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Good morning, Beloved Church.

I'm a first-service person, and I recognize there a lot of people here today, and we -- you and I-- may not know each other. So let me introduce myself and tell you a bit about my connection to Mayflower.

The first year we were married, John and I bought a house on Park Avenue at 37<sup>th</sup> Street. We were refinishing the floors before moving in. My parents had come to help and we were taking a break, dusty and sweaty, sitting on the front porch of our first home. Two kind visitors showed up to welcome us to the neighborhood with a tin of chocolate chip cookies. We had a short and largely unmemorable chat. But at the bottom of the tin was a brief note that asked us to return the tin, "your friends from Mayflower Church." So, having had parents who instilled a significant sense of responsibility into me, we dutifully brought the tin back on a Sunday morning. And found there were more chocolate chip cookies after worship. And this began our journey with Mayflower.

At the time, I was a recently ordained minister, serving as a hospital and hospice chaplain. I later become an educator for Clinical Pastoral Education where I have the privilege of facilitating spiritual formation and professional development for seminarians and those in ministry as they care for hospital patients. It is an amazing privilege to be gifted with a vocation where my work is to empower and equip others, walking with them for a chapter as they discern their call, purpose, and gifting to become congregational ministers, chaplains, writers, professors, or take what they are learning about themselves back to their relationships and parenting. For some, this work has significant focus on discerning how they experience God at work in their lives. For others, they are searching for connections between meaning, purpose, giftedness, and passion, wanting to live into a life of integrity and meaning-making. However they name that process, I find it to be rich and rewarding work.

And sometimes, if I'm really honest, it is painful to be patient-- to let their process unfold, to live into my belief that the student is the center and actor in

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their own story, to stay in my role as facilitator, guide, teacher, while creating space for their own learning to unfold. My role is sometimes to serve as what Alice Miller calls the “enlightened witness”, helping them to understand themselves and name their history and wounds, integrating them, and making space for them imagine different possibilities.

This summer, the theme of “What’s In A Name” continues to build on the exploration and discernment process that this church has been living in and through. Maybe there have been some sessions or events or workshops that are part of your pondering. For me, it was this year’s Reader’s Theatre that spoke to me, both in real time during worship and in many moments and conversations since. I’ve been holding those stories in my heart. Stories which talk about “what Mayflower means to me.” Stories that talked about values and community, belonging and faith, worship and service, spiritual formation and healing. Stories of a people who remember the old building, the new building, the developments and changes and chapters in the life of this community: the communities of choir and youth groups and adult formation and social justice; changes in the worship space, staff and ministers, preschool, a house and a parking lot, and workforce housing--ministries and memories that bind people to this place and empower and equip them to be on the Jesus path in the world. Some of these are stories that live in my memory and experience as well. Each of you has your own stories about this people and place, and I’d like to share one of mine.

As I mentioned, I’ve been mulling over the Reader’s Theatre. As I listened to story after story, I felt my throat tightening and my heartbeat quickening. Something was stirring inside me. On the way out of the sanctuary, I shared with Sarah that not one of those stories was about living through a name change.

So you *now* know that we were new to the neighborhood, and in search of a church. I wish I could say we came because of Mayflower’s strong reputation in the community, but at the time, it really was the cookies delivered to our door that did it. Once in the pew, I experienced what felt like a homecoming.

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I'd been raised in progressive, social-justice orientated churches- first Methodist, then Community Presbyterian in Grand Rapids, Minnesota where I was ordained. I grew up with women in the pulpit and inclusive language. I remember in junior high telling the senior minister that I thought Jonah's whale wasn't literal, and he asked me "then what does the story mean?" I was gifted a book of Ted Loder prayers/poems for high school graduation by our associate pastor as she encouraged me to consider seminary. When we came into this community, I didn't squirm uncomfortably with something said or sung in worship; I felt at ease among people who were willing to be challenged by faith, people who were called to follow in the way of Jesus. We'd visited a dozen or more churches looking for a church home that fit us both, and this was the first place we agreed to return to a second time. And slowly that turned into this becoming our place.

Ten years later, Hannah baptized our first baby here at Easter Vigil, with a reception in the basement where our friends and family gathered with us. And several years later Ben was also baptized at Easter vigil. And a couple of years later, toddler Ben wandered away from us on an Easter morning, gazing up at Sarah as she preached, then settling himself under the communion table to listen. Our kids have been through OWLs classes here, because I want for them what I had from my church growing up. I want them to hear that they are wonderfully and complexly created, and that whatever that means, this is a place where they are welcome as they are and as they are becoming.

