

On Resigning:

Well, friends. Let's start by praying this morning:

Prayer:

Prologue:

Let's begin by remembering what we've been talking about recently: Ourselves, right?

We've remembered our Purpose Statement: "We join together to pursue God's love, become more like Jesus, and build God's Kingdom through word and deed." We've talked about how this speaks to the four journeys into maturity that we make as Christians. We've noted our motto, "becoming more like Jesus all the time," which speaks to our ultimate congregational ethic and goal. And we've looked at the Core Values we hold as a congregation that support this purpose:

***Prophetic Multiculturalism,
Kingdom Building Stewardship,
Intentional Christian Hospitality,
Contextual Brethren Life,
Needs-oriented Outreach,
Dynamic Corporate Worship,
Biblical Spiritual Formation,
& Empowering Servant Leadership.***

And it's deeply, deeply important that we remember these things about ourselves, consider them as we make decisions, look at the way they guide our "yes's" and our "no's." These Core Values are, in many ways, our

contextualized character ethic.

And it matters, at least for awhile, that we can remember them and embody them and let them be our guide, because, quite simply, I will not be here to do it for us after the turn of the year.

At the end of 2021 I'll be ending my time as our Senior Pastor.

Much To Say:

There is so, so much that needs said when it comes to this news, and so, so much that can't be said in the next twenty minutes, but will work to share over the coming months.

And look, let's start there: This isn't my last message. This isn't the last time I'm speaking to us. I'm not logging off today, never to be seen again. On the contrary there is a lot that needs done before the year turns, and I have to do some of that.

But for the rest of the morning I want to talk about the fact that I will stop being our pastor at the end of the year.

Let's start with why.

Why? (or Not Why?)

Or rather, not why.

Because there are ideas we might have about why I'm resigning that are simply not true. I'm not leaving because of any one of you doing any particular thing, or because of any cohort wishing I would. I'm not leaving because Smoky

Row is on some downward spiral, and I want to jump off this ship before I drown with it. I'm not leaving because of some great scandal that will someday be made public--some great sexual or financial or moral failure. I'm not leaving for a "better" church; there isn't one. I'm not leaving out of capriciousness: because I had a bad day and made some sort of grand rejection of the pastorate that I can't take back.

I'm leaving because it's time to leave. It's just time.

And that's not satisfying, I know, because we want to see the pros and cons list, and find solutions to all the cons. We want to know the reasons, whatever they are, because we want to fix whatever it is that needs fixed. But hear me: Nothing external needs fixed. It is simply time for me to transition out of the pastorate.

Why? Because...the work is too much for me, now. And all the tweaking in the world won't make the work less what it is. Why? Because...if I stay, it would be for our bad. I would, in my tiredness, accidentally misuse the power I have as our pastor, and whether it's six months from now or a year from now, I would self-destruct in some way that could hobble us, tear down what my calling is to build up.

The thing is, People of God, I'm wiped out. I came to us when I was young, twenty-seven. Unbelievably young, in some ways, and that non-renewable resource of youthful energy isn't something I have these days. In fact, when it comes to creativity, to energy, to capacity, I'm in debt. It doesn't mean that I can't offer these things to you all and to the work of God that we together are, but it means that

when I do I'm often borrowing from a source that is not renewing.

And to be faithful to God with not only my present but also my future is to personally commit to not borrow from a dwindling resource, but do what needs done in order to offer what I have out of my excess. And simply--not tragically, not terribly, just frankly--the only way to renew that strength is to stop giving it away.

Wells fill up from below; but the well of my spirit needs redug, cleaned out, tuck-pointed if I'm going to offer up any living water to anyone who might need it. And if I linger too long, what I'm going to offer us is going to be poisoned.

I have tried to listen to body and spirit, tried to listen to others, tried to listen to God, and it seems to be the consensus in these voices that the time is sooner rather than later. So...I resign.

