

Commencement Address for the Class of 2020

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"The Only Way to Care for People is to Care for People"

Paul Farmer

Just like all of you, Mrs. Roach and I are guests, honored by Head of School Joy McGrath's invitation to return for this celebration of the Class of 2020. We are so happy to be here.

We thank Joy, your faculty mentors, our Chaplains, our Advancement Office staff, our Housekeeping team, and our colleagues from Sage for making this special reunion of your class possible. And of course, we welcome parents returning to St. Andrew's today, and we think of members of your great class and their parents who may not have been able to travel to be with us today.

We remember how painful and disorienting it was to realize late in spring break 2020 (a day before athletic camps were to begin and the day before the boys varsity basketball team was to play and win at the Carpenter Center in the semifinals of the State Tournament) that the pandemic would force us to live, learn, and accompany one another virtually for the last three months of your career here.

We made that sacrifice as a way of asserting essential national and local cohesion and a public good. We sought to protect our own community, linked in such powerful ways to the neighborhoods of Middletown, Delaware, the United States and the world; we sought to contribute in some small way to the courageous work of doctors, nurses, emergency responders, and essential workers who continued to work in the midst of the fierce early wave. We did not want to contribute to the overwhelming numbers hospitals were facing at that time.

The lockdown we all participated in contributed to a 50% reduction in transmission of the virus that spring (remember that at the height of the first wave New Yorkers were dying every two minutes, reaching 800 people a day: hospitals and intensive care units were overwhelmed, medical personnel lacked essential protective equipment, and doctors did not know how to treat COVID).

As difficult as it was to lose the human proximity and spontaneity of the spring term, the Class of 2020 participated thoughtfully and responsibly to save lives. That is a remarkable achievement, contribution,

and commitment. It is striking, isn't it, that we rarely hear of pandemic sacrifices described as expressions of love and reverence for life.

In addition, you led the school through those final months, maintaining and honoring your love of learning, community, and the care for one another and underformers. At home, a number of you worked as essential workers or volunteers after classes.

All of you brought love, joy, and solace to your families and communities straining under the pressure of this crisis. As much as you longed to be here, you realized that your focus on family and your local communities brought hope, strength, and meaning to your lives.

We witnessed the synthesis of your service to St. Andrew's and your deep connection to family as we celebrated a graduation ceremony in May 2020 that glowed with the love your parent and guardians and teachers provided. As Ms. Ramirez read your names, we had time to see, appreciate and celebrate each one of you, surrounded by your loved ones.

Today, we honor your leadership, displayed in most challenging circumstances; and we remind you that your spirit, mentorship, love, and example continue to inspire the St. Andrew's students of today as they study and live here. They love you, appreciate you, and seek to follow the example of goodness you strengthened here.

I believe that this experience of meeting the challenges of this pandemic time over the past two years will help you embrace the responsibility of citizenship and leadership in a country and world desperate for healing.

This morning, I want to urge you to keep expanding your sense of empathy and compassion to ever widening circles of people in the world.

We had begun the 2019-20 year dedicating ourselves to the words and spirit so beautifully articulated by Toni Morrison: the only purpose of education, she argued, "was to cultivate more humane people."

In that phrase, Morrison suggests that the art of learning, the process of developing intellectual, social, interpersonal habits of heart and mind must in its elemental form make us more kind, more compassionate, more merciful, more forgiving, more generous, and more committed to the cultivation of

human dignity and human rights. Such an education involves both intensive studies of our cruel and vicious past as well as movements towards truth, reconciliation, and human dignity.

Implicit in Morrison's phrase is also her sense of impatience and frustration that too often schools focus only on trivial matters, superficial measures of individual achievement or refuse to understand that education is the process that leads to enlightenment and social transformation. She challenges schools and colleges to become inclusive and thoughtful communities that expose and reject hatred, racism, and intolerance in any form. She advocates an educational process that awakens us to our responsibility for the world we inhabit.

We worked on that goal every day and week in our classes, dorms, chapels, school meetings, special programs. You deepened your commitment to younger students and community service, and your ethic led to remarkable exhibitions of humanity and courage in the Arts.

I will always treasure the early afternoon in January 2020, when we traveled together- students, faculty, staff-to see *Just Mercy* at our Middletown theatre. I remember the feeling I had as I walked into the lobby and saw the entire community gathered together. I remember sitting with your Class in one of the theatres as we watched that searing portrait of the poison of white supremacy and the endless struggle and ultimately successful liberation of a Black man incarcerated for a crime he did not commit. I remember sitting together silently at the end of the film as we responded emotionally and spiritually to the narrative shared so powerfully on that screen.

