

HEAD LINES

A message from Chip Denton, Head of School



The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?
Ecclesiastes 6:11

December 2021

Dear Trinity Community,

People exploring Trinity School for the first time often ask, “What does the Christian mission look like in the classroom and the everyday life of the school?” There are a few easy answers to this question, but I never feel like they are sufficient. I end up talking about worship gatherings (All-School Chapels, Lower School Fellowship, Middle School Sanctuary, Upper School Worship), classroom and advisory devotions, Bible and theology classes. I think these answers are both too much and too little. Too much, because they suggest that these distinctive activities can carry the heavy load of our Christian mission; too little, because the integration of faith and learning that we aspire to is not isolated into these discrete programs.



In his book *Living the Resurrection*, Eugene Peterson tells a story of his friend Brenda, who flew to Chicago to visit her granddaughter, Charity. Charity’s other grandmother had visited the week before, and according to Peterson, she was a woman who “takes her spiritual grandmothering duties very seriously.” The morning after Brenda arrived, Charity crawled into her bed at 5 a.m. and said, “Grandmother, let’s not have any Godtalk, okay? I believe that God is everywhere. Let’s just get on with life.”

A little child shall lead them. Charity has something to offer us as we think about how our Christian faith works itself out in concrete and practical ways. You might expect that a Christian school would be a place with a lot of Godtalk, and sometimes it is. We pray together, we ask one another about our spiritual lives, we try to think Christianly about policies and plans. But there is a way of talking about God that is desiccating and deadening, not life-giving. I think young Charity had a sense of this in her bones. Godtalk that is not connected authentically and meaningfully to real life, to ordinary work and play, is empty and lifeless. And far from advancing the kingdom of God in the world, it actually moves young people in the wrong direction. Subtle messages can be more powerful than explicit blasts, and inauthentic Godtalk has the effect of undermining the plausibility of God’s true involvement in the world. A little thoughtfulness and caution are in order here.

The point is not to avoid talking about God, but to focus on living life: that’s where God is. “I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly,” Jesus said. And as we “do life” together as teachers and students at Trinity School, we find that God and God’s Word stand patiently by, ready to speak into the genuine questions that students have. Answers without questions are like trees without roots. When God is the answer to a question no one is asking, we teach students that God is irrelevant. But when the questions that students ask drive them to the limits of human understanding and the edge of transcendence, then God’s reality shines forth in ways that

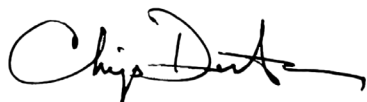
are worthy of his glory. A discussion of the age of the earth leads one student to ask, quite earnestly, “What is God?” A moment of silent reflection on the certainty of a geometrical proof awakens an awe that makes Exodus 3:14 come alive in a student’s imagination. A stunning rendition of Bach’s “Wachet auf” haunts a student’s imagination and makes her wonder how she would answer Jesus’s question to Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Long ago, when I was a pastor designing lessons for Sunday school, I remember struggling to apply the truth of God’s Word as it was being taught. Most applications felt forced and inauthentic, like museum pieces that no one could ever touch or really use. But when I came to Trinity School I found very quickly that the direction of learning was reversed: the applications were right there in front of us all the time. Students were living life together in classes, in hallways, and on the playground. The conflicts, challenges, and failures of their lives were in our faces, more authentic than we might have wished for. The trick was to find the right word from God’s Word, the apt truth that spoke to the situation at hand and brought light to the life moment. For this kind of Word-interpreted living, the Proverbs are a treasure trove. A teacher who sets Proverbs 12:18 to memory, for instance, will find a half-dozen opportunities before Friday to lead students to its truth. And when a wise teacher looks an erring student in the eyes and gently says, “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing,” this is not Godtalk. It is God talking through us.

Godtalk also goes awry when it is superficial: not the good leaven that works its way into the whole loaf of our lives, but a thin veneer of words that won’t stick. When we tell students to add six apostles and five prophets, we are not giving them anything substantial and in fact we are planting in them the suggestion that the only connection that math has to ideas in God’s Word is a silly and incongruous one. Contrast this with the teacher who lets her students discover the Fibonacci sequence by studying pine cones and then asks them to reflect on the correspondence between physical and mathematical patterns. Maybe she sends them to the HUB or the Clark Building and asks them to look for this classic sequence in the architecture. I wonder how students, so primed, would then approach a quest for patterns in the first chapter of Genesis. What was God thinking? Now there’s a question that is not deadening Godtalk, but generative and life-giving.

If we lose our way, as we often do, and descend into insipid Godtalk, we have a special remedy at hand, we who work at a TK–12 school: our littles, who say the darndest things. Out of the mouths of babes and infants, he brings forth truth. Betsy Watson, a TK assistant, tells how she was leading one of her students out of the Opening Chapel this year. It’s our tradition to have the seniors escort the youngest students into this chapel, and we’ve managed to keep this ritual in some form even during Covid. While Betsy was walking one of her students back to their classroom, this young TK Cub said, unprompted, “I have the best feeling about that thing we just did back there.” The next time a prospective parent asks me what Trinity’s Christian mission looks like in practice, I think I’ll just tell them this story and how Mrs. Watson smiled and said, “I do, too.”

Non Nobis,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chip Denton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Chip Denton
Head of School