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Thanksgiving Chapel Talk  
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“On Thanksgiving, Hope, and Gratitude”

The Thanksgiving chapel has an important place in the modern history of St. Andrew’s, and I’m very grateful tonight to add a thread to a rich tapestry of talks that have explored the meaning and significance of this national holiday. Essays are not embroidered textiles, but I employ a metaphor of weaving and spinning – this idea of a rich tapestry – to suggest the beautiful and intentional art of a Thanksgiving address. Year after year after year, teachers, leaders, and friends of the school have offered noble insight, self-reflection, and earnest advice that allow us to catch a glimpse – ever so briefly, yet ever so powerfully – of the ideals of St. Andrew’s: its culture, mission, and core values. These ritual threads bind us together, forming a communal fabric that fuses past and present. At the same time, these threads lead us outside of ourselves, outside of a busy labyrinth of class schedules and daily routines. They offer us the necessary perspective to clarify not only who we are, but who we may be.

Our school, for instance, would not have its confident sense of human community if it weren’t for folks like [Ms. Pressman](#), who stood at this podium in November 2004, and reflected on the difficulty of giving thanks. Her premise, in short, was that we forget because

our lives, however proximate, get very busy; and because giving thanks acknowledges our dependence on others – that is, “that we don’t, that we cannot exist alone.”

Our school would not have its faithful and optimistic vision had it not been for folks like [Mrs. Louisa Zendt](#), an alumna of St. Andrew’s and a long-serving administrator, who in November 2007 asked the congregation to take “necessary time to give thanks: to give prayers of thanks, to exchange words of thanks and, yes, to write notes of thanks.” Our school would not have its kind and transformative ethos if it weren’t for folks like [Mr. Roach](#), whose remarks from November 2012 conclude with a stirring explication of the “highest form of thanksgiving”:

Thanksgiving now becomes a commitment to a new, creative and regenerating approach to our lives. We honor our parents, our mentors, our friends by becoming such figures in the lives of those with whom we live and work. We honor those who have died and have left a profound legacy of passion, integrity and leadership. We live with their spirit of leadership, generosity and empathy in our hearts and minds.

What interests me about these talks are their shared filamentary fibers: their invocations of contemplation and action; their appreciation and respect for their audiences; and perhaps, most importantly, their sustained commitment to hope, a feeling that is intimately related to moral education and character development, a virtue that is at the bountiful heart of the St. Andrew’s experience. So this is going to be my subject tonight: Why is hope so important in the life of our school? What are some connections between hope and other virtues like patience and Thanksgiving gratitude?

Some of you know that I serve as President of the Saint Anne's Parents Association – SAPA for short. Saint Anne's is the idyllic school on Silver Lake Road on the way to Acme. Several of you here tonight are Heron Proud: alumni, parents of past or current students, or longtime supporters. The relationship between St. Andrew's and St. Anne's is strong. Earlier this year, Mr. Barry Davis, St. Anne's head of school, spoke at chapel about the importance of being your authentic self, and this spring St. Anne's, which was founded with the help of St. Andrew's, will celebrate its twentieth birthday. I like to think that the school's best days are ahead it, and as President of SAPA, I love interacting with teachers and staff, who motivate me every day with their creative and exemplary work.

Several weeks ago, Mrs. Jennifer Kellner, a St. Anne's parent and one of the school's kindergarten teachers, emailed me about constructing a bulletin board called "Take What You Need." It would hold cards with inspiring quotes on such things like faith, humility, confidence, hope, and patience. It also included a simple message for teachers: "We are thankful for each of you. Wishing you strength and peace, SAPA." Mrs. Kellner quickly put the board together, folks were encouraged to stop and take a card, and after a few days she reported that all the cards on "hope" and "patience" were gone. This surprised her, and she asked for my thoughts. Why would teachers need so much hope and patience?

Immediately, my mind turned to one of my favorite poems by Emily Dickinson, the one that we just sung. It's a short piece, just twelve lines long, but don't let its brevity or

seeming simplicity fool you. Dickinson, whose poems often blur the line between literature and philosophy, is a master of delivering a big idea in a small package.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without the words –  
And never stops – at all –

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –  
And sore must be the storm –  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm –

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land –  
And on the strangest Sea –  
Yet – never – in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb – of me.<sup>1</sup>

Educators, it seems to me, are in the business of hope. We cultivate self-confidence in young people, we support them when they make mistakes, and we hold them to high standards because we believe that they can achieve extraordinary things. We see the possibility in students even when they don’t see it in themselves. From our perch in the classroom, on the sidelines, or in a dorm common room, we convey lessons that resonate in the moment, but perhaps become possessions for all time.<sup>2</sup> Hope is a universal emotion, without language and evergreen; it’s a little bird that sings a tune we all can understand. Restless and electric, hope never stops; it doesn’t dally; it doesn’t quit. In this way there’s

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<sup>1</sup> The congregation sang a [musical version](#) of the poem before the talk.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Thucydides 1.22: “In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.”

something unusual, even enigmatic, about hope. As Dickinson explains in another poem, hope is as “a strange invention – / A patent of the Heart – / In unremitting action / Yet never wearing out.”<sup>3</sup>

