

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. As many of you know, before starting Haven I was a part of a church denomination that I loved for many years but ultimately felt like I needed to leave. Anyway, in those later years that I was there, **within that group of churches there was a popular catch phrase that was gaining steam.** People would post it regularly on social media, captioning favorite photos or employing it as a hashtag to describe being at a group event. **The phrase was: “I love my tribe.”**
1. When I first heard folks using this language I’m not sure it actually bothered me. I may have even connected with the spirit of celebration and joy I heard in it, even if it wasn’t I would necessarily use.
 2. But of course this mantra **took on a different feel when I stated to find my own membership in the “tribe” questioned.**
 3. As I started to ask questions or name disagreement with the movement’s position in regards to LGBTQ inclusion, it became clear that others in the community, particularly those leaders with the most power, no longer thought I belonged.
 - a) This was often expressed in passive aggressive ways. While I had experienced this community of churches to essentially be my spiritual family of origin, they questioned my connection. **“Why would you even want to be a part of this denomination if you disagree with us on this?”** one powerful leader in the group asked me directly.
 4. The last national conference I attended felt painfully thick with irony to me. The title given to the conference was “All in.” The idea of course was a play on words - both the idea of being totally on board, totally committed, as well as the idea of everyone belonging, everyone getting to play. But this was the part that felt fraudulent. It wasn’t “all in period”, I joked to my friend and pastor mentor Adey who attended with me. It was “all in asterisk”. **LGBTQ folks and those like her and I who believed they should be included too were the asterisks.**
 5. After that, seeing photos captioned “I love my tribe” on Facebook no longer brought any joy. It just brought pain, because it was clear that this tribe was no longer one I could love or that could truly love me.
- B. I share that story as we continue our series on rebuilding after a time of disruption or crisis; a series I’m calling “Recovering the Sacred”. **In this series, we’re thinking about rebuilding our lives, our personal practices and our faith collective experience after a season of profound disruption and isolation during the pandemic.** How can we cultivate in this season and recover experiences of “the sacred” - that which connects us with a bigger reality, with God. Throughout the series, we’re looking to a couple of places for inspiration.
1. In our Biblical texts, we’re taking some time to explore the part of the narrative about a **season of rebuilding after a time of prolonged displacement and trauma** - the Babylonian exile. Last summer, in the midst of the Pandemic, we gained insight from studying the Exile itself. Now we’re looking at the rebuilding season. The story of how the former exiles rebuilt is primarily told in two short books that scholars all believe were original composed as one composition, and in our Bibles these two companion books go by the names of **Ezra and Nehemiah**. We’re also referencing when helpful some of the prophets who spoke into this time in Israel’s story and other texts from the era.
 2. But in addition to our Biblical texts, I started off by presenting us a framework that comes from **Father Richard Rohr** and some of his teaching on how individuals and collectives grow: through a cyclical process he describes as moving **from order, to disorder, to reorder.**

3. This is our third conversation in this series. We started looking briefly at how the rebuilding of the temple began with a lot of mixed emotions as the people dedicated the foundation. Last week we looked at how the work seemed to stall out not long after it began but then after 15 years, a couple of prophets named Haggai and Zechariah spoke fresh vision to the people and their leaders, and highlighted new favorable political circumstances, which gave them the boost they needed to finish the job of rebuilding the temple.
4. And that brings us to the next development in the narrative, the story we have for today, a story which, **if I'm gonna be honest, I find to be pretty problematic**. In fact, the more I read this story and studied it this week and read commentaries on it, and thought about what to share today, the more I wondered if we should look at it at all. Maybe it's best to just skip this part of the rebuilding narrative altogether.
5. But to do that I think **doesn't do justice to this bigger process we're engaging**; the process of growing from order, when Father Rohr would say that things generally make sense to us, through disorder, when life gets in the way and the understanding we might have had falls apart, and hopefully moving into reorder, a place of deeper, more integrated wisdom and meaning-making. If this is to happen, then **part of that reordering process means reckoning with things from our past**, things from our traditions, and so on that trouble us or that we disagree with, rather than just ignoring them or throwing the whole thing away because parts of it are challenging.
6. So today, I'm hoping the might be a teachable moment as we engage the text. I'm going to invite us to do the work of trying to reorder together. We're going to look at a story from our tradition, not necessarily as a model for how we then must live or how we ought to understand the sacred, but as a conversation partner in our own growth and desire to move from a season of disorder to a place of reorder and reconnection with God.