See, sometimes there is no good reason, just dozens of small things that happen, moments and events that slowly wear down one's margins, one's energy, one's mindfulness and creativity. And that's where I am. COVID has multiplied the emotional weight of those things; I'm not sure if it's caused them, honestly. And someday I'll have a report ready for us about causes. I'll highlight this or that weak area that was close to collapse. It'll be an amazing thing to read, but I don't have it now. All I know is that if there's no evacuation, this whole thing's coming down.

Fears:

But I don't want us to resign ourselves to some bleak future

because of my resignation. Let me tell you my fears in leaving.

Fears & God:

I fear that we'll forget that God provides for us. We'll confuse--despite ourselves, despite our great trust, despite knowing better--my presence for the Lord's, and think that I have somehow been at the heart of Smoky Row's good things. But that's simply not true. God gives us what we need to get done what we need to do. God did this for Smoky Row long before I arrived, and God will do it for long after.

Fears & Grieving:

I fear that we'll allow our grief over this transition to linger beyond what's healthy and good. It's good and right to grieve this news. I've held a role in our collective life, and in many cases our individual lives, one that's been significant. The idea of me not being our pastor is a weird idea, and we wonder what the experience of me not being our pastor could, would, should be like? But me not pastoring Smoky Row is not a hopeless situation, because again: We are God's, not mine.

At some point our grief has to give way to something else, the way grief always has to give way to something else. My hope is that it gives way to leaning in, a commitment to see Smoky Row through my transition and past it. But I fear that we'll allow our grief to give way to passivity and hopelessness, instead of renewal and deeper self-understanding--for each of us and for Smoky Row at large.

Fears & Difficulty:

On the other hand, I fear that we won't be sensitive to the difficulty my transition brings us. For good, I think, God has shaped Smoky Row through me as much as I have been shaped by Smoky Row. This mutual shaping is only mutual as long as I'm here, right? And for me to leave is to deeply affect our emotional system: Our sense of security, our ability to avoid reactive, fight-flight-or-freeze responses, our ability to think creatively and be nimble. Will we treasure and protect these aspects of ourselves, speak the truth in love when our congregational life needs to hear it, or will we expect the worst, and in expecting it, give birth to it? I fear we won't be attentive to our congregational health in the ways that we must be in order to not just survive, but in fact thrive--learn and grow and increase our capacities--through my transition.

Fears & Clear Eyes:

And, lastly, I do fear that we start believing an insidious, sublime lie, which is that I think Smoky Row has no future. That's not true. If it comes to your mind, don't just reject it. Wrestle it to the ground and make it explain itself. Smoky Row is as healthy as a small, COVID-cautious congregation in Columbus can be. We have money. We have talent. We have compassion. We have reputational capital: honor that God has given us and built up in us to spend in ways that I don't think we know, yet. I think that the next stage of Smoky Row's life is going to be better than this one. That we'll do even more than I have been able to imagine or ask of us, at least.

Which brings me to some very, very hard truths that we have to own. That we have to grasp with the same energy that God's love has grasped us.

Truth: Good

The first, and the hardest to believe: It is for our good that I go.

Yes, I'm quoting Jesus. And no, I'm not doing anything remotely as impressive as sending the Holy Spirit after I leave the way he did. (Which is what he said after saying that.)

But, honestly: It's for our good that I go.

You do not want a burned out pastor. To take a spiritual journey with an exhausted guide is to inevitably come into danger. You'll be led down a dangerous path. And if I am an under-shepherd of Christ, charged with guiding you but can no longer clearly follow the one who leads us to quiet waters, because I want to lay down and nap now, then what's good in that? You know? What is wise, and good, and kind to all of us is for me to decrease so that Smoky Row, and whoever takes my role, can increase. When a leader outstays their calling, they become a limiting factor rather than enabling growth and health and faithfulness. I will not allow that in our congregational life, no matter how much genuine sadness it causes us to consider my going.

Truth: More

Another Truth: Smoky Row is more than me. We know this, right? None of us are confused, really. Smoky Row is more than me. Our reputation and our work and our unique voice--these things contain the role I've played in our collective life, but they are not summed up in our collective life. We're not a cult. Smoky Row existed before I was our

pastor, and it will exist after I have been our pastor. I respect us, you know? But I think that we might, if we give in to those fears I mentioned, maybe for a minute lose perspective and wonder can Smoky Row be Smoky Row without me as our pastor? The answer's yes, of course. Come back to yourselves. I have been as deeply shaped by our congregation as I have been one of its shapers.

