

dear mars hill,

to all the brothers and sisters of this church

to those who have been here from the beginning—who remember the old building, who braved that one ten foot wide hallway, clogged shoulder to shoulder with people leaving the hangar to pick up their children who had spent the previous hour packed into oxygen deprived classrooms

to those who hiked through the snow and slush and mud that first day to sit on the floor who idled in long traffic jams to listen to sermons from the book of Leviticus on blood and guts and fire and then to those of you who showed up for the first time last week

to those who have complained for ten years that there's no sign out front and heard me respond time and time again 'yes, but you found it'

to those who were baptized in that nearby lake in those early days—especially those of you who were baptized that one sunday when we didn't know that all of those hundreds of fish had died earlier that week and washed up on shore and so before you got baptized, you watched in horror as your fellow church members wearing waders collected the dead, rotting fish in black trash bags and cleared out enough space for you to wade in and celebrate your new life—

and then to those of you who have been baptized in this room, in an old former mall, standing here soaking wet, surrounded by friends and family, cheered on by your tribe, not sure how to put it in words but absolutely convinced that you in some way were tasting heaven on earth

to the young and to the old

to the hunters in your trucks who can't grill it if you don't kill it,

to the vegetarians in your prius' wearing hemp underwear

to those on the right and those on the left

and to those of you who never removed your ron paul bumper sticker from the last election,

to the Dutch, and to the not much,

to Lions fans and to infidels,

to all of you wherever and however you find yourself

whatever size, shape, color, perspective, history, and background you bring to this gathering

grace and peace to all of you on this day.

kristen and i were out to dinner with some friends in october for a last meal before we moved. they have been beloved friends of ours for ten years and at the end of the meal one of them took out several folded pieces of paper as she told us that she had written us a letter, which she then read. in the letter she took us back through our ten years together, remembering events and people and places and moments we shared, several of which i had forgotten about. many times she would pause when she read about a particular experience we had all shared together, and we would look around the table at each other as we found ourselves visiting that day long passed. when she was done, there was not a dry eye around the table. it was a sacred moment. a glimpse of the eternal in the now.

so as i've been thinking about my sermon here today, i found myself returning again and again to the power of a good letter. someone may text you or ping you or email you or direct message you or contact you on facebook—but none of those particular mediums of communication can begin to compare to a letter in which the person has labored over every word, going back over it again and again and again, crafting the phrases and searching for just the right word and turn of phrase to capture precisely what

you want to say. technology has given us a wide array of methods to communicate and because of this variety, it's important we remember that there is a distinction to be made between diversity of form and depth, significance, and soul.

so, i've written you a letter.

i'll start with some thanks,  
then a lesson you've taught me,  
and then some warnings,  
and then a confession.

first then, some thanks.

there is a pattern to the creative process. you start with an idea, a hunch, an image, a vision, a picture of the thing you want to create. it may be a business or a painting or a mission or a cause or a new way to empower people to help themselves or a basic need that is unmet or a song or a new way to landscape your backyard or a product or a project for school or a piece of furniture or a new color for the walls of your downstairs bathroom because you just can't stand that awful shade of pale mustard that for some unfathomable reason the previous owners thought looked good.

and so you set out to make it, create it, change it, fashion it, form it, organize it, and arrange it. and it takes something out of you. you have to sweat, exert, and expend yourself. you have to gather or purchase or harvest the materials. you make a plan, you design it, engineer it, make sketches, have meetings, do research. you study how others have done similar things.

and then you get at it. as you work away, what was once just an idea, an abstraction in your mind, begins to become a reality. whether it's wood and nails or words or paint or a new flow of resources in a new direction, at some point it begins to take shape. what once existed only in your mind begins to exist in actual time and space. you can see it, taste it, hold it, admire it. and because it cost something, because it only exists as a result of your sweat and blood, you have a visceral attachment to it. it came out of you. and when it's completed, you may be exhausted, spent, and ready for a rest, but you are exhilarated.

it's late sunday night and you've been painting all weekend, and you're sitting there on the floor in the hallway outside that downstairs bathroom and you're exhausted and it took way longer than you expected and you smell and you need a shower and you have a bit of a buzz from all of those fumes, but you are the king and queen of your empire because those walls are no longer that putrid shade of pale mustard. they're magenta.  
or cranberry.  
or sea foam green.

