

## What's Our Church's Story? Our Past? Our Future?

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I thought I'd be preaching outside today, under our solar canopy, overlooking our small parcel of urban land and our building, and worshipping with some of you, but it was not to be. Not yet!

Here's a question for you. What's your elevator speech about Mayflower, that sort of easily explained, tangible description? It probably depends on how long you've been part of this community. But if someone said, "tell me about your church", what's the story you would tell?

I might say something like this: We are an 800-member progressive Christian church with a strong music ministry, predominantly white with many LGBT families. Our mission is to work for God's Dream of Justice. We tend to be big dreamers and follow through on many of the dreams. In the last 15 years, we have: partnered in building 30 units of workforce housing on our parking lot, now home to our wonderful mostly Somali American neighbors and consequently this predominantly affluent white neighborhood is beginning to change, becoming more religiously, economically, and racially diverse. We created an excellent early childhood education center for 100 mixed income families. Spread the gospel of solar and of moving towards carbon neutrality after installing 200 solar panels on our roof top. We were one of first largish congregations in the country to refuse to sign weddings licenses until all married couples could get married. We are a leader UCC church in Isaiah, Minnesota's faith-based community organization, working powerfully for the last decade against voter suppression and mass incarceration, and for racial equality, immigration, and healthcare. We have offered sanctuary, in our homes, to four asylum seekers and support them in their journey to citizenship. That's a long elevator ride...

And what would you say about the history of Mayflower? What story do you tell about Mayflower's past? We're just five years shy of 100 years old.

Maybe you'd talk about how, what is now the Russian museum, used to be Mayflower; about how the highway cut the church neighborhood in half, wounding the church community; about how the founders named the church *Mayflower Community Congregational* intending it to be a church ever serving the wider community and society; about the merger with Faith UCC. Maybe you'd go on a bit more about how ground breaking Mayflower's history: with women in leadership; with teaching human sexuality in Sunday school; with becoming a safe church home

for LGBT people; including our scout troop....and about our several year partnership with Zion Baptist church in north Minneapolis.

What story do we tell about our church? How do we tell our history? Are we honest about the complexity of our story? Is there anything we are erasing? If so, why?

Have you ever discovered something about your family history that rearranged your thinking, your self-understanding? Causing you wonder: "oh *that's* why he was that way" ... or "that's why they did that"...

Several years ago our older daughter had to do a thorough family tree for graduate school, to help illustrate the concept of family systems and she made a discovery while doing this that rearranged all kinds of understanding about this side of the family. It raised so many questions. It had been all but erased in this prominent Christian family. I'll just say it was about a misalignment, if you will, of a marriage date and a birth date. For privacy reasons, I won't go into all of the wondering and questioning that that one discovery stirred up, and how the story that we tell ourselves now about this family has changed...

This past week something similar happened when I was digging into some dates about Mayflower. I kind of went: Whoa! What does this mean?! It started rearranging my understanding...

We call that education and I hope it happens to me until I die-- education about myself, my family, my church, my city, my country-- so that I can try to be the best worker for God's dream of justice that I can be until my last breath....

So, this is what happened to me... you may already be on to this.... I've known, somewhat vaguely, that Mayflower was in the heart of the racial covenant geography of MN . Racial covenants-- and by the way I hate it that they appropriated this religious language of "covenant"-- were a ubiquitous part of real estate transactions in the first half of the last century. Covenants were embedded in property deeds to keep people who were not white from buying. For example, one Minneapolis covenant reads: "The said premises shall not at any time be sold, conveyed, leased, or sublet, or occupied by any person or persons who are not full bloods of the so-called Caucasian or White race." This was legal in MN until 1953.

So! when you hold together the mapping prejudice date expansion, you can see that on your computer someday, each year how it spread, where it spread... *and* you read the Mayflower Journey, our history book, about when and where the church was built and how it grew and where members were living, no doubt around the church.... you hold together the rapid growth of racial covenants on blocks all around Mayflower and the rapid growth of this church...( From 1928 to 1938, the church membership grew from 41 to 640, mostly if not all

white.) You hold that together and then you read this account in one of Curt Brown's amazing Minnesota History articles in the Sunday Strib: He writes: "In 1931, black World War I veteran Arthur Lee, his wife and 6 year old daughter moved into a home at 4600 Columbus Ave, (which is 1.7 miles from Mayflower)...Crowds of up to 3,000 people gathered there nightly, throwing stones, lighting firecrackers and threatening to "burn them out". The Lees stood firm, declining buyout offers and waiting years to move to show that they couldn't be forced out." But then they moved. By the 1940s the neighborhood was entirely white.

So, these pieces come together in your mind and you begin to wonder....

-were any Mayflower members in those crowds?

-did the preacher ever preach about that or any other incidents or about racial covenants?

-Did anyone in our church ever break the silence around this, say in a conversation during coffee hour, this sinful practice in the Mayflower neighborhoods?

I asked someone whose grandparents lived in various neighborhoods in South mpls, did your grandparents ever say racist things? No. Did they ever talk about how wrong racist practices were? No.

