

Chapel Talk
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I want to talk this evening about how important it is for you to be good followers. This sentence may sound strange to you in that you are usually told how important it is for you to become a good leader, but I want to focus on the overlooked yet vitally important idea of “followership” in your lives.

In the St. Andrew’s mission we say we want to “encourage our students to find the balance between living in and contributing to the community and developing themselves as leaders and individuals.” This kind of statement is pretty standard for independent schools. Now I want to be clear that I think developing leadership is indeed a worthwhile goal, but I also think that being a good and thoughtful follower is perhaps even more important as a goal, yet it is generally overlooked or even taken for granted. But keep in mind that this school was named for Andrew who, when he heard Jesus call him, quickly decided to follow, so as students at this school, a school named for a person who followed, we too should think about what it means to listen and follow when called. Furthermore, the reality of life is that most of us will spend most of our time being followers rather than leaders, so it’s worthwhile thinking about how to be good and thoughtful followers. And finally, when you study great leadership, you usually find that the person leading has to also follow – no person can know or do everything, so a leader has to recognize when he or she needs to follow someone else’s advice or delegate responsibility. Mr. Roach, for example, is definitely the leader of our school, yet even he has to follow a board of trustees, listen to the wishes of the parents of students, delegate areas of responsibility to other teachers, and adhere to guidelines established by various national education groups. He is leader, and a follower.

We tend to hold up for praise the individual who leads us in a great cause while we tend to overlook the quiet followers, those hardworking, committed individuals who simply pitch in and get things done. Yes, we need visionary leaders, but their success ultimately rests on the work of those who follow. Or, to make the analogy to rowing – you had to know there would be some connection to crew in this talk – what I love about the sport is that success in a boat depends on

everyone being good followers. Even the stroke of the boat must follow the rhythm of the rowers behind him and listen to the calls of the coxswain, and the coxswain depends on the rowers following his or her instructions. It is by being great followers that a rowing team finds success. But what then does this all mean for you in your daily lives? What does it mean to be a good follower?

We tend to use the word “follower” in a negative sense – you are told NOT to be a follower. “Think for yourself”, you are told. “Don’t be a lemming” – lemmings are those rodents according to urban myth that people once believed would simply follow the mass of their own kind in any direction, even over the edge of a steep cliff to their death. I don’t think we have any lemmings here at St. Andrew’s. But if we have a generally negative association with following, how can it be a positive trait? It seems to me that’s where you, as an individual, have to exercise your own judgment as you decide who you are going to follow, or for what causes you are going to allow yourself to be led. You have to avoid being a thoughtless follower, a lemming, and instead listen to the small voice inside you that knows when something is good, and when something is not.

These moments of decision are often small and come up on you quickly or unexpectedly. I can remember my freshman year of college, being more than a little insecure and wanting to fit in. My roommate was this great guy named William Love – Will Love – just think about how great that name was in college. He was smart, athletic, charismatic, popular – and I was very happy to hang out with him and follow him. There was one afternoon in the first month of school when I was walking around with Will and a group of other friends and I looked up and spotted this other freshman walking across the campus. This other boy was the quintessential nerdy looking student, the story was that he had perfect SAT scores and more than a dozen 5’s on AP tests; he had acne and an overbite, and his name was Martin. I thought the way to fit in and impress the group I was walking with was to cut someone else down, and so I was just about to say something like, “Hey, take a look at that total geekasaurus” or some other such disparaging remark. But just before I could make my comment, Will called out, “Hi Martin, how are you?” Lost in his thoughts behind his thick glasses, Martin looked up, focused, and replied, “Oh, hi Will, I’m fine thanks” and walked on. In that quick moment, Will had recognized Martin and

included him by simply saying hello. I could no longer say the mean thing I had been about to say about Martin once Will had been nice to him, and I had the uncomfortable realization that while Will was being nice and inclusive, I was about to be the exact opposite. I thought about the contrast, and I became increasingly ashamed of myself as we continued to walk along. Fortunately I had not opened my mouth, and my shame was private, but I was ashamed of myself, and I realized that Will was a person worth emulating, worth following in the way he treated others.

When you do something that makes you feel good inside, when you help others, when you are kind and thoughtful, when you would want the same thing done for you – then you are choosing to follow wisely. In contrast, if that voice inside you is warning you, or if you feel upset or angry as you follow, then you should listen to your conscience and go in a different direction. So many times I believe that God does talk to us, and we know what the right thing to do is, but we have to choose to follow in God's direction. Or, if you prefer, you can think of it as Obi Wan and Yoda explain the force to Luke: it is an energy force that surrounds us all, and you are following it when you are quiet and at peace; conversely, there is the dark side, and as Yoda tells Luke, "Remember, a Jedi's strength flows from the Force. But beware. Anger, fear, aggression. The dark side are they. Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny."

I also think about Jesus when I think of what is required of a follower. What was it about Jesus that made the people he encountered willing to drop everything that they were doing in order to follow him and to be his disciples? Something about him and his message had to resonate with the spark of God that was in each one of them and that is in each one of us. His was a message of faith, hope and love; it was a message that was worth following then, and it is a message worth following today. It was a message that our school's namesake, Andrew, recognized and dropped everything he was doing to follow. Back in Andrew's time, and today, there are always other competing voices that ask us to go in different directions and follow towards anger, fear, and aggression – those traits of the dark side. Each one of you will be confronted with moments of decision throughout your lives, moments when you are asked to do something or go somewhere that you just know, deep down, is wrong. These are hard moments when the easy

way might be to stifle that voice inside you and simply go along. But I hope that when you are asked to follow, you will close your eyes and listen to your best self before you decide what you are going to do.

In the moments when you find yourself in a leadership position, I also hope that you will keep in mind how much you depend on those following you, and how the greatest leaders are often somehow simultaneously followers. A shepherd leading his flock, for example, can't just charge ahead with no notice of where the flock is going behind him; a shepherd has to be back in the midst of the flock, encouraging and directing from amongst them. Again, Jesus as the shepherd of people demonstrated this skill of leading by living among us and being a follower himself. And as the 23rd Psalm reassures us God is also our shepherd, and he will not only lead us to those still waters, he will also be there with us when we need him.

When you find those people and causes you do want to follow, work hard and do good things. Remember that as a follower you are essential to the success of any program. I think of the Hogwarts dinner earlier this fall when a few students showed great leadership, but what really made the event work was that so many seniors, without any fanfare, pitched in and followed, doing the hard work even though they did not receive personal accolades. That was great followership. And, to be fair, the leaders of that night were right there doing the hard work themselves alongside everyone else – that was great leadership. The same thing could be said about the school's participation in the AIDS Walk – there was great leadership by a few who organized us and got us to that worthwhile event, but it was the mass of us, all of us who followed and went along and walked for a cause, that contributed to it being such a success.

I am grateful that I am here at St. Andrew's and able to follow in the mission of this school and the leadership of Mr. Roach and the Trustees. That's why I've stayed here now for 21 years. I feel very lucky that I believe in my work and feel good about what I do each day. I hope you too will be so fortunate in your lives. I hope that when you encounter those moments when you have to decide what you are going to do and what kind of follower you are going to be, that that you will listen to that voice inside yourself as you make your choices.