We were trying, I think, to comprehend not only the long, long deferred release of Walter McMillian from death row. We were understanding that his experience and suffering ultimately broke him, prevented him from fully experiencing freedom, and family, and hope; we were thinking about the community of death row prisoners he left behind. We were thinking about how little some of us knew about mass incarceration, the death penalty, and our system of injustice. We were thinking about how much certain members of our community understood this system of intolerance all too well.

We were thinking about Bryan Stevenson's words: "In America, we have a system that treats you much better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent."

We became, collectively, better, or to use Morrison's words, more humane people that day, more restless, more thoughtful, more aware of the needs, sufferings, and tragedies in our country and world.

And in the very same way, we were transformed that year by Messiah's spoken word and Steph and Bwembya's accompanying dance, performed both in Wilmington for the celebration of Dr. King's birthday and later in Chapel here at St. Andrew's. Their performance expressed and brought to life the pain, struggle, anguish caused by continued violent assaults against Black people in America: Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice. Their performance prefigured the sufferings of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery to come.

Then, on the day after you graduated, on May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered on the streets of Minneapolis, igniting a national and international protest of millions asserting, once and for all, that Black Lives Matter, that white supremacy systems of oppression and violence had survived and resurrected themselves in new and alarming ways in the 21st century, that it was time to take action and demand change. The marches and demonstrations held in the midst of the pandemic signaled America and the world's urgent commitment to a more humane world. Floyd's lynching marked the latest chapter in the narrative Bryan Stevenson, Messiah, Steph, and Bwembya depicted so vividly. We called for and marched for change and for reform. As Sherrilyn Iffil observed as she received the Radcliffe Medal at Harvard last week, this was a time of national unity and determination. Unfortunately, we soon witnessed an inevitable American backlash.

Two weeks before this, your second graduation, came the white supremacy massacre in Buffalo, an act of deliberate murder and hate that sought to tear apart families and a community of love, dignity, and faith, a community that had long endured the deliberate and debilitating effects of structural racism.

Informed, mis-educated, and incited by the doctrine of white supremacy replacement theory, the killer chose a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood as the site of his racial terrorism. He killed ten and injured three people that terrible afternoon.

This was one white supremacy response to the millions in the summer of 2020 who called for an end, once and for all, to racism and intolerance and police violence. The white supremacy virulence takes other forms of course: the mob violence of January 6th 2021 (the Confederate flag and Proud Boys gave it away), suppression of voting rights, escalation of talk and investments in "law and order", threats against public school teachers and professors who dare teach truth and reconciliation by describing our country's racist past and present as a way of creating a more accepting future. Writers like Morrison and Stevenson

now find their books banned in states throughout the country; students can turn in their teachers for the crime of making them uncomfortable with references to racism, intolerance, and white supremacy. Parents can do the same, forming leagues of intolerance.

We now understand that creating a more humane world is a dangerous undertaking, a threat to an established and reactionary old order. It is not for the faint of heart, but then again, we know it never has been.

In a tragic way, the pandemic reinforced something else we should have known to be true: that in the world of health care too, 21st century systems have built and maintained and accepted the proposition that some lives just simply matter more than others, that some people deserve special access, special doctors, special treatment; and others deserve only the most cursory attention and commitment, and at times even less than this minimal level of care.

Dr. Paul Farmer, who died this spring (and who spoke powerfully here in Engelhard) dedicated his life to developing health care approaches that would honor the essential humanity of the poor, the neglected, the invisible people of the world.

Awakened and outraged by the death of a pregnant patient with five children caused by her inability to pay for a blood transfusion, Farmer was haunted in his heart and soul, by the patient's sister's voice. He told the story to Tracy Kidder this way, beginning by quoting her grieving voice:

"This is terrible. You can't even get a blood transfusion if you're poor". And she said 'we're all human beings;' she said that again and again 'We're all human beings.'"

He had witnessed what he said was " the world as it really is," and he refused to look away. He embraced the doctrine of proximity, always making time for his patients in Haiti, Peru, Mexico, Rwanda, Cambodia, and Roxbury Massachusetts. He wrote, "People who do not have direct exposure to the ill and suffering and poor are much more likely to make errors in formulating policy." He rejected all the reasons experts told him his commitment to care for the poor was futile, unsustainable, too expensive, too much for anyone to take on. He insisted on saying yes to care, yes to accompaniment, yes to healing, yes to building infrastructure to make health flourish in these communities.

