

WE WERE
SPIRITUAL
REFUGEES

a story to help you believe in **CHURCH**

KATIE HAYS

Foreword by Doug Pagitt

CHAPTER 2

Year One

Getting Our Shit Together

#firstyear, #firsttime

One time we were taking a big group of people to Wild Goose, that leftward-leaning, hippie-dippie, Jesus-loving justice festival in North Carolina. Our musician was scheduled to play a couple of times; our church was leading worship under one of the tents; we were taking a big support team. But the main thing was, we were camping. And it turns out, our musician knew *nada* about camping. “Can you borrow a cot?” I suggested. “What’s a cot?” he asked in all sincerity.

That story got repeated with much hilarity because this musician was weirdly and endearingly inexperienced in many things: a novice among some very, um, let’s say, “worldly-wise” church people. One of our snarkier friends implored, “Oh, you must document this experience with photos of everything awkward that happens. And use the hashtag #Paulsfirsttime.” It wasn’t nice, but it was funny. So we shortened it to #firsttime and found it to be one of the most useful designations ever.

Galileo is all about #firsttimes of all kinds, for lots of us. Year one was chock-full of them. Just about everything I did that whole year was a #firsttime—not because two decades of traditional church work didn’t teach me anything, but because there was so frickin’ much more to learn. The world is a big place, and God has in mind that the church’s

imagination should sort of e-x-p-a-n-d to explore it. Doing the same things again and again, approximately fifty-two times a year, isn’t all there is to ministry, as it turns out.

But it wasn’t just me. I was working with some young adults who hadn’t had a lot of chances to do stuff yet. Like Malcolm, Galileo’s first president, who couldn’t sign Galileo’s papers of incorporation for the state of Texas until he turned twenty-one. Like our first treasurer, managing more money than she’d ever seen in her life and who, as it turns out, didn’t know every single thing needed to write payroll and keep the IRS happy. (Do you? Don’t judge.) Like the people we were asking to host small groups in their homes and apartments, in many cases their first home away from their parents’ homes. (We bought thrift-store dishes and folding chairs for some of them so they could feed everyone at the same time.) Like the people we were asking to lead Bible studies or write liturgy or use their voice in worship or plan parties.

In year one we wrote our first policy (“The Big-Ass Check Fund Policy”! It was a good one!), made and canceled our first rental contract, hired and fired our first musicians, wrote and pledged our first covenant of co-conspiracy, drank our first Bible & Beer, delivered our first Cookie Evangelism. It was a big year.

But the #firsttimes more important than the mechanics of church start-up were these: the people who were coming into my life seeking something beautiful, something trustworthy, something healing. Some of them were coming out as LGBTQ+ for the first time. Some of them were out everywhere *but* church and wondering whether church could really be a place for their whole selves. Some of them were moving away from painful pasts, painful churches, painful families, hoping to find softness for this present moment and hope for the next moments. Some of them were

families, 'rents and sibs, of LGBTQ+ people who were no longer willing to be part of anything that excluded their beloveds. "I just want to be part of a church where my son could come if he ever decides to come home," one woman told me.

Some of them were trying on new identities for the #firsttime in the safety of this shelter we were building together. Nathan brought a duffel bag to worship every week for months, going into the bathroom to change into the femme clothes he-becoming-she loved most, existing in that genderqueer space for ninety minutes of worship, then going back to the bathroom, changing back to "regular" clothes before going home to her campus. Lesbian and gay couples who were ultracareful not to show public affection to their partner or spouse (because in Texas that can get you hurt) were experiencing their first opportunities to hold hands and snuggle—in church! One of my favorite preworship activities is to watch the entrance door from a distance, just close enough to see people's neck and shoulders relax when they come in the door and realize that here they are safe and seen and loved for their whole selves, many of them for the #firsttime.

Galileo has given a lot of people their #firsttime feeling like God's love is the realest thing in the world despite all appearances to the contrary.

There were #firsttimes happening in my life too. One day in October 2013 I encountered my husband in the dual-sink, heteronormative master bathroom of our neat suburban home. (Come on, one sink was several inches lower than the other. It stereotypically screamed male and female.) It was the morning of the #firsttime Galileo was going to be a part of Tarrant County Pride—we were going to walk in the Pride parade and host a booth at the Pride festival and just be as Pride as we could be. I had even ordered a cheap, nylon, rainbow-striped flag for someone to carry and wave in swoopy figure-eights like those French revolutionaries in *Les Mis*

("Can you hear the people sing?" How are you not singing right now?). I had never been to any kind of Pride anything. I didn't know what to Pride expect.

Lance (husband, twenty-seven years as of this writing, most of which we're proud of) was brushing his teeth at his sink, and I at my slightly lower one, both of us wearing brightly colored Galileo T-shirts, both of us contemplative about what we were about to do. Our eyes caught each other's in the mirror. "Oh, honey," my reflection said to his, "we are not where we started." (Keep in mind we both grew up in fundagelical Christianity. We didn't know from gay.) "No, we are not," he agreed. *Brush, brush, brush, spit.* "Thanks be to God?" I asked his reflection, searching. And God bless him, my spouse nodded his head with all the seriousness the question required. "Thanks be to God," he confirmed.

You never forget your #firsttime.

Excursus: Our First-Ever Policy

Policy for receiving large, non-repeating, financial gifts

aka "Big Ass Check Fund"

Galileo Church • approved by Leadership Team • September 2014

Because the people of our generous God can be extraordinarily generous, Galileo Church occasionally receives large financial gifts. The leadership team has discerned that such gifts can be reserved for our future life together, according to the following guidelines:

1. Financial gifts that are large and non-repeating will be routed into a Big Ass Check Fund.

a. A "large" financial gift is a single gift that totals more than 2% of our operating budget in the year in which we receive it. (That means gifts over \$3,200 for 2014–15.)

b. "Non-repeating" means that we're mostly certain that the gift won't reoccur as a regular or semi-regular tithe or offering.

c. The Big Ass Check Fund is not a separate bank account; but it is delineated in our

and thousands. I like to imagine them held by magnets to refrigerators all over DFW.

