

Jonah-Kai Baker Chapel Talk
November 20, 2025

When I was first asked to give this chapel talk, I was a bit reluctant. I don't see myself as a font of deep wisdom or hilarious anecdotes, and I don't have any particularly moving stories of overcoming incredible adversity. My next thought—and I suspect this was the reason I was asked to talk on Thanksgiving—was to try to take some historical angle on the holiday. But I actually don't know any more than the rest of you about the history of Thanksgiving, so that's not really an option. So why am I up here talking to you all?

The simple answer is that I'm only 23 years old, and I wake up almost every day feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the world. I think about small tasks—washing dishes, printing homework, planning practice—and also much bigger questions: Do I want to be a teacher forever? Where will I be in five years? What do I want to do with my life?

It feels like the world is wide open before me—a feeling that is invigorating but also paralyzing. I imagine that many of you feel the same way, or will at some point soon. It is an immense privilege to have this feeling of unlimited opportunity, however anxiety-inducing it may at times be.

This feeling is truly a product of the many privileges I have been granted throughout my life. I was born in a beautiful and prosperous city, San Francisco, to loving, college-educated parents. I've grown up as a white cisgender man in a society defined by white-supremacy and patriarchy. My parents—both teachers—always valued education immensely, and I was lucky enough to attend excellent private schools my

entire life. It was never a question that I would go to college, and when the time came to actually apply, I was in a position to choose among dozens of incredible options. When I made the decision to go to Carleton College, like when I've made almost every big decision in my life, I reassured myself that regardless of the choice I made, it would work out well. I told myself: "I'm choosing between great options, it'll be fine either way..."

And so far, I've been right. My life has been fine and easy at just about every stage. My privilege has taken me a long way without me trying too hard or taking many risks. Whenever I want, I can navigate the world on auto-pilot, not worrying about the way I'm being perceived, the way I'm representing people of my race, or whether other people think I belong in a space. I arrived at St. Andrews' last year wholly unqualified for the many responsibilities I'd be holding. I'd never taught a high school class before. I'd never been paid to coach anything. Yet I arrived in our first full faculty meeting, sitting alongside folks who had been teachers for longer than I had even been alive with no fear of speaking up or sharing my opinion. There was no mental friction. No part of me had to pause and wonder, 'Do I belong here?' or 'Will all these people judge or dismiss me because of who I am?' There was an automatic assumption that I belonged—this space was designed for people like me. When I speak, people listen—not necessarily because of my qualifications, but because of my gender, race, and appearance. This is my privilege in action.

For all of you, attending a school like St. Andrew's lends you some amount of privilege. Each and every one of you is now in a prime position to attend a prestigious college and achieve an excellent higher-education. At the same time, each of you identifies differently based on your class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability—identities that impact the way you navigate life at St. Andrew's and beyond. In fact, diversity across these identities is crucial to our community's goals, and it is my hope that St. Andrew's can be a place where you all feel the same belonging and freedom that my privilege granted me. This is not an easy thing for our community to achieve, but it is something we must work toward together.

I point this out, because—as Peter Parker learned from his Aunt May and Uncle Ben—“with great power, comes great responsibility.” Privilege grants each of us power within the world, but also prescribes us a responsibility to change the world. Working toward justice necessarily means doing our part to dismantle the structures of inequity and oppression that are all around us. For those facing systemic marginalization, this work is a daily battle that you were born into. For those with privilege, it is a choice you need to make.

Now, for the first of two history teacher moments in this talk: as my Research Sem students can tell you, you always need to cite your sources. The model I will soon be drawing on is derived primarily from Professor Laura J. Wernick's article, “Leveraging Privilege: Organizing Young People with Wealth to Support Social Justice.”

Wernick offers a framework for how people can use their privilege to advance social justice. Their model calls on us to develop “critical consciousness” of the systems of privilege and oppression in our world and to reckon honestly with our role within those systems. This reflection must operate in tandem with tangible actions that leverage each of our particular skills, access, and forms of privilege. At the same time, relationships of trust with non-privileged groups must underlie both that reflection and that action.

Fundamentally, the more privilege you have, the more you need to consider what you do with it. Do you just want to ride that privilege to a life of individual ease and comfort, ignoring the people who suffer under the same systems that benefit you? Or do you want to use your privilege to fight against those systems of injustice to create a more equitable world?

Now, I’m not asking you to be ashamed of your privilege, to ignore it, or to try to throw it away. I want you all to be grateful for the privilege you have and the opportunities you’ve received, and to use that access to create the same opportunities for others.

This brings us to the second and final history teacher moment in my talk. I want to leave you all with a quote that many ninth graders read for US History just last week; because ultimately, the choice Wernick describes—between self-centered auto-pilot ease and selfless positive action—isn’t new. It’s a choice people have faced

for centuries, whether we say we're fighting for social justice, or, as John Adams did in 1776, for the public good.

At the dawn of our nation, Adams declared: "Every [person] must seriously set [themselves] to root out [their] Passions, Prejudices and Attachments, and to get the better of their private Interest. The only reputable Principle and Doctrine must be that all Things must give Way to the public."

For Adams, the only hope for liberty and democracy was if everyone made the choice to put their individual interests—the fruits of their privilege—aside in favor of the public good—the rights of others. I believe this plea resonates now more than ever.