

Old St. Anne's Church, September 13, 2015

In true St. Andrew's fashion, we begin with appreciations as we gather at Old St. Anne's Church. First, we are guests of the leadership and congregation of St. Anne's parish in Middletown. Working with our Chaplains Jay Hutchinson and Dave DeSalvo, the Reverend Russ Bonrer, and the St. Anne's community welcome us here for two services each year, held on the first and the last Sundays of our School year. We honor St. Anne's by taking good care of their church and the sacred ground that surrounds this beautiful sanctuary. We join them in doing good work in Middletown and the State of Delaware.

Mrs. Gahagan joins us today for this opening service. Mrs. Gahagan is my mentor, leader, advisor, and friend, the Chair of St. Andrew's Board of Trustees during much of my tenure as headmaster and the granddaughter of the Founder of St. Andrew's Alexis Felix duPont. She and Mr. Gahagan had two wonderful granddaughters graduate from St. Andrew's over the past five years, Grace, now a teacher in India, and Amanda, just graduated from Babson College. Mrs. Gahagan's family is responsible for launching the miracle of this School, and Mrs. Gahagan is the person in my life who best exemplifies the goodness, grace, generosity, and spirit of the School we all love. We thank Mrs. Gahagan for all she means to us and welcome her to Old St. Anne's.

I draw inspiration from the two services we have here each year. We enter this historic church today as a new school community, full of promise, hope, and aspiration, but still in an early tentative stage, especially for our new students who today complete their first week and now begin to understand the full potential of a year here. In May, when we return to Old St. Anne's, our school community will be whole, completely integrated and focused on the mission, spirit, and momentum of our year together. New students will no longer be new—you will have experienced nine months of life, challenge, and opportunity. You will have enduring friendships, important responsibilities, and many accomplishments to celebrate. And on that day when we feel so complete, so full of the St. Andrew's spirit, we will be preparing to say goodbye to the seniors who made the year possible, beautiful, authentic, and affirming.

To quote Hamlet, "the interim" is ours—nine months to explore and enact Bishop Wright's definitions of love and mercy, nine months to practice "generating clever solutions, personally helping others, negotiating with others," skills Mr. Finch brilliantly enumerated on Friday at Convocation, nine months to respond to my challenge that St. Andrew's go on the offensive in its assertion of goodness, intelligence, and kindness in the world, and finally, nine months to create and sustain grace in this community.

God's grace or the grace we ourselves create leads to acts of love and mercy, and therefore, I am fascinated by the peace, serenity, and clarity of grace in our lives. We need, I think, to learn how to access it, pray for it, express it in our lives.

The word, the concept found new expressions through tragedy and unspeakable violence this summer in Charleston, South Carolina. A white supremacist and terrorist, infected and ignited and distorted by racial hatred and animus, gained entry to the Episcopal AME Church that itself proudly represented the heroic and triumphant and difficult and dangerous journey of people of color in America towards a dream of equality and freedom. President Obama described the church's history this way:

*. . . it was built by blacks seeking liberty, burned to the ground because its founder sought to end slavery, only to rise up again, a Phoenix from these ashes. When there were laws banning all-black church gatherings, services happened here anyway, in defiance of unjust laws. When there was a righteous movement to dismantle Jim Crow, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached from its pulpit, and marches began from its steps.*

As a Christian community, the Bible Study group expressed in the most natural way possible the love Bishop Wright described on Wednesday night: they welcomed the young white man into the sacred sanctuary of the Church, and he sat with the group for over an hour, waiting apparently for the right moment to strike. We later learned that the kindness and peace of the Bible Study group made him hesitate from the fatal execution of his plan.

However, there would be no mercy that night. The absolute hatred won out, and the shooter massacred nine members of the AME Bible Study group: The Reverend Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel L. Simons, Sr., Sharanda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson.

Days later, after the shooter was arrested, relatives of the victims addressed the shooter over video, with a national and global television audience looking on. And this miraculously is what we heard:

*I forgive you, Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, said at the hearing, her voice breaking with emotion. You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never ever hold her again. But I forgive you. God have mercy on your soul.*

*We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible Study with open arms, said Felicia Sanders, her voice trembling. Tywanza Sanders was my son. But Tywanza was my hero . . . may God have mercy on your soul.*

*I acknowledge that I am very angry, said the sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor: 'But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family . . . is she taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive.' I pray God on your soul.*

In his eulogy, the President sought to explain the source of these beautiful, miraculous, and radical words of forgiveness. And he did so by thinking very hard about Christian grace: his ruminations began with the words of the families, words so astonishing precisely because they were perfectly Christian; he thought of the grace Reverend Pinckney himself explored in his sermons; the President returned to his hymnal and found Amazing Grace: he recited, and he sang, and he thought about the miracle of moving from ignorance to wisdom, from violence to peace, from bigotry to fellowship, from slavery to liberation, from hatred to love. He said:

*According to the Christian tradition, grace is not earned. Grace is not merited. It is not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God.*

We see this, hear this, feel this in chapel or at Commencement when the Bishop or our Chaplains bless us, signaling the gift of peace and love and forgiveness to each one of us, no matter our condition, moral, ethical, spiritual, or physical. We see the grace of God bestowed upon students and faculty and alumni in baptisms, confirmations, weddings; I watch each Sunday as a student or adult crosses his/her arms across his/her chest to signal a request, a desire, a need for a blessing. It is a beautiful, eloquent, and humble expression of our need for the miracle of love, spirit, and grace in our lives.

It is important to understand that the source of this Christian heroism, grace, and spirit in Charleston was not only divine, but human. The depth of this church, this congregation's commitment to freedom, to dignity, to the journey from enslavement to heroic demonstration of human dignity and love, was the work of generations. It was a collective effort as those in the 21<sup>st</sup> century present honored and re-interpreted the grace of those who preceded them. Grace emerged through week after week of readings, prayers, services all exploring ways to honor and enact a religion of sacrifice, and hope, and service.

With grace comes an obligation to live, to work, to serve, to witness, and to sacrifice. This gift of grace manifested in the words of the grieving families radiated not only to the shooter, but to the nation and the

world. This grace served as an argument for love, for compassion, for dialogue, for compromise, for goodness, for humanity. The President's words:

*God's given us the chance where we've been lost to find our best selves. We may not have earned this grace with our rancor and complacency and shortsightedness and fear of each other, but we got it all the same. He gave it to us anyway. He's once more given us grace.*

As we seek to create love and mercy in our School and in the world, we know we have two remarkable forces behind us: God's grace that calls us to be strong, courageous, and bold—in today's reading: to lose our lives for God's sake rather to live in fear, in isolation, passive before the challenges and human responsibilities of our lives.

And we embrace the grace we ourselves create by daily, intentional expressions of kindness, concern, and respect. You create grace at St. Andrew's when you listen, when you honor a perspective different than your own, when you share, when you express joy and exultation in another person's success, when you cry and grieve not for yourself but for someone else when you reject the temptation and the ability to say or do something that is unkind, lacerating, or destructive, when you imagine the needs of others and do something about it.

When we return to this church in May, we will ask ourselves how we as a community have grown in love and mercy, how God's grace has filled us with hope, compassion, and courage through the challenges of a year. We will ask ourselves how we celebrated the gift and grace of a year at St. Andrew's. We have nine months together: I pray we will truly be "the family that love built."