



7.1.2022

Greetings, St. Therese Family!

Eight years ago today, I began my term as principal at St. Therese Catholic Academy. I was 28 years old, had six years of professional teaching experience, and one year of graduate school preparation to be a Catholic school leader. My wife, Rose, and I had one child, Gabriel, who was 9 months old when we arrived in Seattle. We made a five year commitment to serve this St. Therese community, but we had no idea what the journey would be like. We took the leap of faith to move away from everyone we knew and loved in New Orleans (and decided NOT to move back to the Midwest at that time) to start a new chapter in our lives in Seattle ... But in reality, it was not really a move to Seattle, it was a call to serve at St. Therese. We had (and have) no family in Seattle and neither of us knew more than one person that lived here. However, the Holy Spirit's winds blew us here. The call to serve and lead St. Therese was strong, and I truly believe it was exactly what God had in store - for all of us - over these past eight years.

As I have been reflecting on my time in this community and discerning how to put into words what these past eight years have meant to me, I've concluded that it would be easier to write it in a book than to confine my gratitude and awe in one short letter. Alas, God has not blessed me with the time to get that done. We've been blessed with 3 children (Gabriel, Maria, and Maya) - so quiet time to write is a wonderful idea in a distant corner of my imagination. However, I do think it is important to tell my St. Therese "origin story." Very few people know these details and I think it is important to share as further evidence that God is in charge, not us!

When I applied to serve St. Therese back in 2014, I was not exactly "qualified." While I was looking for leadership roles around the country, Seattle was not on the radar. However, I received a call from Dr. Anthony Holter, then Executive Director of the Fulcrum Foundation, who thought that I might be who was needed at St. Therese in light of what he knew about me and the reality on the ground at St. T's. I define "vocation" as *where our gifts and talents meet the needs of the world*. Hearing about St. Therese felt like a call, a way for me to live out my vocation as an educator and leader. After conversations a few conversations, the Archdiocese passed me through as an eligible candidate (despite my lack of credentials!) for an administrative role. After an initial interview that felt like "home," I was saddened to hear that the St. Therese hiring committee decided to NOT advance me as a final candidate. I was told that the faculty and the staff at the time, having just experienced two brand new principals who did not stay multiple years, were adamant that they needed someone with experience. However, two weeks later, I received a call inviting me to fly out to Seattle the next day - the "experienced" candidates both dropped out of the process, accepting leadership roles elsewhere.

I hopped on a flight to Seattle on the Friday before Memorial Day weekend and began an all day interview in which every conversation felt so comfortable, I truly felt and knew that I could help lead this community to become what it was called to be - "a beacon of light shining on the top of the Madrona hill" as I said in my interview. At the end of that day, I received the offer to serve as principal - and the ask to make that five year commitment. After a night of discernment and talking through the reality and scope of the situation with Rose, we accepted. I was not "ready" and certainly not experienced in school leadership, but God knew what our



community needed, and *I quickly learned that I needed God more than I thought!* I had prayed for a challenge in my next chapter - which led me to apply - and God was bountiful in answering that prayer!

In the past eight years, our enrollment has gone from 112 in 2014 to peaking at 203 this past school year. We have grown every year during this span, and with that growth, we have transformed a fiscal operation from a six-figure deficit to a six-figure surplus. This was only possible through the generosity and commitment of our parish, parent, alumni, volunteer, donor, and wider community. We have made tremendous academic gains - raising test scores for individual students and as a school. Four consecutive graduating classes had 100% of students accepted into Catholic high schools. We launched a unique service-learning program in partnership with the Josephinum and other local organizations that centers on transformative relationships - not transactional experiences. At its best, this led to our Class of 2019 funding and building a Tiny House that a resident of Seattle currently calls home. We have lived our faith acknowledging that “God is good, all the time. And all the time, God is good!” and we have prayed together as a family to begin and end each and every day, *even when we were apart* (remote). This authentic living of our faith has brought us national recognition from the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education who has written about our school culture and Catholic Identity and sent a group of aspiring school leaders to witness our faith and school culture in action.

We have so much to be proud of, but ***it is not these accomplishments that I carry with me into my next chapter, it is the relationships.*** I have often been asked how we can replicate the St. Therese “model” elsewhere, but I have found this an inherently flawed concept. We are not a model - though we do *lead by example*. We are not a blueprint - though we make *excellence happens on purpose*. We are not an operation that can simply be duplicated - *we are a diverse community called to act with justice*. St. Therese is not just a school. We are not just a parish. St. Therese is a community - we are a FAMILY that for nine and a half decades has brought people together inspired by our mission and created a space in which all children - *especially* children of color - can feel safe, learn, laugh, love, *authentically be themselves*, and grow into the servant-leaders that God created them to be. My favorite part of this job - and the thing that has sustained me over the years (along with my loving wife!) - has been entering into meaningful relationships with all of our families, children, and “Dream Teamers.” I am eternally grateful for all that we’ve experienced and done - TOGETHER.

I admire and stand in awe of all those who came before me - it was and is on your shoulders that we have continued to live our mission “*surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses*” (Hebrews 12:1). For all of those I have served and partnered with during this chapter of our beloved St. T’s story, THANK YOU - we are all blessed and better off because we have been here together! As we look to the future, to our 95th school year, the forecast is incredibly bright! Today, I pass the torch of leadership on to St. Therese Class of 2004 alum and my very first hire back in 2014 - Mr. Malcolm X. Nelson. I am excited to continue to watch our community grow and thrive in this next chapter, and I know that whatever challenges arise, we will overcome - TOGETHER. I know this, because *we can do all things ... through Christ who strengthens us*.

God bless, in gratitude,

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