



THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL

April 25, 2019

Comments in School Meeting: Reflection on the Recent Tragedy in Sri Lanka

This year has been marked by a number of tragedies that defy comprehension. We now confront a loss of life among the Christian population of Sri Lanka that has stunned the world. There is a sense of helplessness and detachment that sets in at these moments because there is so much we cannot know.

The depth of grief by the mourners, the disruptions in the daily lives of entire populations who now live in fear, the motives in the hearts of the perpetrators – all of this feels out of our reach, well beyond our ability to make sense in normal terms. Only those who have suffered similar, unthinkable violence can know; only those who have lived close to such tragedy and for whom now a trip to the market seems profoundly dangerous can begin to relate; and as for those who have done such things to others, well, only God knows what drove them to inflict such horror and pain.

I have urged this community at recent moments such as this to find strength in the values of our School community, values such as simple respect, civil discourse, and compassion.

At such moments, I have urged this community to keep our trust in “our founding principles as a country; these serve as guideposts in a world that may not share those principles: **in this case, the fundamental right of religious freedom, to worship and practice one’s religion in a safe and respectful environment.**”

This is because when we maintain belief and trust in these principles that bind us together, “...it is a clear rejection of the fear and base impulses that seem to be welling up all around us, and in fact it is an act of faith, faith that we can do better, faith that we can build a better world.”

I continue to believe that the world needs this faith urgently; and that we must use this faith as an optimistic reminder of our better impulses, even when the goodness of humanity is punctuated briefly by hate.

And I also feel this is a time to remember that, as detached as we may feel from these events, as far off as the suffering may be, **we are all connected**, and that these human bonds are far more profound than the shallow hatreds, jealousies, and fears that sometimes draw us apart. No one expressed this more beautifully and more reflectively than the great poet and Christian sermonist John Donne, whose comforting and familiar words from “Meditation XVII” remind us that we are all pages in one book, all part of one world; and whose words feel as if they were written for this very moment:

“...when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. (...)

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

-- John Donne, from *Meditation XVII* (1624)

Thank you.

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