

ALL SCHOOL CHAPEL TALK

**Wallace Gym
August 25, 2004**

Readings:

Psalm 103: Verses 15-18

**As for mortals, their days are like grass;
They flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.**

Philippians 4: Verses 8-9

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Good morning and welcome to our All-School Chapel. This is one of the three times during the school year when all of us, students and faculty and many trustees and parents—some 2,000 people strong—gather to celebrate as a community.

In many ways, this chapel service marks the formal beginning of Lovett's 79th year and indeed it is important to gather from time to time as an entire community. Coming together as we do this morning is a ritual—a ceremony—that reminds us of our ties with those who have gone before us. Literally thousands of Lovett students and faculty have participated in this kind of all-school chapel in years gone by. It is comforting to me—and I hope to you—that we are part of a school which takes the time to honor tradition and ritual. Every community needs ceremonies such as this one to help link past, present, and future. Ceremonies remind us of the transcendent and eternal purposes and principles of our school and of education. Amidst the busyness of our work here, the classes, the tests, the homework, the athletic contests, the arts performances, the meetings—the list is almost endless—gathering together this morning in a chapel service reaffirms for us that we must use this extraordinary education we are blessed with at Lovett ultimately to serve others and to serve our Creator.

In fact, it is in service and in love toward others and toward God that we find true happiness and fulfillment. Let me repeat that. In serving and in loving others and God, we find true happiness and fulfillment.

Unfortunately, this notion of happiness is one that is difficult to grasp in a society that encourages us to focus so much on our individual needs. What we often forget as a society is that happiness of any real depth and substance results from giving of ourselves to others, from almost forgetting ourselves as we go about our work and lives. A fellow headmaster perhaps put it best when he told his students how to go about being happy in a chapel service at his own school:

“If you want to be happy, then you must learn to love, to pay the price of caring for others, of putting them first, of inconveniencing yourself. That is the pathway to happiness.”

Tony Jarvis, Headmaster, Roxbury/Latin School,
All Love’s Excelling, (2002), p. 190.

Happiness does not flow from what you have or don’t have; it does not flow from a title or a salary or a particular career; rather, it flows from trying to love and to serve and from trying to do what is right—everyday. As one of my favorite pastors and writers, Peter Gomes, says:

“ . . . (H)appiness itself is not a destination but a journey, not a result but a process, not a content but a consequence. It comes from the accumulated experience of seeking to live the good life—that is, a life that is good, a process that begins anew each day, when one is never too young and never too old, never too bright and never too dull, to begin again.”

Peter Gomes, Strength for the Journey (2003), p. 70.

And, the journey toward, real substantive happiness is not easy. It is a struggle! And yet, we know that nothing worthwhile was ever achieved without struggle or as Frederick Douglass, the former slave who won his freedom and became a powerful spokesman for abolitionism, put it:

“If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” (repeat)

Our own struggles as a country—the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement—are gripping reminders that progress comes to us as a result of real struggle waged literally every day.

And happiness and fulfillment are no different. They come to us as we struggle and battle to live lives grounded in eternal and transcendent purposes and principles that take us outside of ourselves and that constantly challenge us to reach higher in our thinking, in our integrity, and in our effort. To experience real happiness, we simply must throw ourselves into endeavors and causes larger than the individual. As we struggle to live into our calling to act on these enduring principles and ideas that we heard about earlier in Philippians—“whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just . . .” —we must adopt what one observer has called a “cathedral philosophy.” Let me explain.

I was blessed to travel with a number of Lovett colleagues in late July to Ecuador to visit Siempre Verde, Lovett's beautiful cloud forest property. While on that trip, several of us visited two cathedrals in Quito, the capital of Ecuador. It took over 160 years to build those cathedrals. Think about that—a construction project lasting 160 years. The architects and builders who initially envisioned these cathedrals did not live to see them finished and had no idea that they would in fact be completed. Talk about an act of faith!

Like the cathedral builders of centuries ago, we know that in living lives of meaning and integrity as called for in Philippians and throughout the Bible, we might not always see the fruits of our work. We may not see the results of our striving and struggle. But still we must labor on and that of course is where faith comes in—the kind of faith described by the psalmist in Psalm 103 when he talks of believing in God's steadfast love as being “from everlasting to everlasting.”

