

THE GIFT OF NON NOBIS CHIP DENTON

Parents today are more anxious than parents a half century ago. I think my own parents had one or two serious conversations about where I was to go to school and then they were done. But I meet parents every week for whom this conversation about the right school(s) is like the song that never ends.

David Brooks may have told us why this is so. In his perceptive and comical account of the new generation of the ruling class, *Bobos in Paradise*, Brooks chronicles a major shift in American culture from the 1950s until the present. In the middle of the last century, a typical *New York Times* wedding announcement would introduce the couple by highlighting whom they knew—their associations. Clubs, relatives, connections, ancestry, alma maters—these were the social currency of the day. Today the couple is introduced by their resumes. College majors, graduate degrees, nonprofit volunteerism, honors and awards—today the currency of success is what you've done.

It's true that almost anyone can succeed now. If you work hard and excel, you can be what you want to be. The difficulty is that we have created a generation of young people who know that they must always perform at their very best, and even better if possible. They must be smart and strong and quick and clever. Such a life can be exhausting. Even by the time they've graduated from high school, most of our children could sing along with Bruce Cockburn: "I've proven who I am so many times, the magnetic strip's worn thin." No wonder anxiety is on the rise. You may be at the top, but someone younger and more energetic, with the burst of ambition that you used to have, is yapping at your heels. There is an inverse relationship between opportunity and peace of mind.

Trinity School began in 1995, when the buds of this meritocracy were beginning to bloom. At first, we were largely immune to this cultural trend, for we were so young that people expected little from us and allowed us the freedom to do our own, quirky thing. But we have come of age. With ten years under our belts, we are something of a success. More and more people expect us to enter the fray of this rat race, to do our part in producing this next generation of wunderkinds. We're starting to get bills for our dues to the cultural club.

Before we start paying those bills, I think it's worth asking whether a countercultural school might turn out to be a blessing, a liberation from the intense expectations of this new formula for success. And that is exactly what we hope Trinity School will be. We can't ignore the world we live in, and we need to prepare our children to navigate the best they can; but we can teach them to stand up in the middle of the show and shout, now and then, "Who do you think you're kidding?" The good news of the Gospel is that neither our connections nor our accomplishments will win us any favor

with the One who counts; against this is the simple, outrageous love of God in Christ, and this is what matters.

This year's theme verse captures this truth eloquently. It comes from the prophet Jeremiah, who also lived in a time of much cultural upheaval and strain. Into that world he proclaimed,

*"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
Nor the strong man of his strength
Nor the rich man of his riches,
But let him who boasts boast of this:
That he understands and knows me,
That I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness,
For in these I delight," declares the Lord.*

The wise, the strong, the rich—we don't disparage these folks, the kinds of people independent schools are always looking for. You could marshal our accreditation standards under those three rubrics. They are good gifts from God, and we hope to teach our children to recognize and celebrate God's gifting without boasting. (We talked about this in the first Assembly—ask your children to tell you about the Sorting Hat.) We don't want to be misunderstood—these gifts are not evil, but they are not what really matters, either. And when they become the focus of our lives, they become pernicious.

The knowledge of God is the only boast that will not puff us up, for it begins with the recognition that our best is a gift and our accomplishments are incomplete. Jeremiah's proclamation of good news starts with "not" and "nor." That's where I'd like to see our students this year. I want Trinity to be a school where knowledge of God is the focus, where the smart kids, the athletic kids, the talented kids, and the popular kids all lay their best down on the altar, because they know that there is Someone better than even their best. Of course, before you lay down your best, you have to know what your best is, you have to do your best. That's when you can find your voice to sing "Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory." "*Non nobis, Domine*" is not just a quaint Latin phrase our students memorize—it's the most wonderful gift we can ever give them.