

Chapel Talk
Parents Weekend
Staci Williams Seeley P'17, '22
October 24, 2021

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight. O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Good chilly morning! Thank you, Joy, and thank you Hutch, for asking me to speak and to be of service.

In true St. Andrew's fashion, I have to wonder if I should be up here. I mean, after all. Even though it is *PARENTS* Weekend, this *is* a student-centered place. Those here who range in age from 13 or 14 to 17 or 18, are the reason for the season. What if we flipped this tradition of having a parent speak at Parents Weekend chapel? And, the parent who is asked to speak comes up and then just turns it back over to their child or children who attend St. Andrew's? However, we all know that if I were to call Crawford back up here, this talk would not last much longer.

Ok, Crawford approved that jab. And, he is super good-natured about being a man of few words. The ones he shares are pretty impactful, often hilarious, and we at Seeley Family Headquarters are grateful each time we are on the receiving end of his quips.

Speaking of our family, my husband Chris and I, our daughter Camille, a 2017 graduate of St. Andrew's who is away at college in California, and Crawford have just moved back to New York City. Chris is the newly installed head of school at Saint Thomas Choir School, the boarding school for boys, grades 3 through 8, aged 8-14, who are professional members of the Saint Thomas Episcopal Church Choir of Men and Boys.

Last week, Chris spoke in the pulpit at Saint Thomas and heaped a ton of responsibility on me, informing the congregation that I would be speaking today at St. Andrew's Parents Weekend. I heard his talk for the first time in real time, and you should check it out online. As a former teacher of religion and ethics, he is in his element at the altar. I don't seek to compete and certainly cannot top his address from last week, although as the lectionary calendar continues to unfold, there may be a through line in our messages; Jesus and his disciples are continuing on the road to Jerusalem encountering more opportunities to alleviate suffering and to comfort the afflicted. I was surprised to be reminded that this is our 8th Parents Weekend at St. Andrew's. I hadn't done the math. In the recesses of my mind, I certainly knew that this is our final Parents Weekend, capping a decade of being members of this community once Crawford graduates in 2022.

In Chris's talk he noted, and I agree, that we are humbled by the opportunity and responsibility of standing before a congregation. He suggested that neither of us are particularly eager to command the spotlight, and I have to say he might be wrong about me. I don't mind it as much as he does; Camille and Crawford can certainly step up if required, but prefer to look to pass, to assist, to support others in their leadership. By the way, Crawford had a corner kick assist to Liam Hurt yesterday that was beautiful in case you missed it! We beat Tower Hill!

I have chosen a life of service that sometimes requires leadership, taking that step forward to speak up, lean in, be authentic, and tell the truth. In service to others, and throughout my 30-year career in education, I have worked to advantage or advance others: in college and high school admissions, in academic enrichment programs for underserved middle school students, as a teacher, academic advisor, college counselor, and college mentor, and now, as a leadership search consultant, who helps independent schools and leaders of purpose find one another and make a match. I spend hours daily convincing schools of the greatness in candidates they might otherwise overlook, and reminding seasoned, but sometimes vulnerable, apprehensive leaders of the talents they have to offer to yet another school. I really like being in the wings and not quite on the stage. This is also my responsibility at St. Andrew's and Montgomery School as a trustee: to ensure that the leader of each school has the resources – personal, professional, financial – and the capacity to articulate their vision and realize the mission of their respective institutions. That is my pledge to you, Joy. I am so appreciative of the gifts and talents and boundless energy and love you bring to this leadership seat. Maybe podium? Standing desk? I know you are not one who sits! Thank you for all you have done and will do for this wondrous place.

On this Parents Weekend, I am especially inspired by the example in the Gospel of Mark that casts Jesus in the role of teacher. As parents, family members, and guardians, we are our children's first teachers. And our faculty! I will invoke Tad Roach and affirm that we have introduced our children to the most amazing teachers in the world at St. Andrew's!

It is Jesus as a teacher who not only hears Bartimaeus, the blind man, but he also clearly sees him, as others around him ignore him and seek to silence him. And, though blind, the man can feel, *see* perhaps, that Jesus is not just *of Nazareth*, but he is the Messiah, Son of David, King of the Jews, and more powerful than any ruler, and he asks for Jesus' mercy.