you have taken part in the mystery at the heart of creation. we're here, somehow. our existence itself continues to be a profound mystery. *being* itself raises more questions than it answers. this mystery takes us deep in to the heart of the divine. when we create, we are participating in that mystery in a real and tangible way.

this truth about the creative process brings me to you because  
you  
were  
once  
an idea.

this church, this place, this community, was once simply a hunch. a dream. a vision. a picture in the mind

of a new kind of church for the new world we find ourselves in. a church that was fearless in confronting the injustices and systems of oppression that lurk around every corner and at the very same time deeply committed to the personal, intimate experience of following Jesus, of experiencing the joy and peace that transcends space and time. a church that found the stale, old categories of liberal and conservative boring and irrelevant because we'd experienced resurrection, which includes and affirms anything and everything that brings liberating, new life wherever it's found, irrespective of whatever labels and categories it's been given because of an abiding conviction that the tomb is, after all, empty.

a church where the main thing was actually the main thing.

a church that understood that there is a simplicity on the other side of complexity, aware of all of the various interpretations and theological perspectives and complicated systems of thinking and analyzing and yet with a clear, resolute sense that Jesus is doing something in the world, bringing water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, peace to the restless, presence to the lonely and we are invited to join his movement. that Jesus is ultimately not a proposition you intellectually assent to but a person you say 'yes'to.

what matters then, is your 'yes.' with whatever you have, and whatever you don't have. with whoever and however you are or aren't, wherever you've come from. what matters is our 'yes.'

you,

my friends,

through you i have experienced the mysterious joy of creation. i will never be able to fully, adequately explain what it has been like to have imagined you, conceived of you—this church—and then have you exist. from those earliest discussions kristen and i would have in our early twenties, eating lunch at the taco bell on colorado boulevard in los angeles, imagining what a church could be, to this very moment, you have brought me the joy of creation.

thank you.

thank you.

thank you.

and then a second thanks.

in september when you learned that i would be leaving you, for many of you it was like a bomb going off. you didn't expect it, you weren't looking for it, you got an email on a thursday and on the following sunday you heard it directly from me. i have, since then, had the chance to personally interact with a large number of you and you have been across the board extraordinarily consistent in your responses, which have been two:

one: grief

and

two: support.

this is significant, and meaningful, for a number of reasons.

first, any change, even if it's good, is always a form of loss, and loss must be grieved. that's the only way it works. stuff it, deny it, repress or suppress it and it will come back to haunt you, it will lurk in the shadows and it will resurface later.

your grief then, is a sign of health. it demonstrates an awareness of your interiors, your heart, and your

desire to face and embrace what's actually going on inside of you.

and then secondly, you have been supportive. at times, shockingly so, at least from my perspective. some of you only had that thursday email and still, when you saw me, with no details, you expressed your grief and then went on to make it very clear that whatever we would be up to next, you were cheering us on. this is significant for a number reasons, namely, your belief that God is big and that any movement to share this love of God with more people is movement in a life giving direction and that this same big, loving God is fully capable of taking care of all of us, whether we are together or apart.

a story, to tell you why this means what it does to me.

several years ago there was a well known pastor who openly, publicly had a number of issues that he was against, both morally and spiritually and politically. he was loud and outspoken about these particular issues. it turns out that one of the issues he was most vocally opposed to was something that he himself had been engaged in. upon this being revealed publicly, his church released him from his leadership position. shortly after this, a friend of mine happened to meet him while visiting the same city and when they began conversing, this pastor-in-exile expressed a great deal of stored up venom for his former church that he had started, venting about how they had shot their wounded and they hadn't extended him grace and love and all that. he was shocked that they had treated him like they had.

here's what i find so startling: he was complaining about how they dealt with him, but he's the one who shaped and taught and molded them. he merely found himself on the receiving end of how he had trained them to be. he created and crafted the system to behave a particular way and then it behaved in that exact way.

it's easy to form a circle and pick up stones, taking turns quoting bible verses the whole time, ready to unleash those stones on the one who's guilty. it's another thing to be the person standing in the middle of that circle, desperate for one person, just one, to say "is any of you without sin?" those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

so that's the question you have as a leader, pastor, teacher,  
the question you live with day in and day out: "are they getting it?"

