



Trinity's Mission and History

A Steep Good

Chip Denton

We've been learning some lessons at Trinity, and I'd like to reflect on them with you in this *Parent News*. Putting it as simply (though probably not as clearly) as I can, I would say we have been learning about prudence. Prudence is an outdated word; most of us would say wisdom nowadays, and we needn't quibble about the distinctions.

Prudence is the first of the cardinal virtues, in a tradition of moral discourse as least as old as Plato's *Symposium*, where prudence appears with the other three: justice, fortitude, and temperance. You may recall from our first parent newsletter that I had proposed these four, along with the three Christian theological virtues, as the model for the sort of community of learning we want Trinity to be. It was with a certain seriousness about this task of moral education that the teachers and I sat down last week to discuss this "intellectual" virtue. We had done a little reading together—some excerpts from Aquinas, from C. S. Lewis, and from Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. We had an interesting discussion about the importance of the intellect and the anti-intellectual trends in our culture. Thankful for the collegiality among our faculty, I went away from that discussion thinking that moral education is a comfortable venture, rather like a pleasant stroll in the autumn countryside.

I had not remembered well (which is one of the marks of imprudence) the reality and truth I had met before. I had forgotten my own words from that first newsletter: "Virtue is gained only at great cost." I had not kept in mind Aquinas's notion that prudence, like all the virtues, is not knowledge acquired without great difficulty, but in fact, a *bonum arduum*, a "steep good." A steep and dangerous hike is a better metaphor for moral education than a pleasant stroll, and it took just such a steep hike to teach me, along with others at Trinity, a thing or two about wisdom.

On Friday a week ago two of our classes were scheduled to go on a rather long field trip in conjunction with a science unit on rocks. The weather on Friday was volatile and threatened rain, and we made a decision to change the venue of the hike to our local Eno River State Park. The trip was, by all accounts I have heard, a fine one until the end of the hike. After hiking independently for most of the morning, the two classes merged near the end of the trail, where they both back-tracked along a stretch they had hiked earlier that day. The children were excited to see their Trinity friends, confident along a familiar stretch of trail, and eager to finish (and to finish first) as they came to a point where the trail ascends about thirty feet up a steep set of steps. At the top of that hill two Trinity

students came to a place where another trail veered off to the left. Children sometimes climb hills faster than adults, and these two children happened to be out of sight of the adults ahead and behind them when they decided to take the turn to the left. It was only about five minutes before the children were discovered missing, but since they kept hiking it took over an hour to find them.

Needless to say, there were some anxious parents and teachers. The two students are safe and unharmed, surprised to learn that they were such celebrities and the object of so many prayers.

Some will think it the height of imprudence for me to recount this tale. “Be glad that nothing serious happened and let it be forgotten”—this is the common “wisdom.” Although I am cognizant of the dangers of telling this story, particularly in a litigious society, I am convinced that it is good to tell it. And the particular good that can be done in the telling is the exercise of prudence. Prudence has at least two faces: one that looks back and one that looks forward.

If prudence is “reason perfected in the cognition of truth,” then we must be busy about that perfection as we look both ways at the particular realities of our lives. This means telling last week’s story and reflecting on it.

Telling this tale helps us to grow in wisdom as we look back. We are told by moral theologians that backward-looking prudence consists of at least three things: memory that is true to reality, a proper open-mindedness to things as they are (and not as we would wish them to be), and a certain objectivity in unexpected situations. In many conversations that I have had since this incident, I have witnessed such backward-looking wisdom: the parent who remembered well but painfully his own carelessness in passing that fork in the trail; the fifth-grade students who faced the fact of a lost classmate and gathered to pray; the teachers, parents, and rangers who recognized the danger and acted swiftly with the eyes of clear-sighted vision to find the children.

Wisdom looks not only to the past but also toward the future, and the perfection of prudence at Trinity means that we have opportunities to act with foresight, which is to say that we should be growing in our capacity to estimate, with a sure instinct, whether a particular action will lead us where we want to go. I trust that already this chapter of the Trinity story is about learning such foresight. Both teachers involved and some parents have suggested improvements to our field trip policy. David Hancock, Chief of the Durham Search and Rescue, is coming to Trinity on November 5 to talk to all our students about safety in the woods and elsewhere and about how to respond if lost. All of us have a heightened awareness of the priority of safety both on and off campus. And I for one face the future with a keener sense that this world can be a dangerous place and that actions have consequences. “A prudent man gives thought to his steps” (Proverbs 14:15).

The virtue of prudence, like all the virtues, is not a moral trick or technique that we can memorize. Rather, it is a difficult craft to be mastered. The next opportunity to practice wisdom will not look like the last; it will be a different fork in the trail, up a different steep slope, and it will take us by surprise. Prudent protocol and policy are certainly called for, but our greatest need is people who act

with prudence. If Trinity can be the kind of school that trains people for these “steep climbs,” then we will be doing something right.