A big part of faith is being open to grace! Remember that grace is a blessing that we did not ask for, we did not expect, and did not necessarily deserve. There are countless examples of grace—a warm and caring smile during a tough day, an unexpected act of kindness from a friend or stranger, a call or note or an email from an old friend, a beautiful flower, a refreshing breeze on a hot day. If we are open to grace and if we look for grace, we see it all the time and that will strengthen our faith.

Albert Schweitzer was a successful organist and scholar in Europe and had achieved great comfort, security, and reputation. Most of us in Schweitzer's position would have continued in his secure roles but instead, he—in his thirties—gave up all of that—his professional comfort and his personal security—and he pursued the arduous study required to be a doctor. He then went to Africa where he spent the bulk of the rest of his life as a missionary doctor. Why did he make this change? Why did he give up his comfortable status and standing in life and make enormous sacrifices for himself and those close to him? Listen to what he said about the kind of choice which he made:

“I do not know what path in life you will take, but I do know this: If, on that path, you do not find a way to serve, you will never be happy. We are not alone. We are a part of something bigger, and we experience the connection by giving with grace a portion of our time and talent to service.”

Albert Schweitzer understood as the gifted playwright and lecturer George Bernard Shaw did that real wisdom and happiness have their source not in experience but in “*our capacity for experience.*” In other words, we are wise, we are fulfilled, we are truly happy to the degree that we are always open to new experience, and new ideas, and new people. It is then that we see more and more of God's grace.

In addition to being open to new experience and to grace, we must be grateful for those great gifts! John Claypool, a thoughtful minister and writer who has had more than his fair share of grief because of the death of his young daughter, tells us that “*the way out of*

darkness is gratitude.” The so-called “attitude of gratitude” makes us all the more likely to see the grace that is present even in life’s toughest moments.

The road to happiness is full of challenge, struggle, and paradox. Peter Gomes captures the essence of this struggle and paradox when he says that truly happy people

“are those who are able to stand up in the midst of the real and the worse that life has to offer, and are not destroyed or compromised or overcome.”

Peter Gomes, Strength for the Journey, p. 69

To make this kind of stand, though, for all that is right, honorable, just, and truthful demands a brand of faith and love that takes us outside ourselves and that proves itself in our devotion to others and to noble causes and principles, and that often require sacrifice, personal inconvenience, and courage. Philippians says it so beautifully as does Lovett’s Character Pledge, which we shall say later in this service.

Gail Brown, one of our fifth grade teachers, shared with me recently a book of writings from last year’s fifth graders to this year’s fifth graders. In effect, these writings are pearls of wisdom and advice to new fifth graders about the fifth grade experience. Last year’s fifth graders, in writing these pieces, wanted to help new fifth graders be successful. These words of advice are so thoughtful, so helpful. In fact, they are of significant assistance to this still relatively new headmaster. I thank last year’s fifth graders for their counsel and for this gift. I would love to share all of this advice with you but there is not time to do that this morning. I do want to share one letter with you. It is entitled,

“How to Survive Fifth Grade”

Dear New Fifth Grader,

Fifth grade is very fun, but you have a lot of responsibilities. You have to do bookstore, wrap silverware for the kindergartners, straighten bookshelves in the library, pride and SSC.

In fifth grade you have more homework than you’ve ever had before. If you don’t do it, you have to write a note to your parents and get it signed. In math if you don’t do your homework, you get a red slip and also get it signed.

(and most especially this third paragraph—this student’s version of the Golden Rule):

To make new friends, talk with everyone, don’t ignore anyone, don’t make fun of anyone, and be nice to everyone and they will be nice to you.

Some advice is to be very organized and neat. It WILL pay off eventually. Make sure that you keep every paper that is given to you and returned to you.

**Before a test, start to study a few nights before it. It will help you get good grades and give you a good reputation.
Well, that's that and I hope you have as much fun as I did in fifth grade!**

Rich Niehaus

What a stirring piece of advice about service, responsibility, and caring for your neighbor from this former fifth grader to the new fifth grade.

What an incredible year we shall have together if we follow the simple but powerful advice of this very thoughtful fifth grader, especially that piece that reads:

To make new friends, talk with everyone, don't ignore anyone, don't make fun of anyone, and be nice to everyone and they will be nice to you.

I look forward to sharing Lovett's 79th year with you. I feel blessed to be a part of a community that has these kinds of sacred gatherings and that seeks to pursue a vision of education that ultimately calls us to lead lives of service and kindness and integrity.

William S. Peebles IV
Headmaster