

## **This Is Not Goodbye**

To the young people of The Good Shepherd Lutheran Church,

This is not goodbye. Let that be the first and last thing that you hear in this.

Some time ago, one of you (I can't remember who right now) asked me a rather innocent question. "So Jason, um, where do you *work*?" We were playing ping pong at the time, down in the basement of the Parish House, and I remember grabbing the ball out of the air and stopping the game so that I could hear the question again.

"Yeah, where do you work? Like, what do you do for a *job*?"

I told him that I played ping pong for a living. At the time, he seemed duly impressed.

I suppose the reason for the question lay in the impossible coolness of this job. (Youth ministry, not professional ping pong.) In his mind, and I suppose many others, it was inconceivable that you could grow up, own a car, own a house, and collect a paycheck for playing laser tag with a bunch of rowdy teenagers. Or for being a mediocre guitar player. Or just for being a good listener. Come to think of it, that does sound pretty crazy.

But it's all true, and I'm living proof of the possibility of having a job that's so incredibly great that you would do it for free.

Or maybe his question arose out of the disbelief that anyone would pay someone to hang out with *him*. But that's true too. The adults of your church, in their infinite wisdom, feel that all of you are so great, so special, so vitally important to the future, that they would pay someone to hang out with you and be your ... what? Mentor? Spiritual big brother? The relationship is kind of hard to classify, but trust me when I tell you that I love all of you like little brothers and sisters. And not just because I'm contractually obligated.

Unfortunately, with every dream, and with some dream jobs, there comes a time to wake up. And with the birth of my second son, River, it's become necessary for me to find another place to work that will keep the diapers and baby formula coming regularly. I've accepted a job in software development, and starting in January, I will no longer be "that weird youth guy" at the church. I'll just be "that weird guy".

I've prayed long and hard about this. And I wish that God had dropped a neat solution in my lap that ended with me retiring at 65 with the title of "oldest living youth minister". That's not the path before me, though. I know that this does not mean the end of my service to God, or even my service in youth ministry. It just means change.

This will mean some changes around the halls of Good Shepherd too. Someone else will eventually be sitting at my desk, probably keeping it measurably neater. Someone else will have the unenviable task of keeping you awake 'till dawn at the next Lock In. Someone else will get

the impossibly cool job of being your spiritual big brother or big sister. They'll get to love you, and know you, and they'll get to share in those most intimate conversations about God, faith, and life that I've been privileged to be a part of over the past nearly seven years.

Already I'm incredibly jealous. And sad.

But this is not goodbye. I'm not moving, and I have no intention of changing churches. (You may not know this, but that you're already at the best church around, hands down.) You'll still see me Sunday mornings in worship, and leading our basement YABS class. You'll still find me playing guitar from time to time. You'll still catch me digging over the hill in the community garden and quizzing you on your highs and lows. I'll still be a part of your life, if only in a different capacity.

Remember when I said that this job is so incredibly great that I would do it for free? I meant it. You haven't seen the last of me. Not by far.

So do me a favor. When the time comes, welcome the new youth guy/girl with open arms. Give them the opportunity to get to know you and walk alongside you in this great journey of faith. Help them in becoming a part of our church family. (Just don't give away all the best hiding places for Sardines. Some things you should have to learn on your own.)

And lastly, know this: as much as I have shaped, or tried to shape your lives in the likeness of Christ, you have shaped me more. I have learned more about the nature of God and the love of Jesus from you, the young people of The Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, than I have from any other source. I am forever in your debt, and I will always remember the time we shared together in this holy space.

Thank you. Thank you thank you thank you.

And remember ... this is not goodbye.

Peace and love,

Jason