

**Bloom and Grow**  
*Mayflower Church*  
*Elijah Carroll*  
*Sermon 9.27.20*

A kind of faith formation opportunity for me —or, a way for me to walk along the Jesus path has always been online. During my seminary years, I was presented with the possibility of helping the LGBT National Help Center in San Francisco launch a chat for transgender youth 19 years old and younger. As long as you can read and type, and are even questioning your gender, you are welcome to attend as often or as little as you want to.

Pre pandemic, we met once a week on Thursdays. During the pandemic, we have expanded our hours to three-hour chats and offer two nights a week, Thursdays and Fridays.

We often chat about funny memes, music groups we are listening to, musicals and podcasts we love, we “sing” pop music together, talk about our pets and plants and siblings—these topics are those surface topics that help us feel comfortable sharing the deeper stuff—The stuff that I ask youth put out a trigger warning before discussing.

Religion is one of the topics that gets a trigger warning— because let’s face it, Religion has been triggering for many queer folk, trans folk included. Some youth have already been so deeply affected negatively by their religious experiences that they experience deep anxiety just from the mention of God. And, some youth, even though they’ve been affected negatively by their church—by the God their church says doesn’t love them—still believe in something out there that is bigger and more loving and more powerful than the God they learned about at their church.

When I mention that I work for a church and that I've attended seminary, and that I am on the path of ordination, I imagine some dropped jaws and confused looks from some of these kids. I get a couple of, "that is so cool's!" And, I always get a couple of, "how does that works?" from others.

And so, I explain to them a little about my church—our church. I tell them about k/1 and 4/5 OWL and 8<sup>th</sup> grade OWL, and how we tell our Mayflower kids that no matter who they are and who they discover they may be, they are loved for exactly who they are. They are accepted. They are holy creations of God.

I tell them about Confirmation class—how we focus on both faith and doubt. That it's OK to question an idea or theological concept. In fact, it is so good and important to do that. I also tell them about our youth group that focus' on justice themed youth trips and the strong friend connections made in that group.

These trans kids usually say, "I wish that was my church." Or, "even though I don't believe in God anymore, I wish I could go to that church." And, during the pandemic, some of them have gone to our church and participated in our livestream worship.

I am so glad we have been able to reach out to some of these youth, that so desperately need a message of expansive love—a message that says to them, "you matter". A time in their week where they feel calm and held by our church. Or, by their church too.

Our scripture this morning is the first lines of Acts. The author of acts is writing to Theophilus. Let's think of Theophilus as a lover of God, or a kind of friend. Our author makes mention to another book, probably the Gospel according to Luke where Luke

writes of Jesus' ministry, passion, and resurrection. Luke presumably wrote Acts as a kind of sequel to the Gospel. Our scripture today ends with Luke telling Theophilus that those who stayed in Jerusalem to wait for the promise of God would be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

I feel like we are in a baptized by the Holy Spirit kind of time right now. (pause)

When we are baptized with water, it's a time where we make an outward sign of an inward commitment to start along our faith/doubt journey with the community that we are taking this outward symbol with—our church—usually gathered in one place to witness this event. If a baby is being baptized, the pastor usually parades the newly baptized member of the community throughout the pews so that we can all catch a good glimpse of our newest member. It is a time where families gather, Godparents are introduced to families, we take pictures, we hug one another, we give gifts. All things we can't do during this pandemic.

In the book of Acts Luke focuses on this other symbol of being one in the community of Christ. He focuses on a different kind of baptism. A baptism of the Holy Spirit. It's something we can't necessarily see easily, unless we are looking for it. And, I would say the whole book of Acts focus' on this idea that we are baptized by the Holy Spirit. A baptism that is wholly personal yet causes the baptized to do incredible things.

And that, is how Christianity began. A group of people who were touched by the Holy Spirit and then felt moved into action by that force to do loving, justice filled, and compassionate acts in the world. Christian churches didn't exist yet. And, if they did, followers of Jesus probably wouldn't have hung around them because it wouldn't have

been safe to do so. Early Christians had to find another way to be a community. They had to find other ways to bloom and grow together.

Fast forward to today. I would dare to say that we, Mayflower are individuals who have been touched by the Holy Spirit. Our Holy Spirit Baptisms have compelled us to move into action in the world, doing loving, justice filled things for our neighbors near and far, and for our planet. And, even though we have a church, it's not safe for us to gather here right now. We also have to find other ways right now to be a community.