There was one more preparatory step we needed to take, and it was the hardest of all. Since announcing that Galileo was going to become “a real church,” our group had slimmed down to twelve adults, two of whom were my spouse and me. And while twelve is a terrific size for a small group of people doing life together, it does not leave any room for newcomers. We had spent every Thursday night together for so long, but now we needed to divide up to make space “for the people who aren’t here yet,” as we often said. Cellular mitosis in service of anticipated growth, see? We aimed for half-and-half, but our six-and-six plan didn’t work out exactly right, and pretty soon we were more like eight-and-four, one group meeting at Kayla and Danny’s house and one group in my living room. But that website went up, and Google did its magic, and it wasn’t too long before both groups were full again. People were hungry, and we had food. People were curious, and we were findable.

Seek and Ye Shall Find, Online Edition (Summer 2013)

How do spiritual refugees find a church they’re willing to take a chance on? How does a risk-worthy church make itself findable? I’ve got two words for you: *The Internet*. But then I’ve got two more words for you: *go. outside*. Turns out, it’s a delicious cocktail of virtual presence and IRL.

Here’s what Galileo Church did: We paid good money for a fabulous website that we crammed with clues to our ethos. We maniacally Facebooked for Jesus (and added Twitter and Instagram when the time was right). And we did church in public as much as we could. Why am I using past tense verbs? We still do all those things.

First, virtually.

Our website is up-to-date but stays mostly static with long-term descriptions of our way of being together. It answers the question, What kind of church is Galileo? and demonstrates our commitment to transparency by including links to job descriptions, annual budgets, and policy documents. Eventually we added recordings of every sermon preached in our Sunday worship, even the really terrible ones (hey, Sundays whiz by like telephone poles on the interstate, and not every sermon can be the GOAT), and later a dedicated Galileo-an started work on a searchable sermon index. The goal remains the same: to give the most wounded and reluctant spiritual refugees a fulsome opportunity to investigate who we are and what we’re committed to *being* before they have to take the risk of showing up in person. I cannot exaggerate the number of times first-time worshipers have told me, “I’ve spent the last six weeks (or six months) reading every single thing on your website.” Photos of people and places are important; newcomers often recognize our servant leaders before being formally introduced and know the layout of our worship space before they walk in the door.

Our social media presence is punchy and pervasive. We announce what we’re going to do across several platforms, then live-tweet and post photos *while* we’re doing it, and then post photos to show what *already* happened. It’s a little hit-and-miss, but that’s our goal. We encourage lots of sharing, retweeting, whatever. We’re careful *not* to tag people in photos, because not everybody is out (as LGBTQ+ or as a Christian!) to all their social-media friends. We’re snarky and self-critical, not too polished, not very cool. We’re trying to be as real as we can be in an arena that mostly celebrates life’s greatest hits and most polarizing opinions. We pass along resources (i.e., share links, repost, retweet) that are relevant to our missional priorities, which means we leave a lot of stuff out. I know there

are people who check in to our Facebook page on the regular because they want to know what Galileo is thinking about, not just what we're doing locally.

It remains true that whenever a person walks in the door of the church, their friends and family, coworkers and neighbors, people who populate their lives that you have yet to meet are trailing invisibly behind them. But it's even more true that whenever a person "likes" or shares a Galileo Church post or tweet or photo, there's a galaxy of connections forming in microseconds. And all that goodness we're putting out into the world is available whenever the Spirit moves some sad soul to click around online—in the middle of the night, on a Saturday afternoon, times that the church and its pastor are usually not available for quizzing.

Indeed, the round-the-clock nature of online communication was the best and the worst thing that ever happened to this pastor and this church. I'll tell you the worst part soon enough. But trust me when I say Galileo Church would not exist today without a strong online presence. "Where are all the young adults?" I hear traditional churchgoers worrying. The answer is not hard: they are online. Get in there, church.

Postscript: While I'm writing this section, here in 2018, I'm watching a conversation unfold in Galileo Church's Facebook group, where anybody who has been admitted to the group can post and comment. It's a space for lively conversation, silly jokes, prayer requests. We have a few guidelines for how to have appropriate conversations pinned to the top, and people mostly pay attention to those.

A woman we don't know at all has commented on an article I shared in the Facebook group this morning about a fundagelical pastor who has denounced "social justice" preaching as "evil." It's so ridiculous that it's

funny, and sometimes it feels good to laugh with relief about where we came from, celebrating our great escape from the bondage of mean, small-minded religiosity. This stranger has commented, "Preachers like him are why I will NEVER go to church again." My heart sinks. Who is this person? What is she doing in this Facebook group? I let it lie.

In a couple minutes, a relative newcomer to Galileo, whose spouse happens to be a distant cousin of this stranger, replies, "Hey M, I didn't know you were in this group! How are you?" And she continues:

If you'll allow me a moment of complete honesty, preachers like this are EXACTLY why I needed to find a group of people that were the antitheses of those beliefs. Because on one hand, my cynicism is completely in the "let's throw out all religion" camp, and on the other hand, I see a group of people coming together and doing good work. Whether people are coming together to do good work in the name of Jesus or Allah or Humanism or whatever, doesn't matter to me. I need to be around people doing good together.

This group, this church, this body of believers is essential for me to not drown in a pool of my own cynicism. This is essential for me to learn HOW to fight the good fight and hopefully learn to be a positive and constructive voice in the world.

I'm never going to change a law or debate one of these guys or make a huge difference in the world, but because of this group of people who love justice and also love Jesus, I've been able to have some really sweet and amazing and heartfelt conversations lately. People who were in the same boat as me, asked the same questions, felt the same discontent. And I can tell them, hey, they're not all like that.

And it's giving me a little more hope in the world.