II. Turning to the Story

A. So first, the setup for our troubling story -

1. As we saw last week, the temple of the Jewish people has now been rebuilt in Jerusalem, and at this point our story skips forward about 50 years to the next big development in the narrative which is the introduction of one of the title characters of our series: the person of Ezra.
 - a) So who is Ezra?
 - (1) Well **Ezra, we find out, is a priestly scribe**. This means he's from one of the families who are qualified according to Jewish tradition in that time to become a priest, to oversee and participate in temple worship in Jerusalem, and he's also a scholar. He's been in Babylon this whole time, and has been **an important part of the academic work that was happening there to write down and compile and systematize much of the Jewish people's scriptures**; he's been a core part of helping their tradition move from a primarily oral one to a tradition rooted in the written word. Many scholars believe he may have been the primary compiler and editor of the torah itself - the first five books of the Hebrew Bible that are at the heart of the Jewish tradition.
 - (2) But about 50 years after the temple has been restored, it's not clear that those who are living in Jerusalem have the knowledge they need to really restore faithful worship to Yahweh. And so Ezra, chief scholar, is sent from Babylon to Jerusalem in a mission that is actually endorsed by the Persian Emperor himself, and Ezra leads a whole fresh group of migrants from Babylon to Jerusalem to continue the work of rebuilding the Jewish community and religious practice there. It's kind of like a **renowned academic author, researcher, and professor leaving their work in the**

University to go to DC or Silicon Valley with the hope of applying their knowledge to bring practical growth and reform to an organization.

- (3) So Ezra and his crew set out from Babylon and takes them four months to caravan all the way to Jerusalem. They bring with them lots of animals and other items to be sacrificed at the temple, which they do upon arrival, and they also present the order from the governor who blessed Ezra to come and teach the Jewish people there everything they needed to know about Jewish law so they could properly fulfill it and honor Yahweh in their community.

- (4) And that's where we pick up our story at the beginning of Ezra 9.

B. The Story

- 1. Now when these things had been completed, the leaders approached me and said, "The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the local residents who practice detestable things similar to those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 Indeed, they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has become intermingled with the local residents. Worse still, the leaders and the officials have been at the forefront of all this unfaithfulness!"**

3 When I heard this report, I tore my tunic and my robe and ripped out some of the hair from my head and beard. Then I sat down, quite devastated. 4 Everyone who held the words of the God of Israel in awe gathered around me because of the unfaithful acts of the people of the exile. Devastated, I continued to sit there until the evening offering. (Ezra 9: 1-4)

- a) So the story seems to be that Ezra, the big-whig theologian and biblical scholar shows up in Jerusalem to help their community get on track and immediately some of the local leaders come and confess an issue. We've got a problem, boss. You should know that a lot of our men have taken for their wives women who were not part of the people of Israel. They have married, "foreign women". Ezra hears this news and he is, in his own words "quite devastated". He starts immediately into a ritual of mourning, and as the text goes on we see a grand prayer of grief and confession that he publicly prays in front of all who are gathered. We'll pick up after his prayer at the beginning of chapter 10.

- 2. While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself to the ground before the temple of God, a very large crowd of Israelites—men, women, and children alike—gathered around him. The people wept loudly. 2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, from the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra:**

"We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the local peoples. Nonetheless, there is still hope for Israel in this regard. 3 Therefore let us enact a covenant with our God to send away all these women and their offspring, in keeping with your counsel, my lord, and that of those who respect the commandments of our God. And let it be done according to the law. 4 Get up, for this matter concerns you. We are with you, so be strong and act decisively!"

