

Chapel Talk
Founders Day
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As a way of honoring the spirit of Founders Day, I thought I would share reflections about our collective work at St. Andrew's.

The greatest gift our Founders gave us is the freedom to imagine and enact St. Andrew's anew in each era, decade, and year of the School's history. The principles of the School allow us tremendous freedom of innovation, creativity, and expression:

- Develop, our Founders wrote, a small residential community of adults and students united by Christian expressions of respect, benevolence, empathy, and friendship.
- Cultivate, our Founders suggested, a school dedicated to academic excellence.
- Welcome, our Founders declared, families and students unable to afford private education.
- Preserve, honor, and explore, our Founders envisioned, a campus of remarkable beauty and serenity.

Our responsibility tonight lies in articulating and strengthening these virtues in the 21st century school and aligning them as a contemporary St. Andrew's response to the needs and concerns of the world. Tonight, I formally call upon all members of the community to recognize the blessings afforded us and the responsibility to love, protect, and honor this School for the short time we have responsibility for it.

This goal requires our full participation and engagement. Cultivating human and academic excellence in a school requires a deep commitment to the hard work of building habits of integrity and empathy and inspiring critical thinking skills. We have to be ready to innovate, ready to change, ready to commit to even higher standards and norms for our lives here. Over the course of the winter, I look forward to visiting dorms on Wednesday nights to talk about the School and hear your ideas about affirming and developing who we are and what we aspire to be at our best.

The Founders could not envision the modern, interconnected, and frenzied world of today, but through their emphasis on Christian character and ethics, they endorsed expressions and commitments of new acceptance, love, respect, and compassion towards all within the human family. It was not easy for America or St. Andrew's to awaken to the various movements that led to dramatic changes in the country's relationships with women, men and women of color and other underserved groups, but slowing, gradually, and

courageously, the School joined an historical commitment to Christian ethics with a new appreciation of diversity. The modern school was born, and now your generation has the opportunity to live and learn at a time when we as a human family have embraced a world with a new creed, described best by writer Vinicio Riva as “empathetic forms of solidarity.” This phrase beautifully expresses our ability to honor, stand beside, and accompany those quite different than ourselves. It suggests that we have the time, patience, sensitivity, and skill to support one another in an unconditional way.

We live today in a country and a world that is still healing, still agonizing over mistakes, ignorance, and systems of prejudice and discrimination. A large part of your St. Andrew’s education is a study of humanity’s tragic violations of the rights of equality, dignity, and justice. Our sins of brutality and cowardice cannot heal without our ability to study and acknowledge the sources, reality, and legacy of our past.

But to move forward, we must not only study the past; we must embrace a future that gives all of us incentive and permission to become allies. We in the modern world and modern school must move away from paralysis (caused by our own guilt, anger, or resentment) towards an active solidarity among all members of the human family. This does not mean that we surrender our identities to create a homogeneous mass. It means we ally with one another by creating and establishing spaces for all to speak, to collaborate, to congregate, and ultimately to unite. We recognize the scars, the laceration we all have experienced, and we commit ourselves to the art of healing.

The opportunity of the school of today is to embrace a new ethic of respect, solidarity, empathy, and kindness. This move towards love and respect not only honors those with whom we differ: it makes us whole; it makes us courageous; it changes the world. We know the foul and destructive legacy of human rights violations – we know the emptiness of racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and homophobia. These are outmoded, bankrupt and fraudulent theories, embraced only by the weakest, and ironically, the loudest of our society.

But we are somehow also exhausted by the struggles of the 20th century, discouraged by the pain that lingers and bursts forth still in our society, paralyzed by fear that perhaps our progress has receded. We are astonished at the hold our divisions still have on us. But we are St. Andrew’s. We can assert goodness, dignity, and compassion. We can humbly realize, as Hamlet says to Horatio, “that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” In other words, to live with kindness and empathy, we must acknowledge that we do not have any idea of one another’s stories, one another’s scars, one

another's trials. We, therefore, must learn to honor, love, and ally with one another. If we live this way, all our prejudices and stereotypes will melt away.

At my father's funeral this fall, my brother told the story of my grandmother, who was raised in Utica, NY:

My grandmother's father died, leaving a young family with many children to feed. Our great grandmother accepted a proposal of marriage only to find that her new husband did not plan to have any children in his life. Thus, my grandmother was sent with her siblings to an orphanage, where she soon found herself cleaning for the director of the facility. Soon, the orphanage director sent her to affluent families in Utica as a maid. My grandmother courageously fled to Rochester, New York, and somehow with no money, no degree, and no social standing found work at Kodak. Because my grandmother was Italian, she decided to change her name as a way of avoiding the discrimination associated with her ethnicity.

This story always gave me strength and vital insight into the human condition. It made me revere my grandmother (though we could never talk of this time in her past), and it made me understand my father's deep desire to honor his mother by going to college and becoming a lawyer. It made me understand what it might be like to be invisible, ignored, and helpless. It made me uncomfortable with the way we equate human value and dignity with money, with jobs that hold status. It made me want to do something in my life about poverty, discrimination, and hopelessness.

I am proud of my orphaned grandmother who fled for her life in New York State years ago. Her memory allows me to see that beloved people, magical people, benevolent people work hard, suffer every day and strive for freedom, dignity, and peace. We might, if we are careful, see these heroes and heroines in our midst. We might, if we are attentive, hear their stories and their heroic dignity. We might, if we are empathetic, understand what it meant to be ashamed and embarrassed by a past we had no control over. We might, if we are wise, understand the power of the human spirit in the face of loneliness, desperation, and fear.

We are a school of empathetic solidarity. We are a school that honors all members of the human family. We are a school that recognizes the sins of the past and affirms the joyous possibility of the future. We can in our time here assert the power of love over hate, of enlightenment over ignorance, of empathy over selfishness, of courage over fear. This ambition, this goodness, this possibility, this promise is what Founders Day is all about.