

HEADLINES

A Monthly Message from Chip Denton, Head of School



December 2019

Dear Trinity Community,

Many of us enjoyed the recent Middle School Drama production of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. It took me back to the days when my own children were young and we all enjoyed reading about the Herdmans, “the absolutely worst kids in the history of the world.” It was in the halls of Trinity’s first home at Hope Creek Church—in Kathy Tyndall’s third grade, Rita Davis’s fourth grade, and Jodi Garbison’s fifth grade—that I first heard Gladys Herdman belt out, “Shazam! Hey, unto you a Child is born!” I want to thank our drama teacher, Carrie Sippy, and her Middle School thespians for serving up a good reprise of the early days at Trinity School.

I was a little apprehensive about going back to the white Anglo-Saxon protestant (WASP) setting of Barbara Robinson’s story. The world has changed a lot since she wrote her book and since I first read it, and it’s always risky to revisit things we loved long ago. (I’m still recovering from our naïve attempt to share Disney’s *Peter Pan* with our grandson this past summer.) But I have to say that Barbara Robinson’s period piece wears pretty well still. It’s set in a world four generations old now, when Eisenhower WASPs all went to church and even Sunday School and put on Christmas pageants. If Robinson were writing it today, I expect that Imogene and her siblings might not be poor white kids, or if they were, Ralph Herdman might have a MAGA hat on. Or maybe the Mother of God would be Maria, a DACA girl, and the ingenuous Wise Men would be refugees bringing falafel instead of ham. **But for all its datedness, the central force of the original narrative still works and, like all enduring stories, is adaptable to other times and places: at its core, this is a story of how those on the margin help us all see what is really at the center, and that is a message for the ages.** It’s certainly a message for Trinity School, and I am deeply grateful to our Middle Schoolers for reminding us all of the heart of the Good News of Christmas.

The story of outsiders coming toward the center is all over the place in the Gospel. You might say that it is one of the central narrative arcs of the New Testament. From Mary’s Magnificat (“he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate”) to the desperate woman who interrupted Jesus’s important errand for the synagogue ruler (Mark 5) to the parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14, we see the true meaning of Jesus and his Kingdom when someone on the margin comes to the center. This dynamic of the Gospel was the great “mystery” that Paul proclaimed, that “you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13).

Please turn over...

In all of these biblical stories, the outsider coming inside does not become the new center, but helps us all see the true center. The prodigal son who returns home reflects a resplendent light, like the glow in Rembrandt's painting, on the Father's compassion. The older brother who stayed home, like the church kids in the play, has a new chance to see what the Father's love really means. And, most importantly, there is room at the center for everyone. "You are always with me, and all I have is yours, but we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:31-32).

The Herdmans are not, despite their outrageous and hilarious depiction, the center of Robinson's story. They come from the outside toward the center to discover for themselves and to reveal to everyone Who is really at the center. The climax of the story is Imogene's act of worship at the end of the play:

In the candlelight her face was all shiny with tears and she didn't even bother to wipe them away. She just sat there—awful old Imogene—in her crooked veil, crying and crying and crying.

Imogene is having a *non nobis* moment. It's a glimpse of the Center of All Things. And her ability to see this is both an act of grace and also, in God's gracious providence, somehow connected to her being as unlikely a "God-bearer" as the original Mary. Imogene is a gift to us all, if we have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Seeing the play, along with some important conversations I've been having lately, made me think of the value of those who live at the margins of Trinity School. We've been working hard these last few years to be a diverse and inclusive school, and it's easy for this to come off like some act of charity on the part of those of us who are privileged already to be centered. "Out of the generosity of our hearts, we'd like to invite you in." But this is not the way the Gospel works. The last shall be first, and those on the outside have gifts we all need. They see something that we don't yet see, and their arrival at the center is a sign that the King has come. Most importantly, they belong at the center just as much as anyone else, and they remind us all that it's not about us: *Non nobis*. Creating this kind of inclusive community helps us all see the heart of God, and without it, how can we be a Christian school?

So this Christmas, break out your dog-eared copy of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, or get yourself a copy and cozy up with your family for a great read. And let all us celebrate the Imogenes of Trinity School, who bow in worship and bring us all along with them. Shazam! Unto you a child is born. O come, let us adore him!

Merry Christmas, Trinity School!



Chip Denton
Head of School

TRINITY SCHOOL OF DURHAM AND CHAPEL HILL

4011 Pickett Road · Durham, North Carolina 27705 · trinityschoolnc.org · 919-402-8262