Why are we doing this, all of this unearthing and truth telling and wondering?

Because of our calling as Christians to work for God's dream of justice. Instead of only celebrating history, or over simplifying history or erasing history, we are grappling with it, honestly, imagining the stories of those who were hurt or harmed by racist practices, and the stories of those who were heroic; and those who were sinful and weak; hearing all of this in its complexity... and in grappling with this history, rather than becoming paralyzed by it, we will find a way to move forward into a more just future.

What else do we need to acknowledge about this place, this land? What else are we learning that rearranges our understanding so that we can be more faithful in the future?

This place, our church, is on the traditional land of the Dakota people, who lived here for centuries before the city was created.

This place is just two blocks from a creek that pours directly into the great Mississippi river, the largest watershed of North America. Our church's stormwater pours right into this....

Each of these reframe our story. *Now what's the story we tell about Mayflower, about this land? How will this change how we move into the future? What will be our future story? WHO ARE WE?*

Just now, you may be thinking, preacher! Wait a minute! What are you doing talking about the past and the future? We're just trying to survive now. We are in a one day at a time kind of life these days. Just help us get through this Covid time. Help keep us stay connected to one another and to God. We're just trying to survive here. We're saying yes when we can to.... giving refuge to young black protestors on that fateful weekend.... giving short term sanctuary to undocumented people in detention... opening the early childhood center for essential worker's children... taking meals to homeless families, and more... some have come to pass and some not..... but as for future dreaming.... Hmm.....

Now! is when the Prophet Jeremiah enters the scene. Imagine it with me. He speaks to Mayflower, He says....

*I get you Mayflower. I know about hard times. It was the hardest time in my life, I was in prison. And the lowest point in our nation's history. Our land was being invaded. But **that's** the very time when you most gotta listen for God's word. **That's** when you have to dream... when you have to counter captivity and despair thinking with a kind of obedient hopefulness. While the land is being invaded?!: Most would say it was a foolish time to invest in property... But the word of God came to me and I listened. Jeremiah: "Buy land. Give the people hope for the future.... that domestic and commercial life will resume in the land".*

*So I bought the field! I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses (even in prison).... I charged my confidant Baurch, "Take these deeds, put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time." And God blessed this act saying: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land!*

**That's** what our prophet says to us on this day.... His action reveals his confidence that there will be a future in the land. There will be a future on this land.

Mayflower: What is God calling us to do and to be? What is our future? What will our story be?

Will we continue to care for God's creation? Might we someday do watershed friendly landscaping? converting our parking lot to be more watershed friendly, and install geothermal under it and begin to spread the gospel of geothermal?

How might we do public land acknowledgement? About this land, Dakota land, and the land of racial covenants? We are at a prominent intersection and just across the street from a Minnesota art museum. Might we install a piece of public art, aka Kara Walker, that somehow makes visible what's been invisible and conscious what's been unconscious?

And what will we do about reparations? What will that look like? No, we who are white in 2020 did not perpetrate slavery or racial covenants. We didn't do it. But we have surely benefited from it. We who are white have had a centuries long economic head start.

This pandemic time... rather than just a hunkering down, living one day at a time survival mode time...- this pandemic time can be, in the spirit of the prophet Jeremiah, a visionary time, a pregnant time, an eschatological time. So much is being uncovered, rearranged, clarified... It all feels so weighty now... so ultimate somehow... This is God stuff.

There is a most remarkable group of people at Mayflower I want you to know about. Remember, it was a year ago that we gathered was it 300 of us?, in building our dreams sessions over the course of two months, to hear about your dreams for our building and for our land. This was a kind of last call. Council's been getting your input for years through various means, so many dreams bubbling up from different groups, but it was deemed time to decide which ones we shall pursue as a church. This group of wise church leaders were appointed by the council to take **all** of this material and grapple with it together and to ask more questions and to pray for God's intention word.... But! right after our first meeting, Covid struck. Needless to say each one of these people has been dealing, day in and day out, in these hard times in their own home, with their children or grandchildren, in their own work, in their own hearts,... the trauma, the re-calibrating, the exhaustion... And yet!. not one of them said "let's hit pause... or why don't we put a hold on this... or I don't have the life energy for this now". I am in awe of these people. Why are these eight people doing this?! These intense three hour zoom meetings in the evening and on Saturdays... Why? I suspect it's because they love their church. They love our mission of God's dream of justice. They love you. They are a Jeremiah committee, listening for God's word in these hard times....

What is the story we will tell Mayflower? About who we are? In the future? After the Covid pandemic, there will be no return to normal. Something new is gestating.

I end with this biblical poetry from the book of Revelation about God breaking into this world and making all things new.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*“See, the home<sup>[a]</sup> of God is among mortals.  
God will dwell<sup>[b]</sup> with them;  
they will be God’s peoples,<sup>[c]</sup>  
and God will be with them;<sup>[d]</sup>  
God will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.”*

*<sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.... Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”*

Let us pray,

Oh God, use us to make all things new.

Amen.

### **Sources**

Brown, Curt, “Mpls. scorned early black residents”, Star Tribune, June 14, 2020.

