

Chapel Talk
Terence Gilheany
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In the passage Shabazz just read, the prophet Zechariah has God say “Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath.” In the psalm, the anonymous author claims that God favors “Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart.”

What makes this school so special? We could note a long list, but one stands out. So much of what makes St. Andrew’s a great place to live and work comes down to a choice you, the students, make every day: you choose to be honest. It is a simple decision that has far reaching consequences. Your commitment to telling the truth engenders trust, and trust leads to a closeness that cannot be attained any other way. More than many others in our culture today, you tell the truth about your intellectual results, about your belongings, and about your actions. Rabbi Grumbacher’s congregation in Wilmington is called Beth Emeth – The House of Truth. It is a great name for an intentional community. Your choices make St. Andrew’s also a house of truth.

St. Andreans frequently note that you expect yourselves and your classmates to be truthful about whose work is whose. Some of you have contrasted this to your experience in your previous schools; fortunately, some of you had a great experience of honor in your old schools. But whether this is a change or a continuation of your experience, you note that when you arrive at St. Andrew’s, the message comes clearly from the upper forms. Even when you think the instructions have been unclear, even when a good grade on an assignment feels like it will make the difference between your parents’ wrath and their pride, even when a more impressive and developed answer is within easy reach, you consider your deeper values. The result is a positive and unified spirit in the classroom.

Visitors to St. Andrew's often comment on the lack of locks on the doors. Some of you have enough money that you can leave expensive clothes, books and electronic gear around and forget where you put them. Others need to think very carefully before you buy another pair of sneakers, and know that your mother or father has worried and sacrificed to buy you a calculator. Living in close proximity, this has an explosive potential. Folks with more money could fail to realize the value of items, and thoughtlessly take it. People with fewer resources could attempt to justify to themselves picking up an item. But you stop, and think, and realize the huge benefits that come from living in a community of trust.

You go beyond these two choices, however, to a third choice that allows this school to defeat cynicism altogether. You tell the truth about your actions. Many communities have come to believe that while they may believe it wrong to steal and to cheat, it is understandable, perhaps even permissible, for teens to be less than truthful about their use of drugs and alcohol, about the language they use with one another, or about the way they treat each other in relationships. You, however, have decided together that you do not want to drive that wedge between your teachers and yourselves. You can know that when your advisor and you chat, you do not have to carve off an area of secrecy. You can look teachers in the eye, knowing that they would be as proud to hear you speak with your friends as they are to hear you speak in class. You have decided to place us all on the same team.

This trust and pride gives the faculty energy for our work, because we really feel like we know you. Our confidence comes through in ways small and large, from being happy to give a ride into town to being happy to spend hours crafting an insightful recommendation. It is remarkably difficult to write a deeply felt recommendation for someone you suspect has not told you the whole truth. It is easy to write for someone whom you trust. When we go out of our way to help, we see ourselves in a relationship based on mutual respect, not a relationship based on manipulation. When we speak about you, we believe we are telling the truth.

As my wife frequently reminds me, however, it is not enough to create a strong small society. That society also has to have influences in the wider world. As alumni, telling the truth will often be easy, especially if you make it a lifelong habit. Occasionally, though, it will be hard. For example, John Brady Kiesling, an American ambassador and father of Lydia Kiesling of the form of 2001, chose to resign his position in the State Department rather than support a policy he found wrong. In his resignation letter he wrote,

“The policies we are now asked to advance are incompatible not only with American values but also with American interests. Our fervent pursuit of war with Iraq is driving us to squander the international legitimacy that has been America’s most potent weapon of both offense and defense since the days of Woodrow Wilson. We have begun to dismantle the largest and most effective web of international relationships the world has ever known. Our current course will bring instability and danger, not security.”

Whether or not we agree politically with Ambassador Kiesling, we can agree that given his beliefs, it would have been disingenuous for him not to speak out. By speaking out, however, he knew that he would have to leave the career he had built and valued. He is a model for the kind of honesty that our world can use more of, and the kind that you, having nurtured it at SAS, can take with you over breaks, at college, and into your careers.

There is a Hindu saying “Satyam vijayate” - Truth will be victorious. In a world of large corporate scandals and small personal hypocrisies, it often can seem in the short run that this belief is manifestly false. The community you have crafted, however, stands as an affirmation of that belief. Continue to nurture it here, and take it forward into your future work. And truly, thank you.