. Something we're gonna take from a number of angles - reforming of ourselves, our personal identities, our citizenship, our identities as people of faith, and re-forming of our community

1. Through Lent, we're gonna consider more of the personal re-forming.
2. But leading up to that, over the next couple of weeks, I want to think about the communal. Picture of the grove of trees. Series I'm calling “Sacred Community”. What is it about this idea of spiritual community that we can't get away from? Most of us may not have had an event as dramatic as Christian's in our lives that has brought us here, but we've likely had some mix of experiences that have been both heartening and painful. We may have been hurt by folks in the church, or found the theology too limited in scope or application, but we still recognize something of life that we need in the practice of Jesus-centered faith with others. As we deconstruct much of our belief and understanding of organized religion, what are we hanging on to? What are reconstructing? What do we find ourselves like Christian Wiman drawn to?

- D. I believe, at the core of it is the concept of Belonging. Belonging in a collective. Not just belonging to the Divine as individuals, or belonging to an institution, but actually belonging to a group of real people. What we're going to consider over the next two weeks.

1. Belonging to One Another
2. Belonging for the Sake of Others
3. Today we consider the first. Our model in this is **the group Jesus called to belong with him**. Most of the stories we have of his life involve deeply investing in other people. Spending intimate time with them, **building belonging**. Rather than focusing on one text that tells us about what belonging meant for Jesus and his friends, we're gonna look briefly at a few vignettes throughout his journey with his closest followers so we can glean

and remember what he valued and consider why, and think about what that looks like for us as a community.

II. The Importance of Belonging to One Another

A. First Story comes right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry as he is forming his first sacred community.

- 1. *One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. 2 He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."***
- 5 *Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."***
- 6 *When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. 8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.***

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

2. This is a wonderful, amazing little story, with a lot we could dig into. But here is the point I'm interested in for our conversation today.

3. Sacred Community Invites us to Enter One Another's Stories

- a) Jesus is preaching by the side of the water and he notices these fishermen who aren't there to listen to him. They're doing their thing. But Jesus gets this idea, seeing them. He decides he could use a boat, so he asks the fishermen if he could borrow it. Most scholars believe this was about acoustics. They didn't have P.A.s in Jesus time, but there are ways around that. The acoustics of speaking on the water would mean that the voice can bounce off the water and to the shore, amplifying it.
 - b) So Jesus invites Peter's help, asking him to put the boat out. And then after he's done preaching, he encourages him to fish, which results in the miraculous catch.
 - c) What I love about this at every point is the way it demonstrates Jesus' coming to Peter the fisherman; connecting with his identity as a man who makes his living catching fish. Jesus doesn't go around announcing that a new rabbi is in town and all who want a powerful spiritual teacher can apply. Clearly there are people already drawn to Jesus, but those aren't the ones he is calling into his intimate community. He sees something in Peter, James and John, but rather than expect them to do the cross cultural work and come to him, he goes to them. He meets them where they are at. He enters into their lives, their vocations, their identities as fisherman, and then he gives them an invitation and an imagination for a way that identity can serve a bigger purpose.
4. Now most of us won't work a miracle with someone during our first encounter with them, and we don't need to to build sacred community. But we can enter one another's stories.
 - a) This happens when we open ourselves up to sharing our history. Sacredness in sharing our stories.

- b) Now I'm not talking just about sharing the stuff we brag about on social media. The sanitized version of life. I'm talking about sharing the real story. The triumphs and the disappointments. The stories of our discoveries and joyful moments, as well as our losses.
- c) Requires a certain amount of risk -
 - (1) We don't always know how people will respond to our experiences. It's vulnerable. Can others hear our grief? Can they sit with us in our pain? Will they judge us for our histories?
- d) But when we can foster a culture of genuine curiosity, care, and acceptance it's an immense gift. It's powerful to give others the gift of our compassion and care. True empathy is an antidote to despair. It brings us from a place of solitude in our stories, sensing that the harder parts of our stories separate us from one another and from God, to a place of communion, as we experience connection, even from those who have not lived our same experiences.

