

# HEAD LINES

A Monthly Message from Chip Denton, Head of School



January 2019

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”  
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., quoting Theodore Parker

But let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:24

Dear Trinity Community,

I hope that this letter reaches you some time near the MLK holiday. In a way, it's an apologetic for why we honor this day as a national holiday, and why the ideas that Dr. King talked about still stir our souls at Trinity.

One of those ideas was justice. Dr. King loved to quote the Hebrew prophets (like Amos, cited above), and his simple but profound message to Americans was that the foundational promise of our union (“liberty and justice for all”) was still unfulfilled for many. Today, we tend to talk more about diversity, equity, and inclusion than about justice—and this too is an important conversation. But I'd like to call us back to this great idea that formed such an important part of the Jewish and Christian story, of the classical tradition that goes back to the Greeks, and of the American experience.

I have wondered what Dr. King, were he still alive, would say about current social justice concerns like police shootings, mass incarceration, and implicit bias in hiring. But more than anything else, I have wondered what he would say about the continuing injustice that persists in our educational system in America. I think I can hear him calling for educational justice to roll down like waters and pedagogical righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Our American educational injustice can be seen by looking at the high correlation in nearly every city in America between ZIP codes and high or low median SAT scores. Or look at the way that median family income is correlated with median SAT scores (the more a family makes, the higher the SAT scores, on average). Now I am no sociologist nor the son of a sociologist, and I want to be careful here. Other factors could be at play (such as the education level of parents, or assortative mating patterns). And, of course, correlation is not causation. But I think we can say with confidence that educational inequality is somehow linked to economic and racial differences among Americans. I think that Dr. King would say that this is part of the promise of justice that remains unfulfilled for many Americans.

*Please turn over...*

What we do about this is not simple or clear. Some Christians have decided to remain in the public school system to effect change—let us pray for our brothers and sisters there, and hope that the system is not so broken that it turns good intentions into bad results. Some have started charter schools to serve those with educational disadvantages. Others have banded together to start programs like the Memphis Teacher Residency. We at Trinity have heard a different calling.

We have heard God's call to establish a school that honors him in all we do. We believe that such an educational community has the capacity to form young people in powerful ways that a secular education—whether private, public, or charter—never can. Teaching students the truth, goodness, and beauty that are rooted in Christ is an important way to live justly: Children deserve to know what is real and true. But we know that all education is expensive and that no one but ourselves will pay for this kind of school. From the beginning we have set aside some of what we all pay to help students who could not otherwise afford Trinity.

More than once I've heard people say, "Trinity's education is amazing. I just wish that every student could have this kind of education." As do I, though I know that not all would want it (we won't compromise our Christian mission), and the cost is very high.

Still, we can dream (thank you, Dr. King!). Generous people have made Trinity possible for students who could never have been here without this help. I could tell you some stories that would make you cry, stories of individual donors, of family foundations, and of the Kenan Trust, which gave the seed money for Trinity's endowment for financial aid. May their tribe increase! I pray that donors will remember Trinity in their estate planning, so that one day we may come into significant funding that would be a game-changer for the kind of aid we could offer to families and students. What if our endowment allowed us to have a much wider range for flexible tuition and to fund all demonstrated need? There is much to dream about here.

But in the meantime, we can be shaping Trinity to be a place that welcomes different kinds of people, one that offers equity of access to students from different kinds of families, one that cares whether every family experiences Trinity as their school. We know that the injustices that persist in education are not just economic, and the challenge of belonging is maybe as great as the challenge of access. This is why we are so focused of late on taking the measure of the way that Trinity is experienced by all of our families. This is the rationale for the climate survey called AIM (Assessment of Inclusivity and Multiculturalism) that we will be conducting in late January.

Justice comes first—it is the foundation of God's throne. And the Just One who sits on that throne is named God's Beloved Son, who mercifully invites us all to be part of what Dr. King was fond of calling "the Beloved Community," where all belong and all are included, where the kinship of humanity is celebrated and enjoyed across its many differences. I am thankful for all the ways that Trinity School has mirrored this Beloved Community, and I pray that we might learn how to experience and embody that reality more truly every year. *Non nobis.*



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