The stranger doesn't miss a beat:

Hi K. I'm doing ok. I do agree that what I've seen so far of this group is a lot

more tolerant than what I've experienced during my church going days. These days, I see so much intolerance and victim blaming going on in the religious world. It's hard to explain in a public forum why I'm so distrusting of religious leaders and churches, as there are people who would be hurt deeply by what I have to say. Let's just say that the church I was raised in burned me and others so badly, that I am afraid to trust. That being said, what I have seen of this group is something different. Perhaps with time, trust will grow. I do like the fact that they are not anti-LGBTQ. That means something to me.

And our friend replies, "I'm still relatively new to Galileo, but from what I've seen so far, many of us would find your distrust and fear completely rational and many have experienced the same. I hope you find this group as refreshing as I do. [heart emoji]"

And the stranger says, "I hope so too."

I can see it happening, in real time, right down to the bouncing dot-dot-dot that means someone is typing. It fills me with wonder, this medium that allows vulnerable and potentially life-changing conversations to flourish. The G-person responding to her husband's cousin would never call herself an evangelist; she as much as says she's barely Christian herself. But she is a trustworthy witness for the reign of God that we preach and embody together. I stop to pray that the stranger who has trusted us to overhear that conversation will find her way to a community of belonging in Jesus's name. Might as well tell the truth—I hope she comes to Galileo. Like, soon. We definitely need her. Maybe she needs us too.

Get Out There, Church (Fall 2013)

Online presence, though, doesn't work by itself. Or maybe it could, but that's not what we did. We remembered that for much of the twentieth century, the mainline church's evangelistic method boiled down to "We

will be as nice as possible so that people will come to us, in here, and stay." That church isn't working in the twenty-first century, though, so we figured we'd try something different. What if *we* go to *them*?

In short order we found that we needed—like you didn't already guess it—a float. As in, a mobile expression of our ethos that we could tow behind my Subaru in parades. Galileo Church joyfully walks/rides/waves a rainbow flag in two parades a year, every year, without fail. I think we just walked in a clump, with posters and handouts, in the local, small-town Pickle Palooza festival parade that first year, as well as in the Tarrant County LGBTQ Pride parade. But soon thereafter we started commissioning float design and construction from among our own dedicated membership.

Let's just say the results were mixed. Our first float was comically craptastic, a hand-painted, blood-red sun with snaky voodoo rays on a painter's canvas affixed to some recycled PVC pipe. Let the reader understand: I/we adore the True Francine who made it pretty much by herself during an incredibly busy season. But when the parade marshal announced, "And here comes Galileo Church, quirky church for spiritual refugees, with their float, and isn't that, um, *interesting*!" I fell to the asphalt in a spasm of laughter. That did not stop us from using it again, though. A float is *so much better* than no float, and the True Francine gave us one. Thanks, Francine! Mwah!

The next year another friend took up the challenge. With some power tools and one of those stencil-cutting things, plus some actual money (an advantage over Francine's situation, for sure), she made something a little more presentable.

Third time is the charm. Mark and Ryan reinvested in new PVC; added spray paint, fabric, and plastic curtains of colorful ribbons. David G.

bought a Bluetooth speaker that blasts our LGBTQ+ soundtrack on repeat (Aretha's "Say a Little Prayer for You," Tomboy's "It's OK to Be Gay," etc.). The current iteration of Galileo's parade float still looks homemade because it is; it still says we have a sense of humor about ourselves and the silliness of parading down Main Street to say that we love Jesus and Jesus loves everybody.

Our three-phase float development is like a lot of things at Galileo and a lot of things in life: you have to try a lot of things you don't know how to do yet to learn how to do it better. So much of our life together has a story like this, of iterations that get progressively better, never perfect, always room for another bigger, better try. It's like the apostle somewhere says: "All of us . . . are being transformed . . . from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18). I'm sure the apostle didn't have parade floats in mind when he said it, and I doubt that *glorious* is the best adjective for describing even our latest efforts, but mostly we keep getting better at the stuff we keep trying.

Alongside our float, we also developed a set of stuff for setting up a booth wherever people would have us. Beginning with my card table and one of those trifold, science-fair cardboard displays, we rented space on college campuses and in town festivals. We have handed out approximately thirty-eight kazillion Starburst and Milky Way candies (get it? because we're Galileo? Astronomy!) along with the afore-described cards that say, "We are searching for you" with our URL at the bottom. We do our best to pick up the candy wrappers and discarded cards when we're finished at the end of those days. We discover that some of us are able to withstand the constant rejection, the inevitable homophobic/transphobic resistance, and the heat that come with booth-babe work, and some of us are not, and that's okay.

But here are a couple of reasons why we do it. First reason: Melissa. Second reason: Amber.

Melissa had just moved to Texas, a retired schoolteacher, divorced from a dude, two kids, barely out to herself as a lesbian, closeted everywhere else. Oh, and a devout Christian, so devout that she stayed with the abusive husband much longer than was rational on the advice of her fundagelical pastor. On her third or fourth day in our state, she attended her first ever Pride event and saw our float. (Iteration 2, I believe.) She came by our booth at the postparade festival and asked if we were really truly Christians. I said yes, we were sure trying. I asked if we could add her to our email list. She said no, thank you.

But later, in line for a beer, she saw a couple of our folks in their Galileo T-shirts that say on the back, "We are not the center of the universe." She asked about that. They were married, Caroline and Michala, and they introduced Melissa to Jill and Tricia, also married. She hung out with them for a little while that afternoon. That was Saturday.

On Sunday at 5 p.m., Melissa showed up for worship. "I met y'all at Pride yesterday," she said. We were a little skeptical and completely delighted because it doesn't usually work that quickly. But here she stays, and now we can't remember life without her. I cannot imagine my life without her. These days we call her "Lady Justice" because she keeps our church aware of policy issues and election seasons.

More often, it works like Amber. We plant our booth at the Student Activities Fair at the University of Texas at Arlington every fall and every spring, paying for that 10 × 10 space so we can set up our stuff (which, like our float situation, has improved vastly over time). One winter Amber showed up for worship and said, when I introduced myself, "Oh, I met you at the fair at UTA." I apologized profusely for not remembering; the fair

was the week before and I had met so many students and my late-forties brain does not hold names and faces like it used to. (That's a lie; I've never been great with names and faces.)