Truth: Future

The corollary to this is another truth: God is not done with Smoky Row. What we have done together these past fourteen years and change? It was built on some previous iteration of our congregation, and it will be built upon. And whatever comes, if it's built in line with those guiding Core Values that are true of us, well: It's going to be amazing, and a blessing to be associated with.

Many of us helped shape Smoky Row before I arrived, built the work that we've together continued to build on, and you will continue to build after me, alongside someone else. You who preceded me are signs to those who do not know what's it like to not have Rich as Smoky Row's pastor. And your active presence in our congregational life will help create the future that we all want for Smoky Row.

Truth: Opportunity

And another truth: There is opportunity in my leaving. Changes bring needs. And needs, for those of us who live by faith, are simply opportunities to bring our gifts to the table. Between now and the next few months there will be needs that we can meet, after the turn of the year there will be needs that we can meet. I hope so much that we can be the people we claim we are trying to be: Ones who are open to

God using us to do God's work.

Fears give way to Truth. And truthfully, I can answer some questions that I do suspect we have. Let me try.

Questions & Answers:

First: What will I do after this? I don't know what I'll do after this. If we can afford it, I'll take some time to rest. On the other side of that I'll try to find a job that allows for the rebuilding of my spiritual well, as it were. (And, look, whoever Smoky Row calls to be its next pastor, let's just try to get somebody who grinds metaphors into dust a little less than I do, okay? I just realized I can't even invite that without using a metaphor. Maybe on the other side of this thing I'll deal with my metaphor problem?)

But, what's next for me? I don't know. We have no plans. We have no plans.

What about us and Smoky Row? Our family and Smoky Row? We don't know. We have no plans. I will take some time away for sure after the turn of the year. It's the responsible and right thing to do; a sensitive response to the power dynamics at work when a new pastor and a congregation are developing a relationship. In the long term, what does that mean with regard to where the Hagopians make their church home? No idea. And, look: I know that you can transfer titles, take them off and put them on, but you cannot do the same with relationships. And we don't want to lose our relationships with you, anymore than--I hope--you want to lose yours with us. We'll figure those things out in time.

And what now? Well: Governance Team has already begun the pastoral transition process. There is a process! Brenda, as our Moderator, has reached out to both denominational and regional staff members who are trained to help guide congregations through the pastoral transition process. They, in turn, have had Governance Team begin to engage in some self-evaluation and they have begun to brainstorm who, in our small denomination, could possibly match how amazing Smoky Row is. In the coming days and weeks we'll be invited into the process, be kept up-to-date, be as transparent as possible about what's going on and how each of us fits into what's going on.

Now: Setting Expectations

And even if I can't see clearly what's next for myself, I can still see very clearly what's important for us--Smoky Row--now.

Right now we all need to set our expectations well. Expect to feel anxiety, grief, fear...and look for God's providence, experiences of newness, creative surprises. My transition is an opportunity for us to very intentionally give God our hearts, our souls, our minds, and our strength, and in turn experience God's love, God's energy, God's wisdom, and God's power. We should expect bad and good; lean into Christ and each other during the bad, and thank God loudly for the good. The next few months, and past them, will be real life, you know? Lows, for sure, but highs--God hasn't abandoned us. So don't be surprised by the feels you feel. Feel them. And we'll all be faithful through them.

If you haven't yet believed, truly, that God "works out good for all things" , now is a chance to come to believe it. And if

you can only pray, “Lord, help my belief.” Pray it.

I love you all. I love our congregation: Who we have been, who we are, and the daydream anticipations I have about who we’ll grow into as the years move ahead. I have been here long enough to baptize some of us and bury some of us, to be with some of us in great joy and in great grief. I’ve felt love and tried to show love to us, and will not stop cheerleading us, speaking well of us, praising God for the shape we are taking in the world.

