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Chapel Talk
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“On Seeing St. Anne’s”

For the Board of Trustees at St. Anne’s Episcopal School, especially Taylor Cameron, Emily Kegerreis, and Don Cooney, whose character was forged in fire.

This story begins on around 1:30 pm on Friday, January 31st, 2025 – about a year ago – in the fifteen minutes before E Block, the last period of the day. I received an alarming call that the head of school of St. Anne’s, where many St. Andrew’s faculty and staff children go to school, from where some of you graduated, and about which most of you know, had been arrested. As a member of St. Anne’s Board of Trustees, I was stunned, unsure of what to do except to teach the St. Andrew’s students in front of me.

On that fateful Friday afternoon my Latin students and I were discussing Book 6 of Vergil’s *Aeneid* in which Aeneas, the mythological ancestor of the Roman people, descends into the Underworld to speak with his deceased father. Joining Aeneas on this treacherous journey is the Sibyl, a priestess of the god Apollo, who serves as his guide. As they move through the various precincts of the dead, the Sibyl helps Aeneas to see the promising future of Rome but also the terrible gravity of his endeavors.

Book 6 is my favorite of Vergil’s epic poem. It weaves together Greek myth and Roman history, Roman politics and Greek philosophy, but on that startling Friday my mind turned to its murky ambiguity, what a Vergilian scholar might call “the clarity of unclarity.”¹ All of a

¹ “In terms of art and poetry, we can say that sometimes, for reasons we seldom know, human beings want their images to be extremely plausible and extremely clear, and sometimes they prefer that their images be, in some way

sudden and without warning, uncertainty and darkness had seeped into my life. St. Anne's was in crisis, and as a steward of the place, I bore responsibility: to the children, who attend so that they may grow in wisdom and love; to the professional staff, who work tirelessly on behalf of those students; to the families of the school, who are drawn to its culture of kindness; and to St. Andrew's, who helped to found St. Anne's nearly twenty-five years ago.

On that sobering Friday I wished I had a Sibyl, a seer who could have guided me and the St. Anne's community through great fear and trembling, steering us towards the light. Unfortunately, there was no guide, no promise of a flourishing future; instead, I drove myself to St. Anne's, rushing out of history into history, to help in any way that I could.²

I'm not going to rehearse the details of the head's arrest because they are ugly; suffice it to say, the Board of Trustees unanimously voted to terminate him. We also vowed transparency in our communications and leadership, so on that Sunday, February 2nd, 2025, we hosted a town hall meeting in the St. Anne's gym. What was billed as an hour-long Q&A turned into a sobering, three-hour session of grief, pain, and upset. The community was rightfully angry and scared, but parents and friends also conveyed incredible grace, prayer, and unity.

I mention this town hall because last Sunday, February 1st, 2026, St. Anne's kicked off Black History Month with an ebullient community brunch. Nearly 140 people packed the gym,

or other, unclear, because they have come to think and feel that unclarity is more nearly capable than clarity is of representing what is true and beautiful" (W.R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil's Aeneid* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976, 27).

² Cf. the last sentence of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*: "And soon now we shall go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time."

and we ate, danced, laughed, sang, and celebrated. The state of the school, it seems to me, is strong. What a difference a year makes.

One of the action items that emerged from that horrible weekend one year ago was that St. Anne's needed to find an interim leader. While three of my Board colleagues were tasked with running the day-to-day operations of the school, I was asked to run the interim head search. Looking back on the flurry of meetings, phone calls, and emails from last year, I'm amazed by how much we had to do and how much we didn't know. We are unpaid volunteers, and most of us are not educators. However, the students, faculty, and staff of St. Anne's inspired the Board; their resilience in the face of a major disruption was remarkable.