Farmer believed that health care is a human right, and therefore he identified and deplored what he called the structural violence that was inflicted on the poor, sick, and destitute. He argued that the world needs preferential system of health care for the poor. He asserted boldly that the very idea that some people by

virtue of wealth, privilege, race, or nationality deserved better health care than others lie at the root of "all that is wrong in the world."

As the Founder of *Partners in Health*, Farmer led international efforts combating tuberculosis, HIV, and Ebola. He gave his life to the mission of changing the way we in the world view medical care. Farmer served on the Board of the Equal Justice Initiative: he knew disparities in public health always reflected systems of racism and the "othering of people."

Farmer, writers, and historians sounded the alarm immediately as the pandemic began. The virus would test public health readiness, flexibility, and resources. It would expose glaring inequities in our society, built up by decades of racism, neglect, intolerance (as evidenced by enduring segregation, red lining, disinvestment in public services, education, housing, transportation and health care).

The virus, experts predicted, would test our capacity for sacrifice, generosity, and responsibility for others.

The United States' performance (despite outstanding doctors and the rapid development of the vaccine) in its response to COVID is miserable both in and of itself and in comparison, to the work of other well-resourced countries; our historical acceptance of conditions and systems that endangered the lives of vulnerable people and our collapse of national unity, cohesion, and humanity have cost us so many lives.

In wake of the one million people lost to COVID, and the unspeakable carnage in Buffalo and Uvalde Texas over the past three weeks, Elizabeth Dias in a recent essay argues that Americans have lost the capacity to value the miracle of each and every life in the world. She quotes these words shared by Rabbi Mychal B Springer, manager of clinical pastoral education at New York Presbyterian Hospital:

The teaching [he refers to an ancient Jewish writing in the Mishnah ] is, each person is so precious that the whole world is contained in that person and we have to honor that person completely and fully. If a single person dies, the whole world dies, and if a single person is saved, then the whole world is saved.

The data collected by the New York Times on the pandemic reflects the disproportionate suffering and trauma the elderly, Black and Hispanic communities, essential workers, and the poor endured over these two years.

It reflects too the destructive impact (and subsequent suffering and death in many parts of the country) of

reckless and irresponsible media and political disinformation campaigns that sought to discredit and demonize the World Health Organization, the Center for Disease Control and medical experts on issues ranging from masking, to physical distancing, to vaccinations. And yes, the data suggests that many Americans did not care if their behavior and resistance to CDC protocols caused death in their communities. Many refused to think about or merely knew and accepted the consequences of their behavior.

"3/4 of US COVID deaths came from the elderly, those 65 and older. Early on, 43% of all COVID deaths came from residents and staffs at nursing homes. 200,000 deaths came from this group."

Public health experts agree that "the reluctance of others to adapt their behavior was a contributing factor to the large number of deaths among older people."

"A lot of what has effectively been a slaughter has been the product of policies and public health failings and just not caring" said Dr. Louise Arenson, geriatrician at University of California at San Francisco.

"Black and Hispanic people of every group have died at higher rates than white people... The racial disparity of deaths was especially extreme at the beginning of the pandemic, but the gaps remain today. Hispanics died at a rate 4 times that of whites of the same age group before the vaccine was available. Black people died at 3 times the rate of whites during that period."

As Sarah Jaffe observes in the New York Review of Books, these numbers reflect both current and historical targeted and intentional neglect and racism: In our country, co-morbidities are distributed unequally: the very air we breathe in neighborhoods and workplaces is unequal, and access to health care is rationed. But the effects of these contemporary inequities are also piled upon historic ones, and [as Rupa Marya and Raj Patel write], 'precondition bodies to react differently, with ancestries of oppression passed on literally in human DNA.'

"Nearly 80% of workers aged 20-64 who died of COVID in 2020 worked in industries designated as essential. A disproportionate number of essential workers are people of color: workers in food service, health care, construction, transportation, agriculture, manufacturing."

"80 percent of workers 20-64 who died of COVID worked in essential jobs", a phrase that disguised the reality and feeling many such workers expressed to Jaffe: over the past two years, they felt non-essential

'expendable,' invisible, targeted, and vulnerable.

"Citizens without a college degree and who lived in poor, crowded neighborhoods experienced high fatality rates."

Jaffe concludes her essay with two powerful and painful insights. First, many relatives of COVID victims never had the opportunity to say goodbye and grieve for the loss of a loved one. She writes, these relatives of the one million people who died, " have walked this path in isolation, mourning, and anger. They feel the people they love have been rendered invisible in a country eager to put the pandemic in the past."