B. Brings us to our next vignette. This also involves Peter and those closest to him.

1. *38 Jesus left the synagogue and went to the home of Simon. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to help her. 39 So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and began to wait on them.*

40 At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them.

2. Sacred Community invites us to share our personal lives.

- a) This is two quick verses, but the vignette appears in three of the four gospels. They all tell this story. I appreciate it because it's like a little glimpse behind the curtain. Jesus healing Peter's mother in law.
 - b) It can be easy just to focus on the healing, and in some ways the gospel writers themselves are making that point. They all end the vignette by sharing how the word spread about the healing and all these sick people came to be healed. It was the kick-off of Jesus healing ministry.
 - c) But what I'm interested in for this conversation about this, is the fact that they're hanging out at Peter's house. He's having this group over, with his family. His wife is there, who we never actually meet. And his mother-in-law is there, and she's sick.
 - d) But the miracle wouldn't have happened if they weren't sharing the every day nitty gritty of life together. Hanging out at each other's homes. Sharing meals together.
 - e) One of my most powerful experience of deep community shared with a family in Iowa City. Shared meals together once or twice a week. We picked up each other's kids and shuttled them around. Relieved each other when needed. And when crises hit, it was natural that we called one another. We poured glasses of wine and lamented together. We prayed for one another, cried together, and found hope, and like Peter experienced, Jesus' healing in those moments.
3. Over time, it's clear that the sharing of personal life knits Jesus and his sacred community together in a real way. They become his kin. They are tighter than actual blood relations. Intimacy being built between them that is like family and we see it when Jesus biological mother and brothers try to come in and take charge of him, and pull him back from all this ministry work. Somebody is sent in through the crowd to Jesus and says, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." (Mark 3)

a) *33 "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.*

34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my

mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

- b)** This is my family. It's not meant as much I think to be a diss of the importance of family, as to recognize that sometimes our closest family, our closest connection and community is to people we're not biologically related to. It's the people we're doing life with, we're engaged in supporting one another with, we're sharing in common purpose together. We're walking the same spiritual path together.

C. Brings us to our last vignette (Luke 9)

- 1. *When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, 2 and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. 3 He told them: "Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. 4 Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. 5 If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them."*6 So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere....**
- 2.** The whole experiment of sending followers of Jesus out to minister to others seems to go well, and so Jesus expands the mission. In the next chapter, he gives a larger group of 72 folks who are following him similar instructions, and they do the same thing. Here's what happens when they return from their ministry adventures (Luke 10):
- 3. *17 The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."***
18 He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. 19 I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. 20 However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."
21 At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.
22 "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."
23 Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. 24 For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."
- 4. Sacred Community Invites Us to Share Spiritual Experiences Together**
- 5.** Jesus followers being sent out to minister together. They all are a part of something spiritually powerful. The partnership in the endeavor is energizing and bonding. They experience the victory together. *"Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name."* When we partner with you and each other God, we experience power!
- 6.** And I love how this vignette ends, Jesus pulling the 12 along side as if he wants them to be in on the knowledge of how special this is, what they're witnessing. He's saying, "this is a historic moment right here. You are a part of it. People are being empowered and released by the spirit of God to do powerful things! And you all are the lucky ones who get to see it, hear it and be apart of it."