Students too have a claim on hope. Amazing to say, it’s been almost three months since the opening of school, and while most days have been full of laughs and learning, some, I bet, have felt like a gale or a storm. You are right to acknowledge the struggle. Preparing assignments for five or six or seven courses, actively engaging in seminar discussions, studying for assessments, writing essays, and sitting for oral exhibitions; all the while participating in sports, service, and extracurricular activities; all the while juggling friendships, family, self-care, and, for our juniors and seniors, the very real prospects of college – all of this work is hard, it’s tricky, it’s exhausting, and there were a probably a few days when you felt abashed; when you wondered if the juice of St. Andrew’s – its proximate human community, its faith and optimism, its kind and transformative ethos – you wondered if this juice was worth the squeeze. But when we’re tired and sore, lonely and

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<sup>3</sup> #1392 (c. 1877)

Hope is a strange invention –  
A Patent of the Heart –  
In unremitting Action  
Yet never wearing out –

Of this electric Adjunct  
Not anything is known  
But its unique momentum  
Embellish all we own –

drained, confused and disconcerted, hope comes walking in – sturdy hope on whose warmth we rely; generous hope whose “unique momentum” embellishes everything.

But what about other virtues that run parallel with hope? Well, in Dickinson’s poem, we see that hope demonstrates patience, even in chilly and strange Extremity. Hope waits with persistence, hope endures with calm, and hope never asks for anything back. Hope survives, and if we tug at the thread just a little bit more, we see that hope and patience, as our reading from St. Paul suggests, are entwined with faith and love. Dickinson’s poetry is steeped in the words, images, and diction of the Bible, and she pushes us to see these connections, and to exult in their infinite possibilities.

In 1864, Dickinson described Thanksgiving Day as “Celebrated part at Table / Part in Memory,” and by way of closing, I want to bring hope together with celebration, memory, and Thanksgiving gratitude. Over the past several days I’ve thought about a few of my former students and emailed them to catch up: Augie Segger, brother of Elyot; Spencer Johnson, whom we know as Spo-Jo; Riley Baker, sister of Ellison; Katie Macalintal, sister of Madison and Zachary; and Andrew Park, who is just so cool. I asked each to think about their St. Andrew’s experience and to offer thanks to an educator who was, is, and will continue to be important in their lives. Andrew, writing from Brown University, was first to respond:

I want to express so much gratitude to Dr. Hammond, [who] was always there for me as a swim coach, advisor, and simply as a second parent when I was feeling far away from home. There were times when I would feel lost, confused about my path forward, and ultimately hopeless, but those were the times Dr.

Hammond instilled the most hope in me. He didn't suggest that things will change, or that I need to do things differently, but rather that I allow myself to feel hopeless while remaining grateful for the things in my life that I did have.

Spencer, now a sophomore at Providence College, then chimed in:

Roz, I'm sure that my first interaction with you was a lot of silence, but I'm glad you kept pushing me to come out of my shell... Before coming to SAS and even while I was there, I had no idea how to relax or take breaks, but now that I'm in college, I find that I'm just now figuring out some of those tips you and Mrs. Brownlee gave to me years ago... Thank you, Mrs. Roz, for everything you did for me in high school and all that you continue to do. I love you, and I miss you.

Riley, taking a gap year in Maine, was next:

I would love to highlight Mr. and Mrs. Torrey's role in my life... As an advisor, Mrs. Torrey was hilarious and loving and always so grounding... Less like an official advisor, and more like a cool, older sister, she cared deeply about me as a person. Mrs. Torrey has always deeply believed in me before I believed in myself... Mr. Torrey was an amazing creative inspiration in my life throughout all my time at SAS, consistently acting as an encouraging eye to all my work and insights. Mr. Torrey's comedic timing and openness to new ideas has made him a collaborative mentor to me.

Then Katie responded from bucolic Middlebury College:

Señora was my advisor my senior year at St. Andrew's, and time after time... she showed me what it means to have a big heart. When her advisees had a big race or competition, she was there with homemade signs to cheer us on at the sidelines. Her RaMiller advisory functions and even her creative efforts to hold advisory functions over Zoom... showed me why it's important to bring people together. Señora showed me how small actions or events... can make a big difference in someone's day.

Finally, there's Augie, who checked in from Bowdoin College:

Thank you, Hutch, for all you do and have done for us students. Whether in the chapel, the classroom, the dining hall, or a passing greeting in the hallway, you embody what makes St. Andrew's so special: joy, concern for

others, and a whole lot of energy. You were a constant reminder that Jesus came to the world 'not to be served, but to serve,' and your example made me rethink what it means to be spiritual. Thank you for helping me become a better person.

Now it's time for all of you to spin a ritual thread. In a moment my advisee, John Teti, is going to play a song called "Tapestry." As he sings, I want you to think about someone in this community for whom you are grateful. It could be a teacher, coach, advisor, dorm parent, or mentor; it could be a staff member, colleague, or one of your friends. After Reverend Hutchinson dismisses us, you will find Thanksgiving postcards and writing utensils at the back of the chapel. Please take a postcard, go upstairs into the dining hall or remain in the chapel, and write a brief note of hopeful gratitude.

As you think about what to write, know that your words will be life-changing. Know that your ritual thread will add depth and texture to the beautiful ball of wool that we call St. Andrew's. We won't see each other for a number of days, so make sure that your words are heartfelt and meaningful. Deliver your postcard before you leave tomorrow. Don't dally; don't waste time. Make hope and gratitude your own. Make them now. Make them new. Make them forever.

Happy Thanksgiving.