Jesus gets proximate, beckoning the man to come close, to be alongside him. He neither exerts nor displays power over him. He steps back from the foreground, or the spotlight, asking Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do *for you?*" The upper hand belongs to Bartimaeus. Jesus does not assume what form the mercy should

take. As a teacher must and should, he meets Bartimaeus where he is, in today's terms. He sees all of him, not what he lacks, but what he possesses. And, then he listens to the request for sight in the physical sense, responding that because of his faith, Bartimaeus *will see*. Though we may not see something physically, we can know the truth. Of a person, a situation, an obstacle. Though blind to the solution to a problem, we may still know truth through faith, introspection, and contemplation. Those solutions to the most inscrutable problems are often found within us if we are patient, honest, and truthful in our seeking the path forward.

Jesus has previously asked this of James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" just before he and his other disciples arrive at Jericho to have the meaningful exchange with Bartimaeus. James and John misunderstand and seek to siphon off a modicum of Jesus' power, saying, and I'm paraphrasing, "Do whatever we ask of you. Grant us ascension so that we may share your power." Jesus reminds them that with power and leadership, come great responsibility. And, that greatness is personified by service, not reign nor authority.

Again, in today's terms, Bartimaeus is seen and heard by one he calls teacher, and he follows him on faith, no longer physically blind, and perhaps never having been blind to Jesus's capacity for healing. What does it mean to be seen and heard? To be seen and heard, when there is more to us than what we look like and, what, how, or how much we say?

When Mr. Roach first asked me to join the Board of Trustees, just as Camille was graduating, and we did not yet know if Crawford would attend or even apply, I thought, "*My word.* Why! Why me? What could I possibly have to offer St. Andrew's as a board member that isn't already in place?" Time, treasure, talent. Those are the foundational three legs that make for an ideal trustee. Spoiler alert: our annual fund gift to St. Andrew's is a major contribution, but only as a percentage of our discretionary income; we are not in any kind of major donor category. Not even close. And, it should go without saying that I and countless other parents are grateful for the gift of scholarship aid made possible by the generosity of those who came before as well as current donors who give at the most substantial levels. Time? Not enough of it. I must not hide this very well, because people usually greet me with some form of, "*How are you busy right?*" Or, "*Things calming down?*" Note to self: work on projecting an outward presence of calm while managing major stress. Talent? Best supporting actor is a category only if you're an actual actor. But, as I've spent less than a third of my time in education on the craft of teaching or research, I don't believe that was my calling card either. In fact, I remember my Aunt Diane, a retired public schoolteacher, asking me at Camille's graduation from St. Andrew's, "So, what do you want to accomplish now that you're a Trustee? What are you going to *do*?" And, I said, "I really don't know. I love, treasure, and respect the school and its faculty so much that I hope I have the courage to recognize something that may even *need* doing." I left that conversation with many questions about how I might best serve in the role and truly having no idea.

Two years ago this month, when Mr. and Mrs. Roach announced their retirement, instead of focusing on the search for a new head of school as many of my wonderful fellow Trustees did, I thought constantly about how trustees must also support the transition of the outgoing Head of School. I actively campaigned against being assigned to the Search Committee so that I could best support Tad and Elizabeth, and perhaps lend to this place what I was learning about succession and transition planning as the Board Chair at Montgomery and in my work in search consulting. I was beginning to find at last a bit of purpose in my service as a Trustee; up to that point, I must confess that I don't think I did much of anything. I began to think about a clear legacy of the Roaches' era at St. Andrew's: an aspirational, beloved community of equity, inclusion, and access created year in and year out with love for each student, however they show up, with whatever gifts they bring or are developing; and admiration for and support of adults perfecting the craft of teaching and cultivating inquiry and curiosity in their classrooms.

With a group of six other Trustees from various walks of life and experiences at St. Andrew's – Laurisa Schutt, Jennie Thomas, Richard Vaughn, Ari Ellis, Heather Mitchell, and Khalil Saliba— all of whom are alums, and current or past parents, I led the DEI Task Force of the Board in 2020-2021. In tandem with educating the Board about best practices in governance with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion, we also sought to uplift and amplify the principles of DEI and the powerful sense of belonging within the school community, intentionally reinforced by the Roaches and this faculty.

We learned that what we have done and are doing at St. Andrew's is in keeping with what the Episcopal Church, the Bishop of Delaware, the Rt. Reverend Kevin Brown (who is also a Trustee at St. Andrew's), and the National Association of Episcopal Schools, endorse as fundamental to an Episcopal school education. And, by the way, we are one of only a handful of schools in the country that are 100% boarding, and, of those only a few are Episcopal.