And she said, "Oh, not last week. Back in the . . . let's see . . . spring, I think, a couple of years ago? Remember, I said . . ."

It came back to me in a flood. "You said how done you were with the church, how badly it had hurt you, how hypocritical and mean it was, how useless and harmful it had been in your life. And I held your hands because you were crying, and then I was crying too, and I said how very sorry I was for all that hurt and how you had every right to be pissed off, even mad as hell, and how much our church would like to try to ease that pain, and you said no, thank you, and you ran off."

"Yeah," she said, shyly. "And I saw you there a few more times, last year, this year, and y'all just keep coming back. So I figured you were serious." And so, here is Amber, who helps on our ministry finance team with her almost-a-bachelor's degree in accounting. Recently, she posted a reflection in our Facebook group:

Hey, church. Today is my 4 year anniversary of the day I came out, and I am kind of astonished at the contrast in who I am today versus the person I was on this day four years ago. I was so unsure of myself and what I believed and who I was.

But you changed that.

Galileo has become my home, my family, and my heart. I have learned so much, met so many wonderful people, and gained so much confidence in myself since that troubling time in my life. The day I saw that big rainbow sign at the UTA Activities Fair that said "Gay and Christian? YAAAS!" my life was changed for the better.

But I didn't come to church right away. Then I even came a few times and

talked a lot with Katie, and then didn't come back for a long time. But you were patient. And you were always willing to accept me for who I am, even the noncommittal parts of myself.

It was your love and acceptance that taught me to love those who have a hard time accepting me. After church last Sunday, I was able to have a real talk with my dad for the first time in a very long time. Even though we still disagree on so much, the door is now open because you gave me the courage to open it.

I just want to thank every single person here for just being you. I'm not sure I would've made it without you, and that thought drives me every day to make sure others make it here, too. You are my heart, and I am so grateful to have you in my life.

Thanks for everything,

Amber

My point being, there are some spiritual refugees who have the gumption to do Sunday-by-Sunday church search until they find the exact right place, the exact right mixture of kindness and devotion and intellectual integrity to feed their spirit. Worry less about them; if they're meant to find you, they will come. But there are many, many more spiritual refugees who are drifting, drowning, weary and wary. They very well may not come to you for good reasons of their own. How far are you willing to go to get to them? And when you find them, or they you, will they trust that yours is a safe place to reveal their comically craptastic selves? And will they find sufficient help and patience to try out new iterations, new degrees of glory, the transformation that the Spirit of the living Christ can work? To the point: *Can people tell by your parade float the truth of that gospel?*

~~Bible, Beer, Integration, and Holding the Space (Fall 2013)~~

space we happen to be in.

And, dear bug, because you are trapped in my ecclesial web, let me say one more thing about that. For most of our church's life, we have set up and torn down the entire worship aesthetic every single Sunday. We arrive in the bar or the coffee shop or the pizza place patio or the theater, and we put it all together. We move chairs and tables, set up the prayer wall and the communion table, hang the lights, wire the sound, drape the rainbow flags, light the candles, arrange the toddler corral, lower the screen, set out our signs with giant arrows pointing to the entrance, and the people come, and suddenly there is a church where there was no church before.

A few hours later, after we've sung and played and prayed and preached and laughed and cursed and held each other tight and kept the faith, we take it all apart. Flags and candles and communion dishes go back into storage. Chairs get moved back into place for the regular customers. We shut the lights and lock the doors and call out one more time to make sure we haven't left anyone in the bathroom. The parking lot empties; the church scatters; we each carry a little bit of Jesus in our bodies back into the world God still loves.

"Where is your church?"

I don't know. They're all over the place. Where's yours?

Now Is the Time to Man Up (Spring 2014)

Back to Caroline. The problem was, we didn't have a baptistery. By this time we had moved from G-House (our first rented home) to the Farr Best Theatre in downtown Mansfield. This old, historic theater with a deep stage and red velvet seats bolted to the floor was not equipped for Disciples-style baptism, which requires full immersion for believers—in

other words, grown-ass people have to get their whole self completely under water.

A friend at another Disciples start-up told me they bought a three-hundred-gallon cattle trough that did the job just fine. I could find it at Tractor Supply not far from my house, but it was going to cost \$450, and that felt like a *lot*. I was scrolling through the Tractor Supply website one morning in algebra class (more on that later!) and D.J. reminded me to check Craig's List for a used one. *Voila!* The very trough we wanted, on a ranch east of Dallas, \$150 cash if you come get it before the weekend. (The lady we met out there was divorcing her husband, and I think she was selling all his stuff before he got back into town. Kinda shady, but good for us.)

But I didn't have a truck, and my hatchback was too narrow. I posted in the church's Facebook group, where Galileo people can post prayer requests or knock-knock jokes or whatever: "Anybody got a full-size truck I can drive to Dallas?" The only person who responded in the affirmative was S.

S was a teenaged kid who lived with their grandparents and sometimes got a ride to Galileo worship, after which I would give S a ride home. The first time I met S he was "Sam," a boy (we didn't know to ask for pronouns back then). But the next time S came around she was "Sarah," a girl. (Those aren't the real names S used, for S's privacy.) She told us that her grandparents kicked her out whenever she insisted on being Sam, so she was intermittently homeless. Additionally, there were parents and stepparents coming in and out of S's life, separately and unannounced, and an older brother who abused S every chance he got. S was surviving a hellish adolescence, and I felt glad that Galileo could be a little oasis of safety and friendship. (Yes, there were also issues of reporting the

endangerment of a minor, which I worked on, but this is a story about how S and Galileo connected.)