5 So Ezra got up and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take an oath

to carry out this plan. And they all took a solemn oath. 6 Then Ezra got up from in front of the temple of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he stayed there, he did not eat food or drink water, for he was in mourning over the infidelity of the exiles.

a) So just to clarify that you heard this right, Ezra is leading this group grieving session, grieving that the people in Jerusalem have so dishonored Yahweh by entering into mixed marriages, and then one of there leaders steps forward and makes an announcement. “Ok, y’all. Clearly we screwed up. God didn’t want us to marry these foreign women but we did it anyway and we let our sons do it and that was clearly bad, BUT we can make the right. **We can fix it. We just need to get rid of the women and their kids and start over.** We’ll have a fresh start, and Ezra can lead us through the fix and help us get right with God again.” That is what’s happening. Going on:

3. 7 A proclamation was circulated throughout Judah and Jerusalem that all the exiles were to be assembled in Jerusalem. 8 Everyone who did not come within three days would thereby forfeit all his property, in keeping with the counsel of the officials and the elders. Furthermore, he himself would be excluded from the assembly of the exiles.

9 All the men of Judah and Benjamin were gathered in Jerusalem within the three days. (It was in the ninth month, on the twentieth day of that month.) All the people sat in the square at the temple of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the rains.

10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have behaved in an unfaithful manner by taking foreign wives! This has contributed to the guilt of Israel. 11 Now give praise to the Lord God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the local residents and from these foreign wives.”

12 All the assembly replied in a loud voice: “We will do just as you have said! 13 However, the people are numerous and it is the rainy season. We are unable to stand here outside. Furthermore, this business cannot be resolved in a day or two, for we have sinned greatly in this matter. (Meaning we have hundreds of marriages we now need to end) **14 Let our leaders take steps on behalf of all the assembly. Let all those in our towns who have married foreign women come at an appointed time, and with them the elders of each town and its judges, until the hot anger of our God is turned away from us in this matter.”** (So essentially they say - let’s put a system together in place to process hundreds of divorces. We’ll do one village at a time, all the men who married non-Israelite women will have to come with their families to Jerusalem, stand before Ezra, who will be the judge, confess their sin, and send away their wives and kids.)

15 Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah were against this, assisted by Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite. 16 So the exiles proceeded accordingly. Ezra the priest separated out by name men who were leaders in their family groups. They sat down to consider this matter on the first day of the tenth

month, 17 and on the first day of the first month they finished considering all the men who had married foreign wives. (Ezra 10:1-17)

- a) So it took three months, partly because it was the rainy season and apparently group divorces were an outdoor affair, but after three months the deeds were done. Hundreds of wives plus all of their children were driven away from their community around Jerusalem. What happens to them is never mentioned. It does not seem to be of concern to Ezra and the story of rebuilding he is telling. **But of what we know of the ancient world, and it's deep patriarchal structure, we can assume it wasn't good.** All of these women and their children would have become immediately destitute. Perhaps some of them might have been taken back into their former communities, into their parents' homes, we don't know, but even if they found ways to feed themselves and their kids, they would always carry the shame of rejection from their spouses and the communities they had built their families in.
 - b) Do you get why I don't like this story?
4. So what do we do with this? Is the takeaway really that in order to rebuild a sacred community after a time of disruption and trauma, the only answer is to "purify" your group, get rid of those who are in some way different and start over with people who are all alike? Is this what faithfulness to God means?
5. For Father Richard Rohr, **the work of moving from disorder into reorder is the invitation to "Include and transcend"**. What does that mean? I'm gonna read this excerpt from Rohr cause I think it's crucial for how we think about problems like what to do with Ezra 9 and 10.
- a) *The human preference for binary thinking has kept us from seeing that when history evolves with a new idea, cultural mood, or consciousness, we need not (dare not, actually!) completely exclude the previous idea, mood, or consciousness.*

We grow best by including what was good and lasting in the previous stage and avoiding the overreaction and rebellious spirit that have characterized most revolutions up to now. This demands both humility and the capacity for non-dual thinking, qualities that are rare in most zealots, reformers, and revolutionaries. Slash-and-burn only creates a whole new set of things to correct or rebel against in the long haul. Either-or thinking creates disjunction and mistrust immediately. Both-and thinking creates continuity and trust over time.

This nonviolent compromise can most simply be stated as include and transcend. It is at the core of what we mean by wisdom and by nonviolence.