And, their purpose should embody the following:

*Episcopal schools are created to be communities that honor, celebrate and worship God as the center of life. They are created to be models of God's love and grace. They are created to serve God in Christ in all persons, regardless of **origin, background, ability, or religion**. They are created to strive for justice and peace among all people and [to] respect the dignity of every human being. These principles are the basis on which identity and vocation are to be defined in Episcopal schools. Episcopal schools have been established, however, not solely as communities for Christians, like a parish church, but as ecumenical and diverse ministries of educational and human formation for people of all faiths and backgrounds. Episcopal schools are populated by*

*a rich variety of human beings, from increasingly **diverse religious, cultural, and economic backgrounds**. In fact, the **intentional pluralism** of most Episcopal schools is a hallmark of their missions.*

The core tenets in the daily life of an Episcopal school include:

- **School Worship** that is creative, inclusive, draws fully upon the liturgical resources of The Episcopal Church, and is a regular part of school life for all faculty and students.
- **Community Life**, in which reflection, prayer, and matters of the spirit are honored and cultivated and the physical, mental, and emotional health of all are supported and nurtured.
- **Religious Formation and Study** that is meaningful, academically substantive, and age-appropriate; and in teaching the Christian tradition, fosters dialogue with ***other faith traditions***.
- **Social Justice**, which is the integration of the ideals and concepts of equity, justice, and a just society throughout the life of the school; the embracing and honoring of diversity; and the inclusion of community service and service-learning as an integral part of the life of the school.

- *National Association of Episcopal Schools website, October 2021*

And, here at St. Andrews, the values and goals of DEI track closely with our school mission and are:

- to foster inclusivity, equity, and open dialogue in the classroom, dormitories, and all co-curricular activities;
- to practice a culture of inclusion in our learning and living spaces where each individual is treated fairly, one's experience feels respected and valued, and one is supported in every area of school life;
- that students and faculty will model the School's values, demonstrate commitment to inclusion, and support each other in developing the leadership and inclusion competencies necessary to participate in an engaged and thriving School body, treating one another with respect by listening to different viewpoints and embracing topics and conversations that may feel unsettling, thereby crafting brave spaces where personal and professional growth can occur.

- *St. Andrew's School website, Equity & Belonging, October 2021*

At the end of a year of study and conversation – among us on the DEI Task Force, with outside facilitators who led a Board retreat on DEI, and in conversation with faculty and students – we did much of what we set out to do, and cemented the legacy of belonging, inclusion, and respect for different backgrounds and perspectives long established at St. Andrew's. We also learned, as it is in the best classroom experiences at St. Andrew's, that we had as many questions as we had answers, that the work of DEI is never really done, and that if you're not thinking about these core principles of school life, as we are guided to by our mission at St. Andrew's and at

NAES, you're not really *doing school*.

So, I haven't touched much on the life of our old, very old, perhaps 210-year-old, friend Job of the Old Testament, nor the message of the Psalm, both of which portray the alleviation of suffering, provide comfort for the afflicted, and deliver answers for those who wonder if God's love and mercy will reach them. Miraculously, it does. "*May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*" It's more fate in their favor than faith within that delivers divine intervention. Gospel writer Mark provides a far more nuanced understanding of the questions of mercy, love, and favor as Jesus heals Bartimaeus. Instead, he suggests that all who have suffered will reap rewards not in the hereafter, but in this lifetime *because* of faith, not just because the clock has run out on suffering. "Go," he says with immediacy. "Your *faith* has made you well."

The teachers in this audience - and that's all of you as family members, too – who, like Jesus, ask their students, your children, "*What is it you want me to do for you?*" And you and they listen to and see the person in front of them. All of them. Such that they may feel seen and heard. Not just in response to a visible, evident, immediate need – to teach a theorem or passage, direct a scene, answer yes or no to a simple request, coach a new play, advise about a broken friendship – but also to the whole person. To heal suffering, to anticipate challenges ahead, to recognize, accept, and celebrate growth and change, to affirm faith in oneself. To assure a child in doubt that they may find the answer within themselves through faith, patience, and yes, sometimes, suffering. This is what our Episcopal identity as a School, a community, and a Board calls us to do for one another. Let it always be so. *Amen*.