7. It's experiences like this that form Jesus's sacred community and bond them to him and to one another. They have corporate encounter after encounter, helping Jesus feed five thousand people with a few loaves and fishes, watching him calm the storm when they're on a boat in the water. Watching him walk on water, and then being released to do some of the same miraculous things he's doing: healing the sick, casting out demons, preaching good news to people.
 8. Those experiences end up meaning more than the things they don't get about Jesus. There are plenty of things he says that leave many folks confused and messed up. John tells us about one instance in which Jesus is saying people will need to eat his flesh and drink his blood if they want to be a part of him - that that will be a source of life for them - and folks don't get it. Many walk away.
 - a) But those who have shared these experiences, they don't go:
 - (1) 66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.**
 - 67 "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.**
 - 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."**
 9. The powerful spiritual moments these Jesus followers shared didn't pass when the moment was over. These things endured even after Jesus himself died. They endured the betrayal of one of their own. They endured their own failures, as people like Peter ran from the group and denied their participation in it in fear. They endured through Jesus' crucifixion. They endured through the tormented nights of fearing this was the end. They endured through the wonder and the glory of the resurrection. Through the mysterious walk on the road to Emmaus. Through their time with the risen Jesus, and the loss they feel anew as he left them again, ascending in to heaven. They endured through the waiting for God's Spiritual comfort to come, and they endured through the outpouring of the spirit at Pentecost, and the eventual establishing of more and more communities like that one the original Jesus followers had been formed in.
 10. *Talk about the bonding that has happened praying regularly with a group of women; or being on a team leading worship. The pain of losing people you've done that with. Share the internal desire to pull back, as well as the longing to have that again.*
 - D. So the story of Jesus encountering folks and bringing them into his story isn't a bunch of individual lives changed. It's not just about she has the truth, she has the truth, he has the truth, one, one, one, one, one: all getting the right answer on the test or all making their individual connections with the Divine. It's also about folks brought into communities of sacred belonging.
- III. Important for Haven to consider in this season of re-forming. How we can best serve these three aims.
- A. We're small. We're also ministering in a context that doesn't have same structures, institutions, cultural expectations of former generations or other cultures. The forms may change. Maybe this isn't the only good format. We may need to experiment with it: change up some of what we're doing if it's not giving us the opportunity to cultivate these things as well as other forms might.
 1. But whatever we do needs to serve these three aims. We need to find ways for us to actually belong to one another.
 - a) to share our stories. Be real with one another Be known and accepted for who we truly are.

- b) To share our personal lives. To be in the nitty gritty of life together.
- c) To encounter the Divine together. Shared spiritual experiences.
- 2. Seems really simple, and it is. But it's also hard to do. Requires things of us:
 - a) **Entering each other's stories requires vulnerability.** It requires risk taking. **It also requires sensitivity** to one another's stories. It requires us to listen more than we speak, to receive one another without judgement, but with a desire to see the creation of God in one another. That's hard, and it's something that I think our current culture pushes against. We're in the era of snap judgements. Evaluate someone based on 120 characters. Or a blog post.
 - b) **Sharing our personal lives requires intentionality.** It doesn't just happen. We have to make time to be together. We have to be thoughtful about it. It may mean we need to schedule it, to prioritize it. To locate our lives around it. And it may at times mean sacrifice. To say yes to spending time with people may mean saying no to something else. But we can't be in one another's lives meaningfully any other way.
 - c) **Sharing spiritual experiences requires an open-heartedness to God's spirit and to one another.** It requires us to hope, to press into practices that may at times feel strange but familiar, awkward but comforting. For those who've been hurt in spiritual community, it requires us to acknowledge our hurt and be present to it, even bring others into it, while at the same time, not allowing our places of hurt to keep us from opening ourselves up to the Divine. It means taking steps of faith, not always out of belief, but out of intention and longing.

IV. I want to end with another quote from the interview I heard recently with Christian Wiman, the poet. *"I am a Christian. I believe that Christ comes alive in communion between people....Sometimes, I'll think all kinds of things are wrong with my life. My job is messing me up. My writing is messed up. Something's messed up. And then I'll have a conversation with someone about a religious topic, or it's spiritually informed in some way, and it's honest. And even if we don't get anywhere, even if we disagree, the air has been cleared in me, and I realize that, in some ways, that I was dealing with all these things that weren't the ground, weren't bedrock. They weren't the ground of my being, and I'm trying to take care of things — the structures on top instead of the ground of my being. And I find that often, all you need is some kind of conversation with someone, even if it's just expressing pure anxiety."*

Questions for Conversation/Reflection:

1. What has your experience been of "Sacred Community"? Have you experienced community that entered each other's relationships, shared personal life, and shared spiritual experiences together? How has it shaped you positively or negatively?
2. What practices or structures do you find most helpful for cultivating the three things Leah identified?
3. Are you aware of what external or internal forces in your life might inhibit you from living into more of these three ways of sharing community?