Equally inspiring to me was the support that came from this community: from my colleague on the Board, Ms. McGrath; from parents like Dr. Fisher, Dr. Hyde, Mr. Edmunds, and Mr. Everhart; from alumni parents like Mrs. Hurtt, Sra. Ramírez, Mrs. Duprey, and Mr. and Mrs. Honsel; from Rev. G and Rev. B; from my students, who on a daily basis encouraged excellence in me just as I encouraged excellence in them. Indeed, St. Anne's would not be St. Anne's without St. Andrew's, but I also like to think that St. Andrew's would not be St. Andrew's without St. Anne's.

It's probably the time in the talk to recognize a special guest in our chapel today. Tonya Beilstein is St. Anne's interim head of school. It was one year ago – Super Bowl Sunday 2025 – that Tonya and I first spoke on the phone. She lives with her husband Eric in San Antonio, TX; they moved there after spending many years in southern California, where she had been a successful head of school. Tonya had never been in the state of Delaware before talking with me,

but two weeks later, we welcomed her for an on-campus visit. The dynamic relationship between fate and free will, the interactions between gods and mortals . . . This is the stuff of epic poetry, but I believe a divine hand brought Tonya to St. Anne's. When we met, it was as if I was greeting an old friend. I perceived a woman of faith, focus, and humility who implicitly understood the mission of the school; an optimistic servant-leader who immediately recognized a caring and loving community and perhaps saw a little bit of herself in us.

Mrs. Beilstein, in turn, helped St. Anne's to remember who we were and who we aspired to be. In early February 2025 – in the aftermath of the arrest – the school issued a public-facing communication in which we mentioned “a desire for justice and accountability, and perhaps even a thirst for vengeance.” Tonya, who was interviewing for a job, told a few Trustees that this line didn't feel like St. Anne's – that “a thirst for vengeance” ran counter to our Episcopal values of faith, learning, love, hope, and compassion. She was right; in the heat of the moment, while we were processing a range of raw emotions, we had briefly lost touch with our essential character.

With a gentle heart and moral courage to speak truth, Mrs. Beilstein reminded us not to seek payback, not to seethe with resentment, not to drown in paralyzing doubt. Instead, we should pursue justice and accountability but do so with grace and patience. Mrs. Beilstein, it seems to me, became our Sibyl. She found us weak, lonely, and dispirited and helped us to grow and heal by modeling our foundational principles. She was a link to an unchangeable past, a wise guide in our present moment, and a prescient seer of our shared future. Mrs. Beilstein has also steered us through a series of transitions: helping to recruit St. Anne's new

head of school, eagerly collaborating with him in advance of his arrival, and supporting the Board in its own season of change. She will be with us for a few more months, at which point she will return to San Antonio and begin service as head of Hill Country Montessori School. We are incredibly grateful to her, and we are so excited for her next chapter.

So what lessons can we draw from this sermon? Certainly, I could speak of resilience and the importance of good leadership, but I want to return to character, an idea that Mrs. Honsel challenged us to consider at school meeting: “Character is what you do when no one else is watching.” Indeed – but I would like to introduce a simpler formulation: Our character is our fate.³ If in our daily practices we choose to explore faith, if we choose to demonstrate learning, if we choose to accept love, if we choose to follow hope, if we choose to express compassion, those choices stop becoming choices; they become character. They become, in essence, the air that you breathe, and that character – your habits, customs, and practices – defines who you are, whether you’re in the chilliest land or on the strangest sea.⁴ It also defines those around you, elevating them to be the best versions of themselves.

³ ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων. [Character is fate.] Herakleitos, *7 Greeks*, trans. Guy Davenport. New York: New Directions, 1995, 165.

⁴ Cf. Emily Dickinson –
“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -

Character is fate, but attaining character is not easy. In fact, you will seemingly stumble as much as you succeed. Consider the story of St. Anne's. A group of devoted, thoughtful Trustees hired a head of school whom we had to fire after seven months under the worst circumstances. That's a failure, but instead of wallowing in bitterness or self-pity, we learned from the experience, listened to feedback and advice, and leaned in to the work. Our daily habits of mind and heart reflected our character. That was our fate, and today St. Anne's is stronger than we could have imagined one year ago. Progress, not perfection. Thank you.

Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.