S said they had a truck we could borrow. I said great. We made an appointment for Wednesday afternoon. Then S texted to say that the truck wasn't actually S's, but S's granddad's. I said fine, tell Granddad thanks. S texted several hours later to say that S him/herself didn't have a driver's license, so I'd have to drive. I said terrific. Then S texted to say that Granddad wasn't going to let a stranger drive his truck, so Granddad would drive and I could follow behind in my car.

I had pledged gas and toll money for this trip, and it was going to be pricey, so I asked if I could just ride in the truck with Granddad and S. A few hours later: okay. So I show up at their house on Wednesday, ready to go. Granddad comes out and kicks the tires (of his own truck!), checks the oil, starts it up. Then he goes back in the house with S. A full ten minutes go by, and S comes out grinning. "Granddad says he likes you, and you can drive the truck. He's staying home."

So I clambered up into that beast, a dually Ford F-650 or something huge like that, and adjusted the seat. It was 4:30 p.m. We were headed straight into rush hour. Sam, who it turns out was being Sam that day, said, "It doesn't go very fast," as I tried to get it up to sixty-five on the interstate. With the pedal to the metal, it never got above fifty. Dallas commuters whizzed around us, shooting blessings with their middle fingers.

But the time was not wasted; on the way, Sam told me his life story, all fifteen or sixteen years of it. The divorces, the abuses, the homelessness, the gender dysphoria that made him feel insane and deeply sad. There was theft and drugs and sex for money; there was such pain that I blinked back tears and tried my best to keep the giant truck on the road. Sam kept

talking, pushing his voice into the lowest register he could find in his slight chest, until the story was all the way finished, right up to present day: finding Galileo Church on the Internet, making friends with me, cajoling Granddad into sharing the truck. Then Sam was quiet for a long time. So was I. After a minute I thanked Sam for trusting me with his story, with his one wild and precious life.

A few more minutes went by.

Sam said, "There's one more thing I didn't tell you. I can't believe I forgot."

I said, "Hit me."

Sam said, "It's big."

I said, "I can take it."

Sam said, "Also, I'm Mexican."

I don't know why it struck me as funny. I guess because alongside all the tragic disclosures of the day, Sam's Mexican American heritage was just so ordinary. But he delivered that news with heavy seriousness, and I tried to match his weighty delivery with a pastoral nod, furrowed brow. But there we were, on the east side of Dallas now, tooling along in this gigantic truck with cars racing by, and I started to laugh. Like, the kind of hysterical laughter that turns to crying real fast, and then there's snot and snorting and apologies through the tears. "Sam, I'm sorry," I laugh-cried. "Your story is so important to me. I just didn't expect 'Mexican' to be one of the things you felt you needed to share."

Then Sam started laughing too. And we laughed together all the way to that lady's ranch, until she pointed to the pasture in the distance and told us to go for it. There was no one around to help us load that trough, and Sam was not five feet tall on his tallest day. This was going to be fun.

When we managed to get one end of the filthy, weathered trough leaning against the open truck bed, I said, “Sam, we’ll have to do this part together. On the count of three, we’ll both lift and push this thing up and forward into the truck, okay? One . . . two . . . three!” And I lifted and pushed, and nothing happened. I peered across the trough at Sam, looking small and stricken. “I can’t,” he moaned. “I’ve got little girl hands. I’m too weak.”

We were now two hours into this excursion, with at least two hours to go, and I’d already handed over \$150 cash to the Craig’s lister. I said, “Sam, there are moments when we have to summon strength beyond ourselves. Moments we have to muster every bit of power we’ve ever imagined having. Sam, I’m telling you, now is the time to *man up*. One . . . two . . . *three!*”

Judge me if you want; I judge myself all the time. I realize it’s inappropriate to tell a young trans kid to “man up.” It may be inappropriate to tell anyone, ever, to “man up.” All I know is, I needed that trough. Caroline was in love with Jesus, remember?

That conversation with S, and my whole relationship with S, exemplifies how Galileo Church became a safe place to transgress the bounds of propriety, occasionally, for the sake of relationship. Sharing laughter around S’s pronouns and “little girl hands” and completely unexpected “confession” of Mexican heritage—and equal laughter around my awkwardness with the granddad, and how I could barely reach the pedals of that humongous truck, and the truly filthy cattle trough in which we were going to baptize Caroline into her brand-new life—it was how we were building trust, forming community, learning how to love each other.

We have developed an ethos of care with language—us cisgender folks naming our pronouns, for example, whenever we go to the mic in worship,

so that everyone feels free to name their pronouns—but not so much care that we stop laughing at our mistakes and peculiarities. If Wanda, who is trans, not in the expensive body-altering Caitlin Jenner way but in the “Now that I’m fifty-five I’ll wear sundresses and take estrogen if I want to” way, takes off her wig during a summer worship service when the AC isn’t working, revealing her male pattern baldness, and proceeds to *fan herself with the wig*, it’s okay to laugh. Nobody, including Wanda, is trying to pretend that’s not funny, all this working out of identity and language and practice and just *being human*. Humans are fucking hilarious. We take after God that way.

I wish I didn’t have to report that Galileo’s relationship with S didn’t end all that well. S was one of those people who pushes everybody’s buttons, saying mean things on social media, asking for stuff we didn’t have to give and becoming furious when we didn’t give it, spreading their misery around. I stuck with S for a long time, enjoying one last long afternoon together on an Ash Wednesday, burning last year’s palm branches in my driveway to make ashes for the service that night. We laughed a lot that afternoon, remembering the truck and the trough and me laughing so hard I snorted Diet Coke out of my nose.

But soon S turned on us again, in a middle-of-the-night Facebook rant, warning people to stay away from @GalileoChurch because we were dangerous. I no longer remember the specific accusations, but I remember confessing shamefacedly to the church leaders that I was not going to pursue S anymore. I was disengaging, online and IRL, after months of exhausting dysfunction between S and the church, between S and me. “Oh, thank God,” one of them said. “You were the last person left who actually liked S.”

Which was exactly true. I did like S and strangely still do. If S showed

up right now, I'd ask what name they're going by and which pronouns, and if they need something to eat and if they need a ride home, if there's a home these days. I trust God is still looking after that one wild and precious life, just like God looks after mine.