i have tried to teach you about a big God, who holds all things, including us, in an unconditional, loving embrace. i have tried to teach and model for you an unswerving hope and trust, that change and risk and leaps of faith are normal and at times absolutely necessary for our growth and the continued expansion of our hearts. so when, in this change, this loss, this transition, this departure, you have responded time and time again with largeness of spirit and bigness of heart, with confidence that the God who got you this far is fully capable of taking you the rest of the way, deeply attuned to your own emotions and responses and at the very same time convinced that everybody will be just fine because what could possibly separate us from the love we've tasted and experienced, the love of Christ that holds and sustains us all?

oh my. it's so moving to me.

thank you.

thank you.

thank you.

with those two words of thanks, then onto a lesson that you've taught me.

for many people, the simple dualisms of right and wrong and good and bad are the sole prism, the lens, through which they look for God in the world. so if things go well, then 'God is good' is how the thinking

goes, and if things don't go well, all kinds of questions arise about God and hope and faith and was it all just a grand illusion in the first place?

the life we've found together, however, is far more subtle, nuanced, and complex than those simple dualisms, and i've seen you discover this deep well of insight as it shapes you in profound ways.

i've seen you get cancer and struggle with infertility and attend funerals of people you love and get let go from your jobs and lose tens of thousands of dollars and get sued and find out your kid is using drugs—and at the same time i've watched you find God in the mess. in the tension. in the chaos. i've seen you find peace and joy and calm and rest in situations in which everybody else is convinced that peace and joy, much like Elvis, have left the building.

there's an ancient midrash about jacob who wrestles the angel. they say that he walks with a limp afterwards, but at least he's experienced God.

i've watched many of you walk with a limp.

it's a deeper wisdom you have attained,  
a higher level of consciousness,  
a more refined and ultimately more enduring way of seeing that you have acquired.

it's a spirituality that doesn't need quick and easy answers, it shuns the trite and cliché,  
it understands Christ is here somewhere in this mess, and no matter how dark or foreboding it gets,  
we will at some point see him,  
friday will give way to sunday  
and while there are blood and tears and heartache  
and at times we're barely holding on by our chiny chin chin  
when we do stumble into the daylight, when we do find a little respite, a sliver of shalom,  
when we eventually do meet the resurrected Christ  
it will be real and it will matter and it will be true and  
it will satisfy.

i've seen you lament and laugh,  
cry and celebrate,

weep and wail  
and then whoop it up,

pull your hair out from pain and frustration  
and then dye it bright colors because someone's throwing a party.

you have taught me not to fear the full spectrum of human experience but to embrace it, to celebrate it, to wallow in it and soar with it. many Christians are eager to point out that Jesus said he was the son of God and that's the wedge issue, the crux of the faith, the divisive point you have to take a stand on. i believe he is. and in the same breath, i remind you that he also referred to himself a shocking number of times as the 'son of man.' you know what 'son of man' means?

human.

now that's shocking.  
take a stand on *that*.

what he stressed, what he thought was a big deal, what he called himself time and time again, was son of man. it is a big deal for a human to be divine, but if you're looking to provoke, and if you want to focus in on astounding claims he made about himself, how about the mind-bendingly revolutionary claim of the divine being human?

weeping,  
spitting in mud,  
eating,  
drinking so much he's accused of being a drunk,  
letting people clean his feet with oils,  
inviting people to touch his wounded sides.

humanity, now that's interesting.

Jesus invites us into the full spectrum of human experience,  
from lament to exhilaration and everything in between.  
from basking in the presence of God,  
to cursing at the top of your lungs from the rooftops  
because God is nowhere to be found,  
shrieking till you're hoarse 'my God, my God, why have you screwed me'  
now that's life.  
that's real.  
that's divine.

you've shown me how to find God in the full spectrum of human experience.

so, there are some thanks,  
and a lesson you've taught me.  
now, some warnings.

first, there is a meta-movement in the scriptures, an arc to the unfolding story of redemption. it is the movement from word to flesh.

