

The Rev. Connor B. Gwin  
Episcopal Schools Sunday  
Emmanuel, Staunton

*\*This text is a jumping off point for the preached sermon. The text may differ from the sermon as delivered in the pulpit.\**

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Good morning on this beautiful fall morning.

Today is Episcopal Schools Sunday across the Episcopal Church, a day to celebrate the work of the nearly 1,200 Episcopal schools and early childhood education programs across our church.

The first word often used to describe Episcopal Schools is inclusive and it's true. Episcopal Schools are inclusive and welcoming to all people, of all backgrounds, from all nations and creeds. We welcome students and families regardless of backstory.

What's more, we don't force our hand. We don't demand that students (or faculty) convert to our way of doing things. Instead, we make a place at the table for all and wait to see what each unique person will contribute to our common life.

Grace.

That is what makes an Episcopal School stand out.

There are plenty of independent schools doing great work and producing great students. What makes an Episcopal education stand out is that students are met with grace as they study and compete and practice and learn and grow.

Too many young people (and all people for that matter) are living without grace. They are living a graceless existence. We see this played out in big and small ways in our culture and in our own lives.

We now live in what people call "cancel culture" meaning if you make a mistake you are cancelled, done for, erased. And now when everything is documented online, the pressure to do everything right from day one is incredible.

I am grateful to God that the mistakes of my adolescence are not stored on a social media company's server. I would imagine you are too.

We are fed this lie that you must know exactly who you are and live a life that it is 100% in line with that vision. You must fall in and follow the script or else you are out.

Our young people are hearing this message at an earlier and earlier age.

We have middle schoolers thinking about their college majors and careers. We have elementary kids building their resumes for their college applications. We have parents of fourteen month olds (okay, this is me) worried about the future school choices of their toddlers so that they can have good career options.

Everything is external: fulfillment, wholeness, success, justification, salvation is all out there and I have to reach for it, plan for it, earn it.

This is the opposite of grace. This is the message that everything is up to you and your effort; that you have to do everything alone, that you have to have it all figured out.

Now wonder our students (and parents and teachers) are more anxious than ever!

Of course, in our better moments, we adults know the truth.

No child or teenager has it all figured out. In fact, if we are honest, no adult has it figured out. That is perhaps the most disorienting part of growing up is realizing that adults are making everything up as they go. There is no manual for life.

We don't know what we want and so we chase all the wrong things and we make mistakes. We don't have solid ground to stand on. We are not actually in control of very much.

We forget this fact but it pops up when we come to the end of ourselves. Often when suffer a great loss or a great failure we are brought back to the truth that we are not in control of this whole thing.

And this is the Gospel, the Good News:.

You cannot do it all through your own effort. You cannot save yourself. You will always fall short in some way, but God, in his mercy, came in the person of Jesus Christ to lift us up and put us on solid ground.

We cannot do it alone and we don't have to. That is grace.

Our readings speak to this fact.

In all four readings we are confronted with this idea that we cannot save ourselves but God has done the work on our behalf; that God has changed the world and brought about a new creation.

Speaking into a world focused on individual effort, individual work towards righteousness, God says that we cannot do it on our own.

Our hearts are misguided, our desires are disordered. We chase the power or success or anything that promises to fulfill us.

The solution is not to work harder, because we are pointed in the wrong direction. It is like we are all climbing a ladder that is leaned against the wrong wall - climbing faster won't help.

We need a deeper change. We need to step off the ladder or the treadmill and that can feel like death.

Jesus told those that would follow him to "come and die", to take up our cross daily.

What we need is a totally new heart, but we cannot give ourselves a heart transplant.

We need a whole new heart that will beat for others and not for ourselves. We need a new heart that will help us focus on the truth of God's love and not the idols of our own self-righteousness and ego. We need God's grace.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.", we cry.

And God responds, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

It is part of the human condition to search and wander and seek fulfillment and wholeness and God in the distant land, the new project, the relationship, the job. We are constantly looking for the ladder to climb to reach the elusive goal of justification or what my friend David Zahl calls, “enoughness”.

What we hear this morning in our readings, and what is at the core of Episcopal Schools, is the revolutionary message at the heart of the Gospel:

We are seeking something the world cannot give. We are longing for a new heart. We are searching for God.

The news is this: God is within each of us. The work is finished.

“...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”, Paul writes.

“For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”, Jesus says.

You don't have to do anything or go anywhere or climb any ladder. That is grace.

This is why Episcopal schools, and churches, are inclusive. It is not a scheme to be relevant or to increase membership. It grows out of this deep belief in the grace of God available and freely given to all - not as they should be but as they actually are.

I am an Episcopal priest committed to being welcoming and inclusive because I deeply believe that the Gospel is true and it is actually Good News for sinners like me and you. I work in Episcopal schools because of the Gospel, not in spite of it. I work in an Episcopal school because of grace.

Recently, a regional association of Episcopal schools asked me to find a Stuart Hall School teacher to write a column for their newsletter entitled, “Why I teach in an Episcopal School.”

Now it would have been easy to pick a dyed in the wool Episcopalian to write that column. I know several who are the children of priests or Heads of School who could write the Book of Common Prayer approved answer to that question.

Instead I asked one of our English teachers who happens to be an atheist why he teaches at an Episcopal school. Here is part of what he wrote:

“I do not belong to the Episcopal church. In fact, I don’t really belong to any church—I’m not a Christian, nor have I ever been. The closest I’ve been to any religious tradition was being scolded for taking Communion at childhood friend’s church and later sitting through Unitarian Universalist services and an associated ‘coming-of-age’ youth group when I was in high school in the early 2000s; I stopped going as soon as I graduated [high school].

Neither I nor anyone I know would describe me as a particularly religious person.

So why do I teach at an Episcopal school? The short answer is, ‘Because it was the school that hired me.’ There is, thankfully, a much better long answer....

It is because this is an Episcopal school that we have faculty, staff, and students from all around the world, from all walks of life, with all manner of varied interests, belonging to any and every and no faith tradition all at once. Chapel here is not a time to proselytize but for each and every person to be supported and reflect. It is precisely because this is an Episcopal school that I, my colleagues, and each and every one of my students is accepted for who they are and encouraged to be everything they wish to be; it is a deep and enduring belief in grace.”

The Kingdom of God is not a far away place that we aim for when we die. The Kingdom of God is breaking into our world, here and now.

Jesus Christ proclaimed that the Kingdom had come near, in fact, it is already among you.

Step off the ladder. Turn off the treadmill.

God offers us rest.

Rest in the knowledge that we are loved, accepted, and made whole in the person of Jesus.

When you can rest in that knowledge for yourself, you begin to see the world differently - you begin to see everyone with a heart of grace.

And this is how Episcopal schools turn the world upside down: by raising up students who are well-prepared for lives of contribution and success, sure, but even more by

raising up students who are known and loved fully - not for their report cards or resume but because God is at work within them.

And this is true of all of us, even if we haven't had a report card in many years. We still fear that we are being judged, that our applications won't make the cut. Our hearts of stone are weighing us down. We long for home, for rest, for a heart softened by the love of God.

"A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you," God says, "and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

Thank God for the Gospel of grace.

Thank God for Episcopal schools and for Stuart Hall.

Amen.