

**Headmaster's Remarks
Upper School Chapel
October 25, 2006**

Readings:

Psalm 91: 1-4

**You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."
For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;
he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.**

Matthew 11: 28-30

**"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."**

Good morning.

I am sometimes asked why we have chapel at Lovett. That question is certainly a fair one and an important one. I'd like to take a few moments this morning and offer some of my thoughts in response to that question—Why do we have chapel?

First—a little historical perspective. On February 2, 1954—some 52 ½ years ago—Mrs. Lovett, our school's founder, and her trustees made an agreement with the Cathedral of St. Philip and we effectively became an Episcopal School at that point. In fact, our name became the Lovett Episcopal School in 1958. In 1959, Mrs. Caro Alston began giving money to Lovett for a new chapel and when we opened in September 1960 at this site on the Chattahoochee, we had three new buildings, including this building containing what is today the Alston Memorial Chapel. Mrs. Alston felt that as an Episcopal School (and Lovett's trustees very much agreed with her at the time), we should have a chapel and chapel services. We ceased being an Episcopal School a few years later but it was clear from the trustees and faculty that there would continue to be a strong commitment to religious and spiritual education here. In fact, a key reason that I was so excited to have the privilege to come to Lovett and still feel so fortunate to be here is that the school does not apologize for seeking to nurture mind, body, *and spirit*.

In our current Statement of Philosophy, which was adopted by our trustees in 1992, we state explicitly our respect for the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as our commitment to encouraging "a sense of responsibility to God." In that same Statement of Philosophy, we also make clear our "respect for diversity" and our desire to enroll "students from all ethnic, cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds who will benefit from a challenging academic program." Moreover, Lovett has always worked to build and sustain a strong and caring sense of community and school spirit—spirit that comes forward at athletic contests, plays and band concerts, and variety shows but spirit that also very positively reveals itself throughout the school day and especially when a member of our community is hurting or has suffered a painful loss. Many people see that quality as one of our

strongest and most important assets. I certainly have been inspired by that quality which I do believe is such a part of this place.

And so our philosophy and tradition suggest that coming together like we do in chapel is important, and appropriate! By the way, the school does not exist nor is it the purpose of the chapel program to impose a particular faith or world view on you. We do think it important to be clear, though, about the philosophical foundations of our school and the fact that there are strong moral and spiritual and religious anchors to our history and to our purpose. We also think it important for you to think carefully about matters of the soul.

But frankly, as important as our school's philosophy is to all of us, I think there are other compelling reasons for coming together like we do in chapel. First, the rituals we practice together in this place—the prayers, the songs, the readings, the procession, the lighting of candles, etc.—are timeless and transcendent. These repetitive practices—which have been carried out across generations—are bigger than we are as individuals and have deep meaning and symbolic value that take us beyond our personal concerns.

Second, the readings from the Old Testament and the New Testament and the prayers and homilies by Reverend Allen and others remind us of certain moral, ethical, and spiritual principles which give our lives additional context and depth. As a school, we believe it important to keep before you those eternal principles which help us stay centered and rooted and anchored amidst the triumphs and tragedies, the victories and defeats, the successes and failures, the certainties and doubts that we all inevitably experience. You study many of these eternal principles—notions like truth, justice, sacrifice, equality, love, community, compassion, faith—in many of your classes and you hear about them every week here. That continuing study of these enduring values is critical—in our view—to our obligation to help prepare you for life. Lovett has always believed that how you choose to lead your lives is the most important decision you shall make—much more important than the decision to pursue a particular college, major, or career. The character and integrity and spirit with which you go about your lives are paramount in the eyes of the school and of our faculty.

As an aside, but I think a relevant aside, the founders and refounders of our country—people like George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln—believed that the sound character of the people of our country would determine whether or not our democracy would be preserved. Listen to what John Adams had to say about the connection between character, morality, and our democratic experiment:

1. “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”
2. “Human passions unbridled by morality and religion . . . would break the strongest cords of our constitution as a whale goes through a net.”

Morality, spiritual conviction, and religion must be ever-present in our lives if we are to have the degree of virtue in our society that in turn allows us to preserve our democratic

liberties. Furthermore, our founders and refounders believed that freedom is not valuable just for its own sake. Rather, freedom exists to serve moral and spiritual ends. God did not intend for us to be free so that we can pursue just our own individual goals and wishes. Rather, freedom gives us the privilege of choosing to act in service to what is right and good. I happen to believe that chapel helps remind us that there are transcendent and eternal moral and spiritual laws that trump and supersede freedom. Freedom carries with it the power and responsibility to serve these higher purposes and to serve God and we should keep those high purposes before us at all times. Chapel, I would suggest, is a way—not the only way but still an important way—to keep these higher principles before us.

And certainly the words of the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament and of Jesus and the disciples remind us of these higher principles. And, we hear these important words every week.

Who among us, regardless of the nature of our faith and beliefs, could not be moved at least to consider the implications of these words from Paul to the Phillipians. He is uttering these words in exaltation and encouragement from a prison. Because of the integrity and tenacity of his faith, Paul spent a lot of time in prison. He was prepared to go to jail and ultimately to die for his faith.

Phillipians 4: 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.

Paul is essentially urging his friends in the church at Phillipi always to use the freedom and power of choice to do what is true and honorable. Our freedom gives us this opportunity—and it is an extraordinary opportunity so few folks across the world have to the degree we have—to make the choices for good called for by Paul.

Back for a moment to the Founding Fathers. They had a very expansive view of religion and they argued passionately for freedom of religion and for separation of church and state. That is why we have the first amendment. Individuals must freely choose their faith but they do need to make a choice for some measure of faith. Or as the philosopher Jacob Needleman has put it, “A religion that is not freely chosen is not religion and a freedom that is not in the deepest sense religious is not freedom” (Jacob Needleman, The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders, 2002, p. 132). My point is that ethics—ethics as prescribed by many religious traditions—are essential to our ability to preserve and enhance democracy and freedom. And so our founders and refounders and history itself would suggest that the kinds of principles we attempt to reinforce in chapel are important at a very practical level to the democracy whose abundant blessings all of us in this room enjoy.

But there is yet another reason for having chapel. We live in a world that is so busy, so demanding. Modern life in the form of competition, materialism, conflict, and technology is constantly pressing in on us. We are obsessed with the now. We are obsessed with the

present moment. We have so little time to nurture our insides, our souls, our hearts. Fifty minutes a week is clearly an insufficient amount of time to minister fully to our hearts and souls but it is at least an effort—an important one I would argue—toward acknowledging the reality of our souls and hearts.

What is the soul? It is your soul that speaks the truth about you and the world about you. It is your soul that speaks the truth about the world as you see it even in the face of stinging criticism. It is your soul that calls you to speak out and struggle against injustice, intolerance, prejudice, and violence. It is your soul that lifts you to love, to sing, to write, to struggle, to dream. It is your soul that causes you to be a doctor or a teacher or a lawyer or an entrepreneur or a minister or a missionary or someone who simply works everyday to strengthen opportunity, freedom, and justice for others across our country and our world not having those gifts. Your soul is the essence of you. Ultimately, you cannot and should not deny your soul and what it calls you to speak, to do, to feel, and to love.

One friend of mine describes the soul as “God’s autograph” on your very being. It is particular to you, it is God-given, it is you as a distinct, unique creature of existence. Typically, we don’t pay enough attention to our hearts and souls. As much as anything, for me, chapel is an attempt—although an incomplete one and an inadequate one by itself—to pay attention to the soul.

Billy Peebles