think of the ten commandments. one of them is 'don't kill.' it's absolute base level requirements here: could you just not murder each other? but then the story progresses, it evolves, and so later Jesus says that greater love has no one than to lay down their life for another. and then he gives his life, out of love. so the earlier 'could you try not to kill each other?' grows into 'could you love with such fidelity and devotion that you'd actually give your life for another?'

the command, the words, to protect and preserve life take on flesh and blood, to the point where it's an entire pervasive pattern of life, second nature, in which you seek the well being of others ahead of your own.

word takes on flesh. this is the story of Jesus, the word, the creative life force of the universe, taking on a body and moving into the neighborhood. so when Jesus talks about the kind of life God has for us, he talks about us experiencing in flesh and blood a whole new way of being. serving, caring, discovering, thanking, forgiving, loving, tasting, embracing, doing whatever we do for the least of these. it's an embodied faith, one that's dirty and bloody with sleeves rolled up and sweat on the brow. it's one where there's plenty of wine at the party.

i write this to you because of how many of you have been challenged about your participation in the life of this church, often with the accusation: but what do they believe over there at mars hill?

as if belief, getting the words right, is the highest form of faith.

Jesus came to give us life. a living, breathing, throbbing, pulsating blow your hair back/tingle your spine/roll the windows down and drive fast/experience of God right here, right now.

word taking on flesh and blood.

and so you've found yourself defending and explaining and trying to find the words for your experience which is fundamentally about a reality that is beyond and more than words.

so when you find yourselves tied up in knots, having long discussions about who believes what, a bit like dogs doing that sniff circle when they meet on the sidewalk, do this:

take out a cup  
and some bread  
and put it in the middle of the table,  
and say a prayer and examine yourselves  
and then make sure everybody's rent is paid and there's food in their fridge and clothes on their backs  
and then invite everybody to say 'yes' to the resurrected Christ with whatever 'yes' they can muster in the moment and then you take that bread and you dip it in that cup in the ancient/future hope and trust that there is a new creation bursting forth right here right now and then together taste that new life and liberation and forgiveness and as you look those people in the eyes gathered around that table from all walks of life and you see the new humanity, sinners saved by grace, beggars who have found bread showing the others beggars where they found it  
and in that moment  
space  
place  
remind yourselves that  
*this*  
*is*  
*what*  
*you*  
*believe.*

remember, the movement is word to flesh.

beware of those who will take the flesh and want to turn it back into words

flowing from this, then, a second warning.

there is a question that lingers in the air,

the question that people actually talk about

the question, of course, is 'what will happen to mars hill?'

now please don't be deceived by this question,

thrown off by it's ubiquity,

mised by the way that it is freely, commonly asked, as if the answer is somehow out there somewhere waiting to be discovered.

the way advertising works is you try and associate the impersonal, inanimate product you are selling with something personal and embodied. sometimes famous people are paid large sums of money to endorse a product, in the hope that whatever this person is known for, whatever they've accomplished or achieved,

will, in essence, rub off on the product. so that you'll think 'michael jordan, the greatest basketball player ever, is talking about this plain white t shirt that manages to keep its shape around the neck after multiple wearings, so this must be the greatest plain white t shirt ever.' that sort of thing. the effort, then, is to associate the tangible product with an intangible value or concept embodied by a person. several years ago apple began running those annoying/clever ads in which the nerdy pc has a stilted conversation with the cool guy mac. microsoft took a beating in those ads, so they began running a series of counter ads in which groovy hipster folks look at the camera and say 'i'm a pc.' once again, trying to associate an inanimate, impersonal product with actual flesh and blood, breathing, living people.

you, my friends, have the opposite problem. when people ask 'what about mars hill?' or 'what's mars hill going to do?' it's as if mars hill is a disembodied reality with a life of its own.

here's the twist: the church is not an inanimate, impersonal product. there is no 'mars hill' in theory. there is no abstract, disembodied entity mars hill apart from the people in this room who ARE mars hill.

so when people say what's going to happen to mars hill? they're asking what's going to happen to you. what are you going to do? how are you going to respond?

you are the answer,  
because you are the church.  
mars hill is not a product,  
it is a gathering of people.  
you.

that's why there's no sign.  
how does a person find mars hill?  
well, you have to meet one.

remember when woody yelled at buzz: 'you are a toy!!!?'  
i'm woody, yelling at you, buzz: you are a church!