As it applies here, we can trust and even need certain kinds of "disorder" to clarify what our original "order" meant, lacked, or intended. There are always a few needed correctives to every new proposition—and those correctives only appear over time and with practice. Thus, we have amendments to our original American Constitution—and now, some think that these also need to be amended. Every reform becomes its own new orthodoxy and the painful pattern of growth begins all over again. Yes, this is the rub of evolution, like the grinding of tectonic plates.

If we can rightly achieve an integration of original plan plus correctives, rule plus "the exception that proves the rule," order plus disorder, we have what I am calling reorder!

- b) So if what Rohr says here is true, the most helpful response to a story like this is not to just throw it away or burn it all down, but to **do the harder work of identifying what might have been good in this moment and claiming that, while also in a non-dualistic way, holding in tension that which was deeply flawed**, so that we can take forward with us the lessons of our ancestors and live into their best intentions in less harmful ways. I'm not gonna lie. That is hard to do. But I do believe it's the sacred work we're called to, so we're going to do our best.
- III. With that in mind, what in this story might we want to include in our reorder? What were the best intentions of our ancestors? Why did they undertake such costly action? I think as I've been studying this story this week, two core reasons come to mind:
1. The people want to **demonstrate faithfulness to God**. They want to show they care about honoring Yahweh - their understanding of the Divine.
 2. The people care deeply about **cultivating a sacred community**; a distinctive group of people that they can embody their faith with, living it together with a particular community.
- B. When I think about these aims of my ancestors, I see something familiar, something I want to include in my own reordering, in my own recovering of the sacred.
1. What I take issue with is not a desire to live faithfully, honoring something bigger than myself, honoring a truer, richer heart at the center of the universe that many of us call God.
 2. Neither am I offended with their desire to do life and faith with a group of partners who can be there in the daily ins and outs of living with attention to the sacred. In fact, I share both of these aims.
 3. Ultimately what I disagree with and where want to transcend the work of my spiritual ancestors in this story is in **the ways they tried to achieve those aims**, ways I ultimately think did not actually align with the heart of God, and brought further harm rather than healing.
- C. So let's start with the first aim: demonstrating faithfulness to God.
1. The way the story is told seems to simply assume that this is what obedience to God looks like; it's an act of devotion. It demonstrates what real worship looks like: a radical commitment to purity. While I have had a hard time finding many sermons preached on this passage these days, the few pastors who do like to preach it, often take this position too. Sometimes God calls us to do radical uncomfortable things to demonstrate our purity and commitment. But is this what honoring God must look like?
 2. The truth is, this is not the only story in the Bible about our connection with people who are different than us. **It's not even the only story in this part of the Bible, written in this era, addressing the question of mixed marriages.**
 - a) From the same era, written in this post-Exile time come some of the famous stories of women in the Jewish faith. **We have the story of Ruth, the Moabite woman**, (from one of those races named in Ezra as being detestable), demonstrating faithfulness to her Israelite mother in law, returning with her to Israel, joining her people, famously declaring "your people will be my people and your God my God", marrying the Israelite Boaz and eventually becoming the great grandmother of King David and of course, ancestor of Jesus.
 - b) This era also gave us the **story of Queen Esther**, the Jewish woman who was brought into the harem of the Persian Emperor Xerxes and eventually made Queen of all Persia, though at the time her Jewish ethnicity was hidden. When a plot to exterminate the Jewish people was underway, Esther took courageous action within her mixed marriage to identify her heritage and save her people, and the story celebrates how God uses her marriage to a non-Jewish man to deliver her people from genocide.