Oh, and we got a killer baptistery out of that deal. Cheap.

Frankenstein Baptistery (Spring 2014)

D.J. calls it the Frankenstein baptistery. Here's what we've got:

- one Rubbermaid Structural Foam Stock Tank, three-hundred-gallon capacity
- one tankless water heater, propane powered, intended for wall mount in a fishing cabin or some such
- two long water hoses
- two big pieces of pink foam board insulation
- one electric pump of the kind for emptying your *huge* aquarium or clearing the water out of your basement after a mild flood.

At first, the "stock tank" lived in my backyard, killing the grass under it in a five-foot diameter circle. We could haul it to the theater in a borrowed truck and put it outside, behind the theater on a little concrete patio just off the street. We hooked up one hose to a spigot around the corner and ran it to the tankless water heater, which we attached with bungee cords to a little metal fence. The propane tank fueled the heater, which ran water through its warm coils before spilling it, through the second hose, into the baptistery. It took several hours to fill this way. If we put the foam board over it like a lid, the water would stay warm for a couple of hours. After a baptism, we could drain much of the water into the street and use the

pump to empty the trough completely. Not exactly efficient but quite serviceable.

For Caroline's baptism on Easter Day 2014, D.J. was in charge of that whole operation. He hooked it all up, sat on the theater's back patio consuming cold beverages, and watched the water rise. We worshiped inside at 5 p.m., raising our alleluias and singing exultant songs. At the appointed time, everybody got up from their red-velvet seats, climbed the stairs to the stage, scrambled through the heavy velvet curtains to the cluttered backstage, and spilled out the back door. Caroline wore shorts over her bathing suit. Michala and I rolled up our pant legs and sat on opposite edges of the trough with our feet and shins in the water, with Caroline sitting down in the water between us.

I don't remember exactly what I said that day, but over time the baptismal formula at Galileo Church has evolved to this:

Do you confess that Jesus was the embodiment of God's logic (logos) among us, and that through his life and death and resurrection, God's own will for the salvation of the world God loves, and your salvation, too, has been accomplished? [Yes.]

We baptize you for the forgiveness of self-interest and self-reliance past,
and for the empowerment of God's Spirit for your future,
and into the worldwide family of God in the present,
in the name of our Mother-Father God
and our Brother-Savior Jesus
and the Spirit of the living Christ.

And then—splash! whoosh! Caroline lies down under the warm water, then does a heroic sit-up with our help, and a child of God is reborn to beautiful, abundant, ongoing life. Everybody cheers. We laugh. We sing a

than most folks' brains do. We think the spike at Galileo in numbers of people with mental health diagnoses and neurodiverse persons came about because of priorities one and four on our list. In declaring ourselves advocates for LGBTQ+ justice, we telegraphed our intention to celebrate the fullness of anyone's humanity. And in practicing "no bullshit, ever," we made safe and brave space for people to be whoever God made them to be, including people who tended toward depression or anxiety or landed on the autism spectrum, or had Down syndrome or Tourette's or OCD, or any other thing that would make it hard to participate in churches where everyone pretends to be "normal," whatever that is. No pretending at Galileo.

So after another year or so, we developed a new priority two, not as succinct as the first one but more attentive to who we were becoming:

2. We do kindness for people with mental illness or in emotional distress, and we celebrate neurodiversity.

Our missional priorities help us decide what to do as a church and what not to do. There are a million possibilities for joining God's work in the world; we're so glad that other churches are working on other missional priorities. And while ours serve us well for now, giving us clarity about next steps, we hold them lightly, knowing that God may have other plans for us at some point.

Here's something I didn't expect: we don't usually get the luxury of working on just one missional priority at a time. They get all tangled up and ask us to pay close attention to the complicated little miracle that is about to be born. Like the time Wanda posted in our FB group, "Anybody got an enema bottle I can borrow?" And she described her efforts to find one large enough, the smaller ones being too hard to work with. It was a

lot. Unusually, nobody chimed in on the FB post right away. I waited and watched, and finally commented: "I can honestly say that this is the strangest request we've had in this group! And also, that you and your small intestine are so loved, Wanda. I truly hope it all comes out okay. (See what I did there?) Love, for real."

It turns out that our Wanda had, before we knew her, experienced a painful and dangerous small-bowel obstruction that left her truly afraid of it happening again. Her request was not just for medical equipment; it was for comfort, even at the risk of embarrassing herself. (*We do kindness for people in emotional distress . . .*) Wanda is trans and happily part of a church that advocates for her right to exist and have health care and feel well. (*We do justice for LGBTQ+ people . . .*) She needed an enema and said so. (*We do real relationship, no bullshit, ever . . .*) And the slow tide of sympathetic comments that rose on that FB post was a lovely outpouring for a woman who is precious to us, created as she is in the image of God. (*We do beauty for our God Who Is Beautiful . . .*)

I'm saying, it's not exactly how we thought our missional priorities would play out in church life. It's not what we *planned*. But having given ourselves over to those priorities, we find that God makes up stuff for us to do. God knows how hungry we are to be useful and how good it feels to be needed.

And in case you were wondering, Wanda is fine. Everything came out A-OK.

About That Queer Thing

Here's what I knew when we started: when millennials are asked why they aren't at church, one of the things they say is, "I don't want to go any place that all my friends can't come." They are unwilling to make anybody else a

refugee, even if it means becoming a refugee themselves. Ain't that a kick in the pants? (To check my research, look for Robert Wuthnow's *After the Baby Boomers* and the Barna Group's data in David Kinnaman's *unChristian* and *You Lost Me*.)

