

“What Else Is There to Say?”

Isaiah 43: 18-21

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I have been struggling with what to say today. I don't have any wisdom about change or endings. One of the things I love about South Church is that you already know how to walk through times of transition with grace, and deep faith. You approach change – even change that comes as a surprise – as an opportunity to dig deeper and craft a new vision for the church. You approach change with both confidence and an attitude of wonder. I am not at all worried about the future of South Church. Your strength comes from each one of you, the members and friends and community that shape and serve this church every day. No amount of transition, today or in the future, will alter that.

In lieu of advice, I only have two words left to tell you today. They're probably not the two words you're thinking. I *know* they're not the two words you're thinking because last week when I told a church member that I had a two word sermon her response was, “What is it: The End?” I was shocked! Then I told someone else I had two words left to say and they said, “See ya?” We'll get there. I promise. But not yet. The two words I want to tell you today are Thank You.

When I look back on these past years together – the amount we have accomplished, the moments we have shared, the relationships and the projects and the love – all I am left with is gratitude. South Church, you were my first congregation as an ordained minister. It's good to be the first - you knew a lot more about ministry than I did. When I began here, I had no idea what to expect. As I prepare to leave, I can tell you the bar is set incredibly high for every congregation I may serve in the future. This experience and my time with you surpassed every hope and dream I had when I started. You called me to nurture your children and families. You called me to lead your discipleship formation programs. And yet, I feel that every single day that I walked into this church, it was you who nurtured me. So, thank you.

I am leaving this congregation so full of positive experiences that it is impossible to tell all the stories that I want to tell or thank all the people I need to thank. In order to highlight a few of the things that have been particularly significant these past years, I brought three items to help me illustrate what our shared ministry has meant to me, and to help me say Thank You.

## **HARDHAT**

The first item is a hardhat. One of the side effects of working at South Church is that after awhile, you always have a hardhat on hand. In your office, at home...I don't know where they come from, I have never asked for one or sought one out, but I have a lot of them. Recently Beth and I gave a ride to a friend of ours and when she climbed into my backseat she asked, "Why do you have a hardhat in your car?" Beth didn't miss a beat and replied, "It's a South Church thing."

I chose the hardhat because mission trips have been an important part of my time here. I have been on nine youth and adult mission trips in my tenure, and I am leaving wishing it would have been possible to squeeze one more in. At South Church you're still a mission trip newbie until you hit the double digits.

Mission trips have been where I have formed some of my strongest and most meaningful relationships. There is something about living with a group of people for a week that leaves you bonded for life. There are no more secrets: you know who snores, you know who needs coffee before you can talk to them in the morning, you know who likes the cookie dough that comes in the yellow package vs those who prefer the blue package. (Team Yellow!)

The work is hard, and important, but so are all the little moments we share on the work sites, on our breaks, and in the evenings as we unwind. To all the youth and adults who sojourned with me to Delaware, Buffalo, New York City, Galveston, Maine, and New Haven, thank you. Thank you for all of the moments that we shared. Thank you for laughing when we were exhausted or lost or frustrated or tired. Thank you for your vulnerability during vespers, over meals, and on the van rides. Thank you for

including me in your traditions and for allowing me to help create new ones.

I also chose the hardhat for a very different reason. When I first came to South Church, I was greeted in the parking lot by Anne Alvord and Paul DeMaio. They gave me a tour of the old church building, a building that already had the furniture packed away and the walls covered in graffiti from the youth. When I returned a month later for my second interview, there was a giant hole in the ground.

The hardhat feels appropriate because our first year together coincided with the construction of our beautiful building. The rest of our years together have been about learning how to do church in a new place, growing into classrooms and meeting spaces, learning how to balance hospitality for the wider community with the changing needs of our church.

It has been amazing to come in to a place and see what happens when a church names their vision out loud, and then takes the risk of creating it. I have seen South Church transform from a literal hole in the ground, to a vibrant church that doubles as a community center. It hums with life, ministry, and fellowship every single day of the week, morning, noon, and night. Thank you for teaching me that the church is more than a building when you have a dream for what that building can house and how it can support the ministry of your congregation.