- c) And of course, if we identify as Jesus-followers, **our primary lens for reading Scripture and understanding the Divine comes through the life and work of Jesus** who consistently demonstrated concern for those who had been declared unclean in some way. One of the first people he revealed his identity to was a Samaritan woman, a woman who many in their era would probably have seen as a descendent of the wives who were sent away. And of course, in the wake of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, the community of his followers feels compelled by the Divine Spirit to bring the Good News of God to those who are not-Jewish, the Gentiles, as they follow what seems like clear evidence that God moves is manifested through Jewish and non-Jewish people alike. And in the same way, amongst the young Christian community, **the Apostle Paul encourages those who find themselves in mixed-marriages not to leave them**, for those marriages might actually be a further means of bringing connection to God.
- d) I share all of this to say, **perhaps the assumption that Ezra and his fellow exiles made was incorrect**: faithfulness to God did not have to mean forced divorce and abandonment of these women and children.
3. This leads me to consider the second, related misstep I see in this story. While I appreciate the desire that those in Jerusalem had to form a distinctive community, **I disagree with the way they sought to achieve it - believing they needed to form a collective identity through "racial purity"**, clearly creating a dividing line between who they saw themselves to be and everyone else.
- a) This misstep, which has been repeated in so many contexts throughout history and still is today, reminds me of one of the most helpful paradigms I discovered in considering the life of faith years ago: **the paradigm of bounded set verses centered set**. This is ultimately about group identity. Bounded sets clearly define a group by shared characteristics: in the case of our story: Jewish heritage. Those who had it were in, those who didn't were not. There's a clear boundary marker and you're either in or out. For the group to hold together you have to expel anyone who doesn't share that characteristic, and this of course is the core of so many of our societal problems - the way we expel those don't share our race, our ethnicity, our gender, our orientation, our politics, our theology, our abilities and so on.
- b) But what if that wasn't the only way to form a collective? What if a group could be brought together **not by the power of it's boundaries, but by the power of it's center**, the power of the destination that each person in the group was moving toward? What if we could be unified by that which we share, that which brings us together, and allow that to be stronger in our collective identity than what separates us? This is what it means to me to be centered set, and specifically to be Jesus-centered - to believe that trying to move towards Jesus with our life of faith takes us necessarily into relationship with people who may look very different from us but ultimately share a common heart and journey to be shaped by the Divine, and we can do that together, **believing the power that draws us forward is stronger than the differences we share, and gives us a way to find group identity not through exclusion but through radical, inclusive, self-giving love of Jesus himself**.
4. I share all of this to say, **I don't believe anymore that studying our tradition or our Sacred texts means finding a way to justify everything in there**. I think it's reasonable, and even in keeping with the tradition we are a part of to refute and to reclaim, to include and transcend. I think that's why we have books like Ruth and Esther written in this same

era, speaking correctives to Ezra and Nehemiah. **Our very Bible is not a declaration but a dialogue**, highlighting vastly different points of view, and inviting us to wrestle along with our ancestors to discern where God is in all of it.

- a) And so I can be grateful for the Ezra community's desire to honor the Divine in their time, and I can also believe that they were wrong to believe that this was what faithfulness to God actually looked like.
- b) I can be grateful for Ezra's contributions to the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish faith, and also believe he missed God's heart for the widows and the orphans when he neglected the women and children in front of him and sent them away.
- c) I can recognize that **he may have been a great leader in some ways and he also was a man limited by the culture of his time and the reality of his own flawed humanity**. I can appreciate that this is true of most leaders throughout history. I can acknowledge that **this is true of myself**.
- d) In the same way, I can look to my former denomination and appreciate their affection for their community. The problem was not having a tribe to love - all of us need a particular set of people. The problem was defining that group against others - **tribes are not the problem, only tribalism**.

D. This wrestling with the realities of our heritage, this I think is sacred work - it is a vital part of moving from disorder to reorder. It is a vital part of reconstructing our lives, our faiths, our communities. And it's a work I want to invite each of us to engage in an ongoing way here at Haven. It's not just a work to do in the wake of a pandemic. It's the work to do throughout our lifetimes.

1. So I ask you: What parts of your heritage - your family of origin, your spiritual background, your political background, your racial construction, and so on - **what parts of your heritage do you wish you could throw away?** What parts would you prefer to bury or burn? What part of your family story would you like to skip over?
2. What might it mean for you instead to include and transcend? What might it mean for us as a collective to do that together?
3. Perhaps this is what the ancients always meant when they called us to **confess our sins and repent**. Not to be controlled with shame, but to be freed to grow; to speak honestly about our heritage, what was good and what was not. **To learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of those before us, and to do better**, to grow wiser, to love more deeply, and to more clearly reflect as Jesus did, the image of God in all of us. May that be the challenge we all rise to as we reorder. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. How did the Ezra story strike you? Did you feel differently about it than Leah?
2. What does "include and transcend" mean to you? How do you feel about its role in "reorder"?
3. What part of your heritage might it be helpful to apply the process of "include and transcend" to?