Therefore, to reach the spiritual refugees among a generation that was already important to me, Galileo Church would need to be clear from the outset about LGBTQ+ inclusion. I had served churches that were explicitly exclusive, and I had served churches that were of the more subtly bigoted "don't ask, don't tell" variety. I had tried moving the needle on that at one church that said, basically, "We'll be nice to them, but we never want to talk about it, ever." Being firmly convinced in my own mind and spirit that LGBTQ+ people are created in God's image and beloved by God's heart, I did not want to get stuck in the hush-hush indecision that would make LGBTQ+ people and the people who loved them *guess* how welcome they truly were at our church. I asked the start-up team, a bunch of het-cis folks, all of them married except for Malcolm, if it was okay to proceed with LGBTQ+ inclusion as a fundamental commitment. They were genuinely surprised I asked. Eyebrows went up. "Of course," they said, as if to a small child who has asked if it's okay to breathe the air.

In our worship exploration during those first several months, we had shared an experience that doubtless emboldened our willingness to be explicit about that welcome. We heard of a little start-up church in Denton, a university town north of Fort Worth, that met in a gay bar. Not the fancy-schmancy kind like you find in Dallas, but a hard-core, gritty place with buzzing neon and dark corners and a cloud of cigarette smoke hovering around the front door. The bar was called Mable Peabody's Beauty Parlor and Chain Saw Repair, and the church meeting there on Sunday mornings was called—wait for it—The Church at Mable Peabody's Beauty Parlor and

Chain Saw Repair, the Rev. (now Dr.) Jeff Hood presiding.

I called up Jeff and asked if we could come over, a bunch of clean-cut, white, straight students and suburbanites. Probably subconsciously I was asking if we would be safe there? And he said, "Sure, you can come, but it's best if you come to the bar on Friday night to get to know some people." His church was doing some karaoke or something on Friday, and we'd be welcome to come have a beer, and then when we came on Sunday we'd be less like lookie-loo tourists and more like worshipers. I understand that even more now—Galileo gets tourists all the time, and while I used to be excited about each and every newcomer, I now understand that some folks come to observe us, not to engage the Deity who meets us there. Which is fine. We've been tourists before too.

So we piled in my car on Friday night and drove to Denton. (Traffic, ugh. I-35.) And y'all, that bar was rough. People passed out in the booths. People of indeterminate gender dancing alone, feeling no pain. Couples (more than couples?) making out against the wall. No bouncer, but a bartender who looked like she could bounce anybody she damn well pleased and who took very good care of our silly selves that night. We drank politely, getting no attention from Jeff (appropriately) while he tended to church folks who were also bar patrons and vice versa. When we decided to leave, he was still going strong, listening and commiserating and laughing with anyone who needed his ear. We were like scribes and Pharisees, the VRPs (very religious persons), getting no love from Jesus if there were sex workers or tax collectors anywhere in proximity.

We came back on Sunday morning expecting to be surprised by how the bar would transform into a sacred space. But the cloud of cigarette smoke had not dissipated, and the lights were not any brighter, and some of the folks who were there on Friday night had not gone home in the meantime,

I swear. Everything smelled, um, exactly the same. When we walked into the room where worship would be held, the only visible change was a six-foot-by-eight-foot plywood sign, painted in broad strokes as if with house paint, announcing, “JESUS IS QUEER.” Jeff would later do a doctoral project in queer theology, exploring the queerness of God as one who finds Godself othered, rejected, and persecuted by mainstream society because God will not conform to mainstream expectations. Sounds pretty queer to me.

I said before that we experienced some pretty crappy worship during our explorations, but this was not one of those times. Jeff is a weird dude, and everything about that worship service was weird, but it was the most gorgeous weird I had ever seen. He gave a sermon during which he lay in a fetal position on the (filthy) floor at one point, in his alb, to embody the story he was telling about Jesus and Nicodemus, each of them trying to figure out what it’s like to be born again, anew. While he preached, his wife painted on a large canvas from buckets of house paint, with wide brushes, his words giving shape to her strokes, until a fascinating, enigmatic portrait of pregnancy and birth and light emerged.

We sang with a shy black woman whose guitar sounded cheap and thin, but oh! when she sang! During communion she quietly warbled endless verses of “We Shall Overcome,” the rest of us joining in when we could. Each worshiper came forward to meet Jeff before getting to the bread and wine. He held each one’s head in his hands, made significant eye contact, and said, “This God, this gift, this grace, is *for you*.” I think he might have kissed my head. I would not have minded. We ate and drank. Sang some more. “Deep in my heart, I do believe / We shall overcome some day.” It was a day more sacred than any we had experienced in a long time.

And I think that’s when we knew. We knew that it would not be enough

to be *nice* to gay people. We knew that people who have been pushed to the fringes of society, kicked out of church, left out of their families, stepped on, turned out, talked about, put down, and in every other way shit on did not need a nice church to be nice to them. Galileo Church didn’t have to be Mable Peabody’s, and I didn’t have to be Jeff Hood, but we felt ourselves sli-i-i-iding significantly in that direction, out to the margins, beyond the bounds of propriety, that day in Denton.

Right around the same time that summer, my spouse and I traveled with Erin and Joel to the Wild Goose Festival in North Carolina. That year there was a talk listed in the program: “How Queers Are Saving the Church.” And of course I went because I didn’t get that at all. Until I heard this gay Episcopal priest talk about how seriously insulting and outright vacuous it was for straight churches to offer “welcome” to queer people. “Oh, no, honey,” he said. “What you need to understand is, queers have what the dying North American church needs. We’re closer to Jesus than you can imagine because Jesus has always been out here with us losers, all the rejects from your respectable churches. Queers know more about getting real with God than straight people can fathom. And we have a killer sense of style, and frankly your churches are looking stale.” I mean, that was his talk in a nutshell. I could have listened to him all day.

Are you sensing that the summer of 2013 was a big one for me, spiritually and ecclesially? Because, yeah. World turned upside down.

So, practically speaking, it was pretty simple to get Galileo registered with gaychurch.org. I had heard from a seeker who found us online that Roger Wolsey’s book *Kissing Fish* advises young adults who are looking for a progressive, science-friendly church to check out gaychurch.org because any church who’s bothered to register there is not advocating six-day creation or a six-thousand-year-old earth. We were vetted somewhat by

that website—I seem to remember a phone call, but that couldn't be right—and then there we were, right there on gaychurch.org, declaring ourselves open for business and open to all people, just waiting for someone to Google “gay church 76063.”

