

HEAD LINES

A monthly message from Chip Denton, Head of School
September 2020



Dear Trinity Community,

With election day fast approaching, it is important for us as a Christian community of learners to think about this national exercise of our democracy and how we can navigate it during this particularly conflicted time. Much of what I want to say here I have said before, but it bears repeating, this year of all years. Some of you may feel that a school ought to stay out of politics altogether and just stick to science, math, and writing. But schools participate in the larger culture, and what happens in November will impact Trinity—our students, our faculty, our culture. By addressing some things ahead of time, I hope that we might, in fact, be better able to stick to teaching and learning and to reduce some of the anxiety that necessarily attends an election in such a politically divisive moment.



First, let me state Trinity School’s policy, set by the Board: *As an ecumenical school, our community includes Christians and non-Christians from different political parties and persuasions. The school neither takes nor promotes a particular political party or ideology.* We recognize that Jesus-followers who come from different traditions and perspectives will interpret Christ’s call to cross-bearing discipleship by means of political choices that are sometimes at odds with one another. (Check out Tim Keller’s *New York Times* 2018 op-ed, “How Do Christians Fit into the Two-Party System? They Don’t,” for a thoughtful reflection on this reality.) Trinity has a unique opportunity here: We are a community gathered from different churches, from different political traditions, from red and blue pedigrees. We are, if you will, a microcosm in which the radical American idea of *e pluribus unum* (“out of many, one”) can be tested. If not here, where?

Second, *politics matter*. Politics are inevitable. If the rancor and the unpleasantness lead us to disengage, hoping to avoid politics, we are fooling ourselves. People are by nature political animals (credit Aristotle), and silence or disengagement is a political act no less than advocacy or protest (this is one of the strongest points Dr. King makes in “Letter from Birmingham Jail”). Further, part of our job as a school is to educate students about how to follow Christ as political disciples. So I am much more interested in forms of robust civil engagement than in a moratorium on things political. It’s true that calculus and conjugations should not be commandeered by politics and that we have a school to run, but it’s also true that we cannot teach truth, goodness, and beauty well without venturing into the political.

Third, *politics matter only so much*. There are good limits on the political, which we should remember as believers: Christ is Lord over all, and over against all, political systems, and our allegiance to Christ trumps all other allegiances. Further, our politics are limited by the time we live in—I don’t mean 2020, but the time between the cross and the final triumph of God, when Christ returns. During this between-time, when the kingdom of God is already-but-not-yet here, we can never know whether our political acts are fully God’s act. But there is a future and final act in the divine drama when everything is from God and through God and to



God. Only then can our allegiance to God and our allegiance to all other loves (including the political) be fully aligned. For now, our political allegiances can never be ultimate, and this should keep us humble. It should also keep us from shouting at each other even as we disagree.

Fourth, *we have a responsibility to educate students to think, pray, and live Christianly as political people.* Theologian Karl Barth's advice to young people in 1963 in a *TIME* magazine feature is still relevant: "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." Today it would be newsfeeds and social media. And let's add that it would do us all good to digest more than one of those, making sure we get out of our echo chambers—*The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*; CNN and Fox; *First Things*, *Christianity Today*, and *Sojourners*. We all need to be intentional about getting out of our bubbles and hearing from people who are not going to tell us what we already think. (By the way, the book to read here is Alan Jacobs's *How to Think*, and I am thankful that our seniors have read some of this in their theology class.)

Fifth, I recommend a simple practice for us all: *Before we criticize someone on a political matter, we should first state that person's position accurately enough that they will concede that we understand, and only then should we critique.* This is commonsensical civil discourse. It is also a standard of formal debating practice. And it is an act of Christian charity, by which we live out the prayer attributed to St. Francis, "O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek...to be understood as to understand." Such discourse requires time, patience, humility, and careful listening, something much more possible in a Trinity classroom than in 140 characters or a meme.

Finally, a word to parents and teachers. We are the adults in the room, and we are called to model the things that we have talked about in this message. Our students are watching how we handle election results, and incivility at the dinner table is not likely to yield civility in a roundtable discussion in class. We are called to be magnanimous and humble if our side wins; we are called to be hopeful and faithful if our side loses. Teachers bear a special responsibility—they too are political animals and have their own takes on things, but our calling is to shepherd and teach all of our students, regardless of their political leanings, regardless of our own emotional response to the election, always careful of how we manage our power as teachers and leaders. It is not our job to persuade students, but to engage them by prodding, asking questions, offering other perspectives, and teaching them how to make up their minds wisely and justly. This is not easy, as it calls for a conscious restraint of our power, but we knew this when we got into this profession, and we are up to the job.

It would be easy to lament our current cultural moment and to wish that things were different. The violence and the vitriol make my heart pray with passion, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." But until that prayer is answered with a Divine Act that comes in the clouds and not in the polls, an act that cannot be gainsaid, let us ask God to help Trinity be a whisper of what we hope for.

Non nobis,

Chip Denton
Head of School