Secondly, the trauma of health care workers is severe: they served as the only people accompanying patients in their last desperate, lonely hours. They suffer because of what they witnessed, a reality the country rarely saw." It shatters you at some point," Elizabeth Lalasz, a Nurse at Stroger Hospital in Chicago, observes.

They suffer now because the gratitude and appreciation health care essential workers received early in the pandemic has been replaced by contempt as they seek to employ masking and distancing protocols and deal with threats of violence.

They have witnessed the deaths of the pandemic and realized "that essential workers and the most vulnerable of society have been treated as collateral damage. As a result, grieving is regarded as unnecessary, as pointless, or excessive."

I realize your last three months at St. Andrew's and your first two years of college have felt fragmented and at times frustrating. I understand how sick everyone is of the virus and how its attendant policies designed to control spread and reduce suffering and death have somehow been politicized and distorted in pursuit of an ethic of individualism that sees caring, compassion, sacrifice and love as signs of human weakness.

But as St. Andreans, we embrace a different narrative.

We have come to understand that citizenship in the human family, and promises to live more humane and compassionate lives come with an ethic of discernment, readiness, action, and responsibility.

We understand that we have to be willing to think, to get proximate, and to act and advocate for others we do not know or even at first see; we have to literally break through and see and hear and feel the suffering that surrounds us.

Yes - this means making a commitment to seeing, learning from, and accompanying others who are struggling, desperately poor, and living on the literal margins of our communities.

We have to be willing to care for, to accompany, to love others in the ways we love and honor and protect one another. Now that we know how to love a small community like St. Andrew's, we have to follow the implications of Farmer's brilliant insight: "the one who suffers is a member of your family"

We have to have the ability to grieve, to feel, to empathize, to understand what is happening, especially when suffering is out of our daily eyesight and hearing range. If six million lives lost to COVID in the world and over a million dead in the United States seems like a number irrelevant to us and our friends, we need to ask ourselves how we lost our essential connection to the human family.

And finally, we have to act on the sadness, grief, and outrage we feel as we see the pandemic and our society's response to it described as a slaughter of many people who ultimately just do not matter enough.

We need new approaches to health care, education, housing, and transportation to create a preferential system to honor all citizens, all children.

We should be proud that St. Andrew's mission demands our engagement in the work of truth, reconciliation, regeneration, and dignity for all in this world. We embrace a public purpose, seek to build a community of diversity and humanity, and make financial aid the very foundation of our school.

We know that the private school movement in America has an unfortunate association with white supremacy. We know there are private schools who boast of their ability to maintain a veneer of suburban wealth, privilege, elitism, and arrogance. We know some private schools and private school parents who refused to protect their local communities, essential workers, teachers, staff members, and immunocompromised students and families from the danger of the first 9 months of the pandemic. Why, they demanded, do we have to sacrifice for the good and health of others?

The mission, Paul Farmer reminds us, is based on "solidarity... We stand with our patients in their struggle

for equity and social Justice. We provide wrap around social support-making house calls, being available to come running when called, advocating for patients as needed. practical, spiritual, intellectual engagement.”

We know this: the only purpose of education, of medical care, of leadership, of justice, of the Arts, of life, is to cultivate a radical inclusive commitment to grace, love, accompaniment, and mercy. We begin small, learning how to love ourselves, our families, and our own communities- then, if education is as inspirational as it should be, we radically expand our circles.

At a young age, as seniors in high school, you were thrust into this work: We embrace the experience, learn from it, grow from it, and in so doing realize that we together can help rescue the humanity of the world.

You have your St. Andrew's education and now two more years of life experience, studying in college, working to make ends meet, confronting complex personal and familial challenges, living in and learning from a global pandemic.

I know that this particular St. Andrew's community will continue to provide guidance, inspiration, and support every step of your life. And I know you will take good care of one another in the celebrations and challenges that lie ahead, but do not limit your humanity and love to your St. Andrew's colleagues or community circles.

Extend it, stretch it, and make yourself a witness now to the reality and pain and tragedy others bear daily. And then accompany others to a far better space.

I give my final words to Paul Farmer:

“I can have this world of privilege and I like this world of privilege. But I'm not willing to erase this world of suffering. People don't get up in the morning and say ‘I'm going to erase this world of suffering.’ They're just cosseted. They don't have to see the suffering. We live in a country so rich that you can hide anything away in it...What does it mean to be human instead of a cockroach? Solidarity, compassion, sympathy, and love...”