It was less easy to get our denominational *bona fides*. The “open and affirming” ministry of the Disciples of Christ has a process for achieving O&A status, which involves congregational studies and guided conversations and (shudder) *voting*, with minutes produced to show that you've done all these things over a sufficient period of time. But we were in more of a hurry than that and couldn't ever imagine studying and deliberating for months about the basic dignity and inclusion afforded all people by God's own Self. So I called up the director of that ministry and said, “A church like Galileo is never gonna make it if we have to go that route. Couldn't you just believe these youngsters? This is what's in their heart. Plus, we've already bought a rainbow flag.” He sighed and said okay. I think the sigh was the same sigh I get from a lot of Now Church loyalists who can tell we're onto something but can't quite make it fit their time-tested processes. I feel them. And I'm so grateful when they're willing to let us do it the Next Church way.

From there it wasn't long before we were welcoming queer people of all kinds—including many for whom the rainbow letters in L-G-B-T don't apply. We became bolder about using *queer* as a catch all for all the ways people don't quite fit. We stopped short of a house-paint sign declaring Jesus's own queerness—the landlord church might have imploded if they'd seen such—but we got clear about the welcome we were sharing.

That is to say, we got clear about the welcome that all of us had received, the same, from God Who is the Welcomer. We became suspicious of declaring that “we” welcome “them,” no matter who “they” may be,

influenced by Jacques Derrida's brilliant little riff on the similarities between *hospitality* and *hostility*, hospitality being that “virtue” that preserves power for the host and keeps the guest on their toes. Sometimes we say, in our opening for worship, that “All are welcome here—not because we are so nice, because we're not actually all that nice, but because God is good, and God welcomes all of us to God's heart just the same.”

So, listen. This book about Galileo Church is not really very much about the queerness of it all, at least in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Yes, we have hung multicolored flags for trans people and genderqueer people and bi people and whatever else—I lose track—around our worship space, signaling that this space is safe for you to be your whole, beautiful self. We are attentive to queer interpretations of familiar Bible stories, and we substitute gender-neutral language in our hymns. We each say our pronouns when we get to the microphone, for the first or fiftieth time. We've married gay couples and blessed babies born to same-sex parents. We've baptized trans folks in the same trough we use for cisgender people. That's all true.

But it makes me a little cranky when people of a certain age ask me, as they sometimes do, *sotto voce*, wanting a private convo, straight person to straight person, “So, uh, how many of your folks are, uh, you know . . . ?” If I'm feeling my oats I'll play dumb and make them ask more explicitly. But usually I just tell the truth with a shrug: “I dunno. I haven't really counted.” It's not the same as “I don't see LGBTQ+”; it's just a recognition that here, in this space, we are doing so much more than that. We're living into that Ephesians 2 thing, where buff Jesus uses his cross like a sledgehammer to demolish the dividing wall between us.

I like to think we'd be “doing justice for LGBTQ+ people” even if there were no actual LGBTQ+ people in attendance, but I don't know if that's

true. I really hope they stick around; this church is no church without them, and I am no Christian without them.

Excursus: "Samaritans in the Gayborhood" (Sermon Preached at the Wild Goose Festival, Summer 2015)

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead."

"Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side."

"So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side."

"But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him."

"The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37)

The lawyer is good with all that talk about love. The lawyer just wants to know, "How far do I have to take this thing? Because I was born to help people, Jesus. When they have a problem, they come to me. I've got answers; I've got solutions; I've got resources to share. But if I get spread too thin, I'm no help to anyone. Give me a measure. Give me a rule. Because I was born to help people, within the reasonable limits of my proximate neighborly obligation. How far does this thing go?" Or, in the ever more succinct rendering

from Luke, "And who is my neighbor?"

The curtain opens on a motionless body, mostly obscured by the Joshua tree scrub that grows by the side of the road. We hear a low moan; we see a twitch of the exposed feet; the pain is unmistakable. There has been violence here. We have missed the main action and have arrived to witness the aftermath.

Enter stage right, a well-dressed somebody on her way to something big, something of which she is, no doubt, in charge. Noticing our casualty, she checks the time on her phone, shakes her head. People are waiting for her, people whose problems are her problems and her responsibility. She hurries on.

Not far behind her, another well-appointed traveler, another somebody with a destination, a schedule, and no time for the friction this complication will introduce. Entering stage right, crossing stage center, exiting stage left, and . . . scene!

Our victim languishes for lack of help.

I can see Luke's lawyer, in the front row of Jesus's audience, practically jumping out of his pew—"Pick me! Pick me!" Because he was born to help people. It's a sign, finding a wounded man by the side of the road. Our lawyer would stop, sure he would. Wouldn't you?

But the third act introduces a new character, a Samaritan, and surely you know that this is the one least likely to have a good reason to help, the best reason to walk on. Samaritans have to be careful. Traveling Samaritans have to be especially careful. Samaritans on the road in the vicinity of Jerusalem have to be doubly, triply on their guard. You can get pulled over just for "walking while Samaritan" in these parts. "You're not from around here, are you, boy?" the temple guard will ask with a sneer. And what happens after that is anybody's guess.

But the Samaritan, not the lawyer, is the one Jesus has chosen for the starring role, the neighborly exemplar whose own plans drive into the ditch he'll be pulling this guy out of. It'll be his resources shared—who even knew Samaritans had that kind of money?—and his instructions followed—who even knew Samaritans could manage a situation like that?

And it's clear to everyone, including our lawyer, that the Samaritan has rightly understood the boundaries of neighborliness—that is to say, there are none. Even when the neighbor-in-need is one who very likely despises you and everybody like you. Even when it feels dangerous to your person and your personhood. Mercy isn't measured; it's simply given wherever and whenever it is most necessary.