you are the answer to the question what will happen to mars hill.  
and so please,  
i ask of you,  
i plead with you,  
to answer well.

prove them wrong.  
bring your friends,  
give money,  
get more involved.  
believe.  
trust.  
practice hope.

there is an essence to this place, a spirit. that's how organizations and institutions and movements and causes are: they develop patterns and energies that manifest themselves in fairly consistent ways over time. and you know it the moment you walk through the door. you size a place up, you catch what's in the air, you read the body language of a place. you're here because of the essence and spirit of this place. people are welcome here, and they know it. Christ is alive here, healing people and liberating people and giving new life. there is mission here, cause, purpose beyond these walls. and you know it. i know it.

it's a reverent hum just below the surface of everything we do here. you can taste it, feel it, smell it.

don't mess with that.

protect that, preserve that.

you know what i'm talking about.

if you grumble and complain and become agitated and divisive you will ruin the pure, sweet, humble, captivating essence that is present in the midst of this community.

when in doubt, stop talking and start praying.

breathe.

stay calm, be cool, be nonreactive. breathe some more.

once again, mars hill is going to be in new territory, trying things, experimenting, learning together where the new life is.

it's what we've been doing from the beginning.

if you want this church to be some other church,  
then please leave this church and go to that church.

this church has it's own unique path,

it's own particular dna

and you must be true to it,

or you will lose something vital to who you are,

and why God brought you together.

in the coming days the question for each of you is: are you bringing hope and creativity and life here  
or are you using your voice and power to cut it down? are you destroying something beautiful?

do you believe that this church's best days are ahead of you?

if your answer is anything other than yes,

you are already answering the question.

this leads me to a universal truth:

people *whisper* sweet nothings to their lover

but they *yell* 'fire.'

reflect on this with me.

love, *whispered*.

danger, *yelled*.

fear, it turns out, is often louder than love.

sometimes fear is good, and yelling even better,

especially when there actually is a fire.

but other times fear is toxic, destructive,

the opposite of love.

remember that.

look for it.

and call it out, confront it when you come across it.

fear has no place in this place.

when you've leaned over and looked into the tomb,

when you've ran huffing and puffing to your friends,

insisting in between breaths, 'he isn't in there!'  
fear is no longer the game you're playing.  
you've been seized by hope.  
and hope has it's own rules.

and now for a confession.

i have tried my best to live at peace among you.  
i have done everything i could to the best of my awareness to keep my side of the street clean.  
i have tried to be a voice of hope, help, healing, and truth to you, year after year, sunday after sunday.  
i have tried to apologize whenever i wronged you,  
i have knocked on some of your doors,  
asking for your forgiveness,  
and you have been gracious,  
and kind,  
every time.

and so,  
with all of these years here,  
all these experiences,  
all those sermons,  
i confess to you today  
that i feel like i'm just getting started.

like i'm a rookie, a freshman, a newb.  
i feel younger than ever.  
i feel like the world is big and wide and open and things are possible that if they were revealed right now,  
we'd turn to each other to say 'no way! that's awesome!'

i believe that God has made this day,  
that it's good,  
and you can have joy in it.  
even if you're limping.

can you make this confession with me today?  
can you say with me 'i feel like i'm just getting started?'

you can be old,  
you can even be over 40,  
you can have a lot of life behind you,  
and yet you're being renewed,  
you're being reborn,  
you're wide eyed and filled with wonder,  
you've tasted and you've seen in such a way  
that you realize  
you're just getting started.  
the past and the present and the future begin  
to meld into one giant eternal now  
and you understand in that moment  
what Jesus was talking about when he said  
he came to give us that kind of life.

i feel like i'm just getting started.  
i feel like i'm just getting started.  
i feel like i'm just getting started.

from quantum physics, we've learned that when two subatomic particles are bonded, attached, together, and then they're separated they exhibit fascinating behavior. they demonstrate that they are aware of and affected by that particle they were once attached to. this is called quantum entanglement. we've been together for a number of years, and now we're parting, but forever we'll be entangled.

and i celebrate that.

and so i stand today in your midst,  
happy, satisfied, anticipating magnificent tomorrows,  
feeling like i'm just getting started,  
and i say, until next time, with as much love as i can possibly muster:

grace and peace be with you.

your brother rob