Which has become an extraordinarily important message in our house during the past few years. Five summers ago, my older kiddo and I were out swimming. It was one of those perfect lake days: 80 plus degrees and sunny. The water at this swimming hole was its usual incredibly clear blue, cold and deep. Out of nowhere my kiddo, then 10 years old, asks me, "what are names that can be used for either a boy or a girl?" And this began my inclusion into their journey where they recognized that the way we'd always known them was uncomfortable for them. They'd grown differently than we'd imagined, and they were giving voice to this in the best language they had.

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Now I have to tell you, we chose that child's name carefully, thoughtfully. We were ten years into marriage before we were pregnant with this baby. We chose a family name that was on both sides of our family tree. On my family side, it represented a feisty self-determined, strong women who bucked all kinds of norms. The woman I knew as my Great Aunt Caitlynn was Dr. Burns in her medical practice. She worked here in the Twin Cities, and in the Indian Reservations in Cass Lake and in Arizona, she was a pilot, flying herself between her jobs and her homes. She was an artist, and a tour guide. She and her sister built a home on Gunflint Lake. When she married in her late 30's, she kept her name-- except upon Gunflint where she was known as Katy Lush, Cliff's wife. She defined herself professionally as Dr. Burns and by her chosen name on the Gunflint trail - Katy Lush. She walked in both worlds, both conforming to and defining how the world called her and how she wanted to be known at different stages and ages of her life.

Bible stories about people and places having names changed are actually fairly common throughout scripture. They are often changed to be aspirational: this is who you will be-- or confirmational: this is now who you are. But what strikes me is that most often when people's names are changed, it is the one with power (God/king/pharaoh/Moses/ or Jesus who does the renaming. Rarely in scripture do people have the opportunity to rename themselves, to discern and claim a truth about themselves or imagine who they want to be. But in today's scripture reading, Naomi does just that. And she captivated me as I was reflecting on "what's in a name" and Bible stories.

The book is called Ruth, who is ultimately revealed to be the grandmother of Jesse. But even as a kid tucked away in my closet-fort reading this story, I knew it was the story of Naomi. Years later in college Hebrew class, our professor encouraged us to avoid translating Ruth, because it had such unusual feminine gender forms that we wouldn't need them unless we were going to be a Hebrew Bible Scholar. So you can imagine that made me all the more curious. Feminine verb forms and feminine gendered nouns? Sounds subversive. I'm in.

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And this tiny little book that is radical in so many ways: In the first 3 verses of the book, the narrator shifts from a male-centric context, to the story of women. Elimelech and his wife Naomi go from Bethlehem to Moab – they are immigrants. They have two sons. But then the father, now named by the narrator as the husband of Naomi, dies. Naomi, a woman who has almost no social standing in her society becomes the central character of the story, the primary architect of the lineage of King David.

This widow raises her boys. In the ten years that follow their father's death, they grow and marry Moabite wives. Naomi along with Orpah and Ruth experience the death of these two young men, sons and husbands. Her daughters-in-law are no longer legally or socially bound to her. Naomi, naming that they have been kind to her and may God be kind to them-- offers them a blessing and freedom. She encourages them to make the most of their lives and return to their mother's homes, and find new husbands in their homeland. Naomi, the widowed immigrant will return home to Judah, back to her own people and culture where her husband owned land in hopes of food and making a life where in Moab she will have no one. There is weeping between them, weeping that I imagine is the sound of love and broken hearts. Naomi convinces her daughter-in-law Orpah to go back to her parent's home.

But Ruth not so much. Ruth chooses life with her mother-in-law, including traveling to Judah where Ruth will become an immigrant. There is more weeping, and more love. And then this strange text becomes a central biblical text for the ritual of marriage: the choice to bind oneself to another, "where you go I will go." Ruth chooses her family, and it is Naomi--whether out of love or desperation (who knows?), but these two women are now a family. Naomi returns home, taking Ruth with her. The story tells us all of Bethlehem is excited to have Naomi home. But Naomi declares, "Please, don't call me Naomi- call me Mara, for God has dealt very bitterly with me. She continues with her lament and complaint against God. End of Act 1.

