



May 24, 2020

Dear All Souls,

This morning, two of our elders (Evan and Audrey) and I shared news that our family will be moving to Holland, Michigan, where I have accepted a position at Western Theological Seminary. I will teach in the seminary and serve as the founding director of The Peterson Center for Pastoral Formation & Christian Imagination (at least, that's the rough draft name for the Center). For the past 4 years I've been writing the biography of Eugene Peterson, the person who profoundly influenced my understanding of what it means to be a pastor, what it means to live in this world with an eye for God's wonder and generosity. This new Center will steward the work Eugene began and extend this legacy of asking crucial questions for the church in our time: *what, in an age of ego and power and fickleness, does it mean to be a faithful pastor?* and *what, in an age of consumption and narcissism and ugliness, does it mean to live as a Christian courageously nurturing the creative impulse and energy that God's Spirit has infused into our hearts and minds and souls?*

The Peterson family has donated all of Eugene's archives (the boxes and boxes of journals and letters and manuscripts currently sitting in our cellar) to WTS for the purpose of founding this Center, and when the seminary approached me about joining them, I was surprised and humbled. It's not lost on me that this Sunday we read of Jesus' Ascension, that moment when Jesus befuddled everyone by calling them to a work they could not have imagined, in a way and timing that caught them totally off guard. Jesus ascended to the Father, and the disciples looked around, bewildered. I feel like those disciples right now. Maybe you do too.

I've wrestled with this decision, grappled with the implications, felt the pang of sorrow at what it means for our family to leave people we love and a church we believe in with all of our hearts. And I've agonized over what it means to deliver this news via video and email in the middle of a pandemic. These decisions were coming to a head the very week before the coronavirus hit. In conversation with the elders, we determined that *obviously* we'd put things on hold until we were back together again, like normal, and process this as a family should. In the ensuing weeks, though, it became clear that a return to "normal" would be elusive. And so here we are, and I regret that I cannot give you this news as we sit together, in the context of prayers and songs and communion, bodies near to one another. This grieves me. However, I will say that in early March, I had grown so convinced that God was at work that not even a pandemic shakes that clarity.

I have clarity because this invitation has the same markers of the very few decisions I've made in my life where God has extended a precise and specific invitation (like the crazy invitation to move to Charlottesville and help to form a new church). On these rare occasions (because most of our decisions have been simply trying to pay attention to wisdom, following the bread crumbs, doing the best we knew to do), I've encountered common elements: (1) no effort on our part to work or make something happen, (2) a surprising invitation at a surprising time--but offering so much congruence with who we are, and (3) the immediate, overwhelming affirmation from the wise spiritual voices in our lives. This invitation has all those markers--and more. Perhaps we can talk about that, if you're interested.

So, I feel at least two things this morning: gratitude and sadness.

I'm overcome by gratitude because there is a deep yes in my soul to God's invitation. I care very deeply about what it means to be a faithful pastor--this is one of my burning passions, and I'm concerned about much that I see on the current church landscape. The opportunity to serve other pastors as they grapple with their calling--and to help in the formation of new pastors who are grappling with a faithful vocation--is work near to my heart. Also, as a matter of personal confession, I've grown aware of a measure of soul exhaustion. In March, I completed 25 years in ministry, and there is a weariness in my bones. I don't want to abandon the work of pastoring and teaching, and my love for the church is strong as ever. However, I'd like to step back for a season from leading in the same way and at the same level. I'd welcome a season where I'm able to continue pastoral work, but where I also get to just go to church on Sundays with my family, where holidays are simple holidays, where I'm not the one leading the church day in and out. As I've pondered this new season, I find my shoulders releasing and my breathing getting easier. This, I believe, is necessary for my soul.

And then, alongside the gratitude, I feel sadness. Leaving All Souls is not what I had envisioned. I LOVE our church. I love who we are, who we have become together. I love what we offer our neighbors. I love that we live at the boundaries, trying to follow the Jesus Way in a climate that is so often antagonistic to such a path. I love that we ask tough questions. I love that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and then try to live as if we actually believe this to be true. I love that we *love* with such abandon. I love *you*. It is possible to have a deep yes to something and a deep sorrow over that yes at the same time. I know this because I carry both of these realities within me now.

Here's something else I know: God loves All Souls more than any of us do. It is very clear to Miska and me that God has put an invitation in front of us, and this means that God is putting an invitation in front of All Souls as well. It's been so powerful to watch our elders step into this time of transition, to lead with courage and faith. They have prayerfully crafted a covenant shaping how they will lead together in this transition, and they have begun working on a Transition Plan and a [profile](#) to share with potential pastoral candidates. I've seen a lot of good and bad church leadership, and I want to tell you: at All Souls, we are led well.

We have time between now and August 2nd (our last Sunday) to talk and plan and cry. I hope that we will be able to find safe ways to be at least in proximity with one another before then. But if not, we can still use whatever ways we have to connect. Here is what I hope: I hope that All Souls will not see this merely as a departure but as a sending. Over the past 12 years, my pastoral convictions and love have been deepened and shaped and solidified by being the pastor of this one church: *you*. I hope that you will have the capacity and freedom to send me, to give me a charge to take who we are, who God has made us---this wonderful, beautiful, mess of a Jesus-community---and to carry who we are into a new sphere, for the sake of God's Kingdom. That's my hope.

While there is much to address here, for now, I want to highlight three things:

+This Tuesday and Wednesday from 7:30-8:30, we are hosting Zoom conversations for those who'd like to process this news or ask questions. Brendan and an elder will join me for each of these conversations. We're limiting the groups to 12 households so that we can keep the conversations small. So if you'd like to join us, please sign up to reserve your spot. (As a result of these gatherings, we will not have Compline prayer this week, but will resume next week.)

+Our elders have created a web page to provide information now and for the months ahead regarding our pastoral transition. There, you'll find a helpful orientation to what will be coming, and I'd like to especially direct you to these two documents: our Elders Covenant and our All Souls Profile.

+If you were unable to join us this morning and would like to hear what was shared, especially from our elders, the recording should be posted on our Facebook page by this evening.

The weeks ahead will bring us joy and hope, along with grief and tears. I hope we will be in all of this together, as we trust God with our lives. All of our lives.

with faith and hope and love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Winn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Winn Collier
Pastor, All Souls Charlottesville