

Address for Equity Weekend

Just as I'm getting up here to speak, some of you might be asking yourselves: what in the world does this privileged, white, straight, male know about diversity? Well, when I came here almost 4 years ago and heard St. Andreans discussing the importance of diversity, I was asking myself the same question.

To answer it, I want to talk about inheritance. From the moment they are born, everyone in this country and in the world inherits the legacy of hundreds of years of their predecessors, and we inherit the privilege—or lack of privilege—that comes with it.

From kindergarten to 8th grade, I went to school with a class that was entirely white. Being surrounded almost exclusively by people who looked exactly like me was my normal. And, my family and background did little to add a more diverse perspective to my life. On school breaks, I visited my grandparents' house to hear my grandmother tell me, with pride, about our ancestors who fought in the American Revolution. And my grandfather would tell me about the generations of Imbrie men who, one-by-one, got their Princeton degrees and became Presbyterian ministers. On other breaks, we visited my mother's parents, in Southern Delaware—just a few miles from Bryan Stevenson's childhood home. But for my mother growing up in the 60s, those few miles between their neighborhoods made a world of difference. While my mother grew up with immeasurable privilege—including the privilege to be able to come to St. Andrew's—the black community of Southern Delaware was isolated and neglected.

Only now, years later, have I thought up some of the questions I should've asked my grandparents as they told me stories of my family's privileged past. How did my Revolutionary ancestors treat the Native Americans that were here before them? Would those generations of Imbrie ministers have allowed people of color to pray in their churches? What about the women of my family's history—where are their stories? And the question that scares me the most: Generations ago, did the Moore family of Delaware have slaves?

These are the questions that I carry with me every day as part of the legacy that is an unavoidable part of my identity—it's in my name, in how I look, and in how I was raised.

It is only in accepting that privilege, and using it to lift up others, that we can leave a better, more just legacy for the future.

There was one member of my family who, in her little way, did something good and just with her privilege. In the late 1960s, my grandmother and her family lived in Leonia, New Jersey—a small, predominantly white suburb of New York—where many white landlords were illegally preventing minorities from renting their properties. My grandmother helped these minority families by posing as a prospective renter, discovering which homes were only being offered to whites, and exposing the illegal behavior. My grandmother had never really been an activist, and she generally kept to herself. But her

contribution—which was really the least she could do—made a difference for Leonia’s black community. Whenever a black family was being denied fair housing, they could go to Barbara Imbrie, and they knew she would help them. She saw an injustice, got proximate, and let those with less privilege know they could count on her.

Lots of privileged people tend to wonder what they can do about all the injustices surrounding us. For most people in my community at home, they feel satisfied if they just vote for Democrats and call it a day. But when hundreds of years of privilege is staring me in the face, I’m not comfortable with that. So, there are of course ways to be much more active in making a change. Dozens of us sounded the alarm for justice at the Women’s March in January, and members of the Whites Against Racism group worked hard to push Mr. Roach and the administration to hire more teachers of color. Really, there are many ways to get proximate with all kinds of injustice in our surroundings. But the first and most important thing we can do is to be someone that people of every identity know will have their backs—just like the black families of Leonia knew my grandmother had theirs. That is really the essence of what this diversity weekend is asking of people like me. We can’t change the legacy of injustice that precedes us, but we can use our privilege to change the present and the future. If you’re willing to be someone that underprivileged communities can count on, then maybe someday your ancestors will finally have a legacy they are proud of.