Now: God Not Done

And, look: Smoky Row was planted by Dale Stoffer on September 21st, 1980. We’re almost 41 years old. I just turned 41 years old. Smoky Row is my age. And I don’t think it’s a lie I’m telling myself to feel better, but I really don’t believe God is done with me yet. Neither is God done with us.

We’re just hitting our stride: We know who we are and how to be and are meant to lean into who we are, with nothing to prove to anyone except that we know God and God knows us. Our childhood is behind us, now. The freedom and power and responsibility of adulthood came a long time ago.

But in spite of my love, our shared experiences, our time together, it is up to someone else to take my place among us. If I thought that it wasn’t, I wouldn’t plan on going. But I want to leave well, and give whoever comes after me what I have had, the beautiful gift of guiding the best congregation in Columbus, a little mouse that roars like a lion of Judah.

So. Let me offer a handful for things to do, because I am, after all, still a pastor, and we love to tell people what to do.

Handful Of Things: Trust

Trust that God is in this process. Trust that God is in this process. Whatever we feel, Christ has felt. Whatever doubts we have, God knows them. And God knows, too, what we don't know, which is God's future hopes for us, to do good among and through us.

Handful Of Things: Pray

Pray in all sorts of ways. Pray that we might, all together, experience "the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace" as important decisions are made during this transition process. Pray, too, that our family might have a hope and a future. Pray that each of us, as Smoky Row, might trust God "to give [us] a future and a hope." Pray that your feelings don't surprise or master you.

Handful Of Things: Work

Work in the ways that this special time calls you to work. I don't know specifically what God might be inviting any of us to do, you know? But I know that stewarding the gift of Smoky Row requires energy, effort, time, skill, and intentionality. And we are Smoky Row's caretakers right now; we are each other's caregivers. Little things may be asked of us, but who are we to "despise the day of small things?" Or big things may be asked of us, but whose power is made perfect in our weakness?

Handful Of Things: Rest

Rest, too. The urge, I think, will be to hurry, to hasten, to

not rest. To scramble, driven by an anxiety to make all things good by our own strength. The greatest sign of our trust is our patience, our ability to not work. It wasn't a coincidence that Christ was mostly unavailable, resting, when the crowds most wanted to touch his robes. Thank God for the moments we have these next months to not do anything, to just be. Take time, as winter draws nearer, to settle yourselves in. (And I don't know why I feel so strongly that we'll need rest in the coming months, but I feel like I ought to urge us to not forget it. I suppose, without the restorative energy rest brings, I guess? We'll see.)

Handful Of Things: Play

And, finally, ***Play***. Let's play together. Laugh when we can. Celebrate the good that comes. Have fun together, in whatever ways we can. Do the work that has nothing to do with care-taking except in taking care of joy. I know this is a hard ask in the middle of a pandemic, but, honestly, people always figure out ways to have fun. We can too. How can we play more? Each of us in our own lives and all of us together?

Conclusion:

Trust. Pray. Work. Rest. Play. These things will carry us through the next months. They won't make everything okay; but God will do better than make everything okay. God has given us a name in the world; God will give us a future, too.

I love you. You tolerate me. We're good.

I have loved being Smoky Row's pastor. It has been and is a gift to me. It has made me who I am. But its time is coming

to an end. And while we'll face that end together, you'll walk beyond it without me. You don't walk alone; you're never alone. Christ is with you all, lo, until the ending of the age. This is something to remember.

Near the end of one of his letters, Paul tells the congregation that when it comes to loving one another, they "don't need anyone to write to them, because they've been taught by God to love one another." Half a sentence later he says "do it more and more." It's good advice. It's advice we'll need to take over the next few months in much the same way that we've taken it over the past fourteen years. I believe we can love more and more, can discover opportunity in my transition, see God meeting us as we trust God, pray with all ourselves, work alongside the Spirit, intentionally rest, and play together, laugh and forget ourselves in the pleasure of one another's company. Expect difficult things, but expect glory, expect power, expect hope even more. Our hearts be troubled, but let's not be afraid: God will not forsake or neglect Smoky Row, or each of us.