Now I know it is easy to go on with the rest of the story in your mind, but I want to stop and linger here. Take a moment. Can you recall a time in your life

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when, in the moment, your life had come off the rails? A divorce, a death, a job loss, a miscarriage, a loss of a dream, a lost home, a lost future, a devastation? “Don’t call me Naomi, call me Mara” she says, “for God has dealt very bitterly with me.” Can we sit with Mara in this moment- sit with the way she names herself and her reality? She has lost her husband, her sons, a daughter-in-law, an adopted home, and is returning to the land of her birth in Judah. Her life is not what she’d had, or hoped for, and without much prospect of a future without a son. The temptation is to move forward into how it all resolves according to the writer, because we’ve read it. But that is not this woman’s perspective or heart. She is bereft. The primary social identifiers of her day (and really, of ours too) are gone. She is no longer a wife, she is no longer a mother, she has no home, even in her own homeland. And she asks to be called by a name that aligns with this new reality.

Now here’s where if this was the book of Job, best mates would step in and give all kinds of cheer-up, look on the bright side advice. Thankfully this is the book of Ruth, and it just hangs there, the chapter ending with, “So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her... and they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.” As with any good author there is foreshadowing in that last line before the curtain falls on the scene. But there is also a tell. The narrator and Boaz and the women of Judah do not honor Naomi’s request for a new name, continuing to call her Naomi. And I am left wondering about that. How it felt for this woman who had seemingly lost everything to also have this one request about how she wanted to be known from here on ignored or denied.

Return with me to my own memory. Shortly after that day swimming, my older child who was on a journey to find themselves, the kiddo I knew as my daughter – with age appropriate nicknames tried out in different iterations of becoming-- asked us to call them Alex and to use they/them pronouns. Part of me was silent and sad, not knowing how to hold what I felt as I felt my stomach and throat tightening, and tears rising. My delightful, funny, quick-witted, strong-willed kid was trying to tell me more about who they are and how they want to be known.

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I want my kids to be who they are, to grow fully into that and claim it, and I want to celebrate that! And I recognized that I also felt the loss of how I imagined they would grow and become-- a different path-- a harder path than I imagined. And part of me is afraid, knowing the experiences and statistics of my queer friends and students who have struggled with safety and belonging because of the world we live in. The complexity of my own feelings—that is my work, and mine to hold.

So in that moment I took a deep breath and tried to stay curious and to learn from my unfolding child. I leaned in and asked, “Tell me more about how you chose Alex.”

I wish it was just that simple. But here’s how I’m like the narrator in Ruth. It was hard work to embrace and use a new name for this beloved child. At least at first. I had to practice. I talked to our dog about Alex and used a name and pronouns that felt like learning a new language- clunky and mistakes and lots of apologies. I talked with my friends and my co-workers, and I bumbled, and they bumbled, and eventually I learned to correct myself, and then gently say Alex’s name or pronouns when others missed them. So that I could use the right name and pronouns consistently in the places where I needed to show up for Alex-- at their school and in their medical care and now with a first job.

During Covid and on-line school Alex asked the school to change their name. The school contacted us, “if we change it on the screens, everyone will know. Is that what you want?” So we asked. Alex responded in typical Alex fashion, “Isn’t that the point of being out?”

This spring we changed Alex’s name with the court. We requested an in-person hearing, wanting to gather with some of our beloved people to acknowledge this significant moment together. Grandmother and aunt and beloved friends came to support Alex and his parents as we formally petitioned for a name change. The judge was both somber and hospitable. When the judge asked about the reason for the name change, he then reflected back what he had heard. He paused and thoughtfully asked, “So am I to presume this is to confirm the way life is already being lived?” I stopped

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breathing for a moment and tears sprang up in my eyes, “yes—yes, I wanted to shout! You see Alex for who he is!” Instead I nodded, and the judge reminded me that a verbal response was needed. “Yes, your Honor.” And in my heart I hugged these words and held them close: “This is to confirm the way life is being lived.”

The tenderness, sensitivity and honoring of my kiddo in that moment melted my heart. I thought it was probably inappropriate to spring out of my seat and hug and kiss the judge, but I sure wanted to. And because my parents raised me with responsibility and duty, I stayed in my seat. But I wish I hadn’t. I wish I’d told the judge how much I loved him for gently and wisely seeing my kid in that moment, with a loving and generous heart.

Beloved Church, I wonder... I wonder what name expresses who we are and who we are becoming? What is a name that is spacious and invitational? What name reflects our aspirations, and confirms who God calls this church to be in the next generations? What name might roll off our tongue as a ritual that brings us to worship? I wonder....

[sing- last verse of opening hymn]

“Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard.

And loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the word.

Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith, and songs of grace

Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Charge/Benediction:

On the other side of this discernment process, here is my prayer, Beloved Church: May we have an enlightened witness or a wise judge who can name back to us someday: “Am I to presume this is to confirm the way life is already being lived in this community of faith?”