



ST. GEORGE'S
SCHOOL

Prize Day Address

By Head of School Alixe Callen
May 28, 2018

Welcome. On behalf of the faculty, staff, and trustees of St. George's School, I am thrilled to welcome you to the 2018 Prize Day Exercises, where we recognize the contributions and achievements of the Class of 2018.

It is an honor and a delight to be with you all, and most particularly with you, beloved seniors.

I want to begin today by extending a special thank you to this VI form class for the grace and good will you have extended towards me. It is not easy to welcome a new head of school for your senior year. Your generosity and kindness have not gone unnoticed. Thank you. And please know that you – my first St. George's graduates – will always occupy a special place in my heart.

[pause]

In addition to being Prize Day, today is also Memorial Day, a day when we remember those, including 52 graduates of St. George's, who bravely gave their lives in service and defense of our nation. I ask that we pause for a moment of silence and reflection to remember their bravery and sacrifice.

[moment of silence]

It is this theme of service that I want to talk about today. As you have heard me say before (perhaps too many times before), and as Mr. Cerenzia reminded us last night, the mission statement of St. George's School calls on us to prepare you, our graduates, for lives of constructive service to the world and God.

As a school, that is the work we strive to do every day. We ask you to develop your own moral code – through classroom discussions, in the papers that you write, during the countless informal conversations that happen in dorms, at the tables in King Hall, and on those endless, endless bus rides to games. We also try to provide you with examples of lives of constructive service. This year we have heard from many – both within and outside of our community – how they are living lives of service. Sometimes those speakers come from outside – the officer who performed Gray Benson's Naval Academy installation, for instance. Other times those speakers are members of our immediate community. I will remember particularly this year, the chapel talks by Stuart Randall and Grace Coughlin, who talked about ways that they have given back, whether it be to the city of Houston in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, or here closer to home, at Camp Ramleh. We also try to model this theme of constructive service here on the Hilltop,

where we ask that you be kind and generous to each other – in the hope that this community might serve as an example of kindness and generosity to the rest of the world, a sentiment that was beautifully captured in Hopie Carlson’s Baccalaureate speech last week.

Despite all that we do day in and day out here on the Hilltop to encourage you to lead lives of constructive service, (and it’s a lot), I still think this idea feels abstract. We can’t help but think that a life of service is something someone else does. It’s those 52 St. George’s graduates who died fighting for their country, or the Holocaust survivor who spoke in chapel, or the alum I met this spring who is working with refugees in northern Iraq. Each of us is faced with the questions: How can I do that? How can a regular person live a life of service?

In their new book, *The Gift of Joy*, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu talk about the quest for happiness in the modern world. Their main theme is not a new one – that joy and happiness come from leading lives of kindness, compassion, generosity – that by serving others, we ourselves benefit. A good idea in theory, but similar to asking you to live lives of constructive service, it feels inaccessible.

Here’s why... When we hear people like the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu, two world leaders who have dedicated their lives to serving others, to seeking peace, to comforting the ill and infirm, talk about happiness coming from compassion and generosity, it feels unattainable. How can I as a regular person commit myself to that kind of selflessness? How can small acts of kindness possibly add up?

In fact, say these luminaries, what we need to do is take the seemingly small acts of selflessness that we commit without thinking and expand them to our greater lives. The Dalai Lama suggests that one of the greatest acts of compassion in the world is that of caring for a sick child in the middle of the night. He goes on to say that the Buddhist monks with whom he lives and works – all people who have given their lives to God – have got nothing on the parent or caregiver who seeks to comfort a suffering baby at three o’clock in the morning. His point? Our capacity to give of ourselves so thoroughly in those moments is indicative of our ability to do it on a larger scale. We need to take the patience and love we feel then and apply it more broadly.

Sometimes the daily grace and kindness we offer to each other goes as far as the big things. If you can seek to extend the compassion of a tired, frustrated parent attempting to soothe a baby to the co-worker who’s driving you crazy, that’s service. Including someone who feels excluded – service. Sharing food with someone who’s hungry – service. Smiling at someone who’s sad – also service.

Because here’s the thing – a life of service is a life of joy. Committing to kindness means committing to happiness. I hope that in addition to enriching your own lives, you will seek to enrich the lives of others. I hope you will smile instead of grimace. I hope you will extend a hand instead of looking away.

The mission of St. George’s School is to prepare you for lives of service. Success here is not measured by what you achieve, the power you amass, the degrees you earn, the money you make. I cannot wait for each of you, my first class of graduates from SG, to come back to this Hilltop and share with us how you are living lives of constructive service to the world and God.

Thank you.