

St. Andrew's Day / Founders Day Chapel Talk
Joy McGrath '92, Head of School
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A reading from the gospel of Matthew 4:18-22:

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Tonight, we celebrate, one day late, the date in the liturgical calendar reserved for the feast of St. Andrew. At St. Andrew's School, this is also the occasion on which we celebrate Founders Day, the day the cornerstone of this building was laid in 1929. It is a day when we consider the durability of our school—today marks 92 years since the foundation, literally, of the school was laid. As head of school, in many ways, my job boils down to one thing: to ensure that in 92 years from now, or 192 years from now, St. Andrew's can be even better and as well-provided for fulfilling its mission as it is today.

How, as humans—in all our weaknesses and frailties—do we build something durable and lasting? When I think about what Andrew and his brother boldly did, as recounted in tonight's gospel, and what Felix duPont did when he founded this school, I see some examples for us.

St. Andrew and his brother, Simon Peter, have the distinction of being the first disciples who were called to follow Jesus. At that point, they were not joining an established movement sweeping across the globe—they were following one guy, whom they did not know, who was passing through town with a radical message of love.

Andrew was fishing—presumably to sell fish and support his family—and let's imagine he and his brother Simon Peter were good at it. They had invested in a boat, nets, and relationships to create a viable way of life in Galilee. As long as humans had inhabited this part of the world, humans had fished. Then, a stranger comes along and calls to him and says, “follow me,” and, by tradition, Jesus says, “I will make you fishers of men.”

That's a pretty big idea. It turned out to be a durable one as well. It is even inscribed on our altar, up here in the front of the chapel. I imagine that Andrew was captivated by this big idea, when he heard the call of Jesus' vision of helping others, his message of love. He and his brother calculated that a reward later—through the process of sharing Jesus' vision and Jesus' love—would be much greater than the immediate and day-to-day rewards of fishing and earning a living.

Most of us perceive a thing for which we must wait and work as less valuable. That's a phenomenon called "delay discounting"—the longer the delay, the less the reward is worth in our minds. Even if the reward is technically bigger in the future, we see it as smaller because we must wait, and we convince ourselves that a smaller reward, sooner, is actually more valuable than a larger reward, later. But, to plan into the future, to build something lasting and meaningful, we must reverse that instinct. We must see the potential of something in the future, for which we must work and make sacrifices today.

What does this have to do with St. Andrew's School? Felix duPont, who founded this school, was a devout Episcopalian. An industrialist and millionaire, he led the smokeless powder—or gunpowder—division of the E.I. duPont and Nemours company during World War I. By 1929 he was quite rich. Imagine: it was the Roaring 20s, and Felix's contemporaries were spending like mad. Have you read *The Great Gatsby* yet? They were building townhouses in New York, and—along our nation's expanding railways on Long Island and in Newport, Rhode Island—mansions the likes of which had never been seen. They were buying cars and yachts and spending on elaborate silver settings for their tables and splurging on feasts and parties featuring fireworks, vintage champagne, and caviar.

Felix could have done this, too—but he had a bigger idea, and one that turned out to be much more durable than his contemporaries' expenditures. He chose to put aside the immediate rewards of instant gratification and instead he invested in something larger than himself: the education of young people whom he could not even see or imagine. He was called by young people from every background and every part of America whom he would never know.

You. It was *you* who called to Felix duPont. You are the big idea, you are the vision, you are the belief—you, in all your exuberance, brilliance, and—this is important—imperfection. You called to Felix duPont and he listened, knowing that you were the people our broken world would so badly need. In a Founders Day chapel service in 1961, Bull Cameron, legendary teacher of English, said that Felix duPont saw in

St. Andrew's, "the light and the hope of the world." The challenges of our time are quite different than the challenges he knew or imagined. But the opportunity of this school prepares you to meet them and equips you to leave this world in a better state than you found it.

There are a million ways to think about our motto of "faith and learning." But sometimes I think the ultimate leap of faith was the one Felix took. The community gathered here tonight would have exceeded his wildest dreams. How did he know? His faith boggles my mind even as I can see before my very eyes how richly his faith was rewarded. Yet, we still have not arrived—we are not finished, we are not perfect, and we never will be.

As a school, as people, we are always becoming. That is what an education is. We never rest on our laurels or reflect on our efforts with total satisfaction. We remain restless, and that's ok. Ninety-two years ago, yesterday, when the cornerstone was laid, was just one step in a process that is still underway. The night before we left for Thanksgiving recess, I asked you to remember that at St. Andrew's, everything we do is part of the process of learning, growing, and becoming—and that the purpose of that process is progress, not perfection.

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Now, I already know that you are not delay-discounters. You are invested in this process and this project. You know that the work today is more than worth the reward of the future. You know that the world needs you. The world does not need you to be perfect, the world needs you to be better—a bit better each day, so that we can leave this world a little better than we found it.

If we imagine that the work we do today must result in perfection, we will become discouraged. It would be impossible to build something meaningful in our lives, something enduring and significant, if it had to be perfect. We would never be able to take the necessary risks and sacrifices today if we felt only a perfect outcome would be acceptable.

Think back to our first apostle, the future saint, Andrew, on the shore of Galilee. He could have remained comfortable with his family and his life as a fisherman. But, like you, Andrew chose to leave home and stretch himself, push himself, to grow and become more. To be perfect was not his goal—to be better was his goal. To love more in all of his imperfection, to love others in all of their imperfection, and to be part of something larger than himself. To work hard and give up valuable things today to create something lasting and meaningful.

The saints are helpful guides to us here as we consider our lives, our education, our purpose, and our imperfection. That's why I am glad we celebrate the school's founding on the saint day of Andrew. Saints are helpful because they are not perfect. Saints are human, and like us, they struggle, they fall, and they fail. In embracing those struggles and failures, like Andrew and all the saints, we are at our most profoundly human: learning, growing, and making meaning.

On this Founders Day, may we revel in our imperfections, remembering the purpose of our process is progress, and that as members of this school we are always part of something meaningful and larger than ourselves—a work in progress, to be sure, but something durable, and built to last.