## **THE ROVING CAMEL**

Many of you recognize my second item, this life-size camel on crooked wheels. It's been living in the church for a few years now, sometimes in the basement, sometimes in classrooms, sometimes making surprise appearances during Words with Children. I love this camel. I love it because it came from Chris Gullotta and Glastonbury Youth and Family Services, so it's tied to one of our mission partners and came into being because of the creative gifts of one of our members. I love this because it came to live at South Church during a time when Lis Davis and I were trying to lead a musical about Noah's Ark. You might be thinking, "I don't remember South Church doing a musical about Noah's Ark..." That's because it never happened. There were a lot of reasons why, but at the end of the day we

tried something, and it didn't work the way we planned. And you know what? It was okay!

I am thankful to have served in a place that says, “Why not? Let's try something new!” And on the occasions when it doesn't happen how we imagined, it's okay. We can learn from it, but it doesn't mean we stop trying new things, and it doesn't mean we have to continue to remind ourselves of the failures. We may have failed in putting on a musical that summer, but the camel's role transformed in the congregation. My freshmen claimed it as their mascot one year and the camel became the Christmas Camel. She's been a part of stories and I've seen young kids wheeling her through the halls. There have been more selfies taken with this camel than I can count.

There is nothing else in this congregation like this camel. She can't walk in a straight line, she is dated and out of style, and she looks like no other creature here. And yet, she is incredibly loved. To be honest, there are times when I have felt a little bit like the camel – a bit like a duck out of water or a camel out of the desert – and like her, I know that I have been loved for being fully myself. This camel has been my reminder that I do not need to be perfect, it is even okay to fail once in a while, because through it all there will be love. This camel is my reminder that when we say we welcome everyone here, we mean EVERYONE. So, thank you for loving this awkward, silly camel. And thank you for loving me.

## **HANDWOVEN STOLE**

My last item is something new. It's a gift that I made for the person who has been a colleague and a friend – who has been a true partner in ministry and without whom I don't know what I will do. At the end of the Wizard of Oz, when Dorothy is saying goodbye to her friends before she goes home, she hugs the Lion and the Tin Man and then she says, “Scarecrow, I think I'll miss you most of all.” Dick Allen, I think I'll miss you most of all. I made this stole for you.

When I was thinking about what to weave for you, I first chose the color green because green is the color that stands for ordinary time. Working with you has taught me the value and importance of all

the ordinary days. Sunday mornings are when the whole church gathers, but the real work takes place Sunday afternoon through Saturday night when we plan, meet, talk, comfort, visit, and work hard to shape and care for this congregation. The ordinary moments are often the ones that go unnoticed, but they have a huge impact on individuals and the church. Thank you for teaching me to live fully in ordinary time, to celebrate the quiet moments as well as the big ones. Thank you for Tuesday's at 9am – for setting aside time to reflect, share, and encourage each other.

I wove a stole specifically because it is the symbol of ordained clergy, and you have helped me grow into the minister I am today. You have given me the space and opportunity to try new things and to pursue my passions. You shared your beloved church with me, fully, and you taught me how to love these people. You demonstrated to me each and every day the depth of love that ministers are called to give to their congregation, and to God. Thank you for all that you taught me. I know that as I begin serving in my own church, your partnership and all that you gave me will be a part of the foundation from which I lead. I love you.

The hard thing about leaving a place you love so much is that it is impossible to say everything that needs to be said. I could sit with every one of you for an hour or two, because each of you has had a significant impact on me. I love you more than words can say, and I am profoundly grateful for our time together. I am both excited for this next chapter of my life, and aware of how much I will miss you as I leave South Church, how much I wish I could fit the church in my pocket and take you with me. Since I can't, I will be satisfied knowing that this has been a wonderful ministry, that I am leaving behind an amazing congregation, and that I had the opportunity to say the two most important words: Thank you.