What we are experiencing right now during this pandemic, is not so unlike what early Christians experienced. We talk about a new normal. Or doing things different during these pandemic times. I would poke at this a bit and offer that, though today we have different modes of gathering and being community than they did in the ancient near east, Like, they definitely didn't have internet and Zoom and Facebook and Instagram and tablets and laptops and all that. They had horses if they were lucky, sandals, and temples. But I would poke a bit and say, we have much in common with early Jesus followers—and how we are having to “reinvent” being community isn't unique to the Christian experience.

Third graders, you just received a Bible. I've heard that some of you have already started reading it! I was super impressed how many of you already knew that the Bible isn't just one book but many. I hope that you take some time and read the book of Acts first, or close to first for those that have already set off on your bible adventures. The book of Acts is one adventure after another, outlining the beginnings of Christianity. You are invited to read it and see if you can see the similarities between early Christian communities and how we are having to do church now are similar.

Every time I get the privilege of visiting homes or yards of our Mayflower families during this pandemic, I've been overcome by countless examples of how we are living out our faith or connecting with Holy Spirit baptism when I see your yard signs, your eco-friendly pandemic projects, or even in the simple and heartfelt ways you connect with your immediate neighbors through smiles and hellos. I'd like to share with you one example in more detail.

Recently, I had the joy of delivering Bibles to our third graders. Each year, our third graders get a 101 on the Bible with Maureen Engelhardt. One Saturday morning, I went to visit one of our third graders, Ingrid. When I arrived, I was greeted by the whole family, including the newest member of their family, Luna, a sweet and affectionate dog. We stood about their yard and talked about life during the pandemic. About twenty minutes into our conversation, Ingrid got a glint in her eye and a smile on her face that seemed to come from somewhere inside and said to her parents, "can I show him the mural?" So, we all took a short field trip to the alley where there was an old crumbling partition wall that separated this family's backyard from the alley. Ingrid and a friend wanted to take this old crumbling wall and turn it into something beautiful.

If you look on the cover of this morning's bulletin, you'll see her mural—this wonderful image of Edelweiss, mixing in a bit of Ingrid's family heritage, and other flowers. And, written in the top left-hand corner the words, "bloom and grow". If you've seen the musical, "The Sound of Music", you'll recognize these words as lyrics from one of the songs. Ingrid's mural took a wall, crumbling and plain, it functions to simply divide space, and transformed it into a message that I think we all need. She took this plain dividing wall and gave it a new purpose as a kind of neighborhood sermon, preaching a

message of growth and expansion of love out of something that was literally falling apart. Ingrid's loving message and apt reminder is visible to her whole neighborhood. When I saw this, I thought, "now, this is church!" This is church in a time when we can't gather. We find new ways to connect in yards, through murals, and so many other ways.

Ingrid's mural—the chat for trans youth—both gleaming reminders that faith growth can happen in so many other ways besides gathering a building once a week-- And that, our Christian history proves that we've done this before, is a great inspiration that we can do this—this work of faith formation now, during a time where we can't use our building for reasons of health and safety. We only have to find the willingness and the creativity.

And, we are doing this work as effectively and imaginatively as we know how currently. Our adult education classes have thrived during the summer months, our Race Matters team, Immigration Team, all of our different environmental teams have all met via Zoom. Even youth group continued to meet during the summer months. Though it's not the way we would prefer to meet, right now, using the internet as a community connection tool is what we've got! And for those that can't meet using the internet for various and excellent reasons, we've got a large group of care callers who reach out to members through the phone.

Our Confirmation class will meet this year in a distanced way. In fact, we have our first meeting this afternoon. Sunday School will start back up beginning next week, where we will have weekly Zoom meeting for half an hour for our members in second grade- 7<sup>th</sup> Grade.

And, for our younger members, if you've missed the children's corner where you can draw and color and play, there are theme specific coloring sheets, word decoders, crossword puzzles, and a family activity that is sent out weekly.

8<sup>th</sup> Grade OWL will meet monthly in a way that is not following our Our Whole Lives Curriculum but using a modified curriculum we are calling Transitions. We will have a livestreamed Acoustic Christmas, Advent Market, Advent Now, Homework Helpers is starting back up soon to reach out to our neighbors at Creekside Commons,

Youth Group will have a planned service opportunity and a special speaker series this year. In fact, the youth group is also meeting today socially distanced at a park to talk about this service opportunity, and to also have fun together!

All of our choirs will continue to make music this program year—not in the ways that feel familiar—but in ways that feel safe during a pandemic. And, more!

We haven't allowed this pandemic to stunt our spiritual and faith growth. We don't always know what we are doing at first and are at times stymied as if we are going in the right direction and that is OK. The Holy Spirit—she is moving in and through us—beckoning us forward in our faith growth—whispering to us, Bloom and Grow.