

Graduation Sunday

June 3, 2018

I would like to start by introducing myself. Hi, I'm Thomas Petty, many of you know me. If you don't, I bet you know my grandparents Jamie and Charles. This year as a general theme we chose to focus on identity and what makes us who we are, so I thought I'd share with you some things about me. I'm allergic to nuts, animal fur, some trees, some grass, you know--pretty much everything that can be found outside. I know this next one may make some of you groan but I am a diehard New England Patriots fan. I want to go into politics when I grow up and I don't like ice cream. However there is another part of myself that I'd like to share.

That part is my kindness, or at least I'd like to think I am kind. Some people over there may say otherwise, but you don't need to listen to them. My whole life, kindness was a one dimensional to me. You just say bless you, hold the door for others, and always treat people how you want to be treated. That was kindness to me, sweet and simple like all of my art projects this year. However, the definition of kindness changed completely on one of the youth mission trips to New York. For a little backstory this was my 9th grade year, I had just started high school and had only been on one mission trip to Weaverville. Now I had been to New York City once before, but I had stayed right in the heart of Manhattan, fully immersed in the glitz and glamour of the city. So on that 9th grade trip, you could say it was a bit of a culture shock for me to see the other sides of the city. On this trip, we mainly work in soup kitchens and food pantries and it was through working at one kitchen that I would make a connection with a man that would change my definition of kindness forever.

It was at the St. John's Bread of Life soup kitchen in Brooklyn. It wasn't what I thought a soup kitchen in Brooklyn would look like. The outside was bright and shiny with a wooden name plate hanging above the door that looked like it came straight from a trendy restaurant. You know the kind, the one where you leave and are still hungry. The inside floors were waxed and the walls were painted bright colors. Since I hadn't worked in soup kitchens before, I guess I expected a more somber feel, not this one of joy. Our group was introduced to the people who oversaw the operation and then were split into teams and sent to work. My first job of the day was to work with the volunteer who had called us out. He was named Daniel. He was a Hispanic guy, most likely in his early 30s. He had lived in the city his entire life, which gave him a strong New York accent. Daniel was also a very talkative person. Some would say he even rivaled me in how much he talked; which as anyone in the youth group or my parents can attest, is very impressive. Daniel explained what he does at the kitchen and told us some other facts about St. John's. Soon the conversation evolved into a discussion about what our dreams are when we grow up, and after answering those questions, we asked him what his dreams were when he was growing up. Daniel mentioned how he wanted to be a football player and then a doctor. Daniel then explained that when he was looking for a job after school, he had no idea what he wanted to do. He

found the opening at St. John's and originally was only there because they had an open job and he needed to work. But then he mentioned that something happened, he found himself wanting to stay at St. John's. When I asked about the reason he stayed, he just said two words: his faith. Daniel was a devout Catholic and his faith in God led him to dedicate his life to serving others; something he saw as the ultimate kindness a person can do. That's when he changed my definition. Daniel saw kindness as something that wasn't just a good deed like holding a door open, but to him, it involved some kind of service to another person. His kindness was the fact that every day he came into work and used his life to serve those he deemed less fortunate. It was then that I started seeing kindness as more than just good acts that I do throughout a day.

One chapter in the Bible that illustrates this is Acts 15 which tells us about Barnabas. Barnabas makes himself a vessel for kindness when he first agrees to go with Paul on his journeys. To agree to go on a journey with a man who until recently was persecuting the very people he was now spreading the message to is an extremely dangerous thing to do. Despite that, Barnabas chose to be kind to Paul rather than to dismiss this former persecutor. He demonstrates a similar kindness to John Mark by standing up for him, even when this means eventually traveling separately from Paul. The kindness that we see in Barnabas is consistent and pervasive, not just something on the surface. Continually throughout the chapter Barnabas chooses to use his life to serve and show kindness to others.

While Daniel isn't traveling the world, he is still embodying that kindness; making it his life just as Barnabas did. Holding doors open and saying "bless you" are kind, but Daniel was taking it to another level. There are many people, a lot even in this congregation, who are just like Daniel, who dedicate their lives to serving others. If there is one thing you can never have too much of in the world, it's kindness of action and speech. I always knew the basics, but Daniel showed me how to extend those basics, making kindness a way of life. From that point on, I made this new definition of kindness MY definition of kindness. Even though I haven't seen him again, his message will always be with me, guiding my life.

Tom Petty

I didn't always realize how much I looked up to the upperclassmen in the youth group as a middle schooler or freshman or sophomore, until I had to write a speech my Jr. year for school. "the Jr. Speech" is a program that every Junior at St. Mary's has to give in order to graduate, and it is something that everyone dreads having to do. The long hours spent deciding a topic, writing about your topic, and then finally the day comes when you have to stand up, usually in front of the whole school, and share your speech with everyone. For me, this was an especially daunting task considering I am not a huge fan when it comes to public speaking. After hearing the great speeches my freshman and sophomore year, I felt as though I had a lot to live up to. At first, thinking of a topic that I wanted to write about seemed almost impossible. Many other girls would pick topics like a trip they took with their family or friends, service work that they had done, or speaking about a loved one. I would often try to think of something, end up stressing myself out, and

then read some of my favorite Bible verses to calm myself down, before starting the whole process over again. This routine, among getting my homework finished on time, was what consumed many nights of my first semester Junior year. But the one verse that I could always turn to that would give me hope and encouragement was, and still is one of my favorite verses, Joshua 1:9, which says “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” After so many nights of reading this verse to calm my nerves, I finally thought of the perfect topic to write my Jr. speech on: my youth group at FBC and how much of an impact that being a part of the youth group has had on my life. I decided to speak about this because youth has always been one of the major parts of my faith journey so far, and I’ve experienced so much as a part of it. I found that writing and speaking about the youth group at FBC was something that came easily to me, and it made me realize that it was a way to share both something I enjoy participating in, and my faith. Doing this speech was not only a way for me to grow my self confidence in public speaking, but also a way to share my faith with others, and it also made me see the type of influence that I wanted to leave on FBC, one where I am not nervous or anxious to speak to others about what I believe in, and to be able to confidently share my faith. This is what I had seen in others in this youth group do, and this is what made me want to be more open and outward with my faith. By writing and giving my Junior speech, I was able to accomplish that.

After finishing the speech program, I really started putting FBC youth at the top of my priority list (it was pretty high up there to begin with) and I found that not only can you impact others as a disciple of Christ in big ways, but in small ways as well, for example, a simple conversation, or an act of kindness can go a long way in inspiring someone else to want to be confident in their faith or share the gospel with someone outside of church. As it says in Matthew 28:16-20; “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Jesus is telling the disciples to go out and share the word and their faith with others, something that I saw people in this youth group doing. That made me want to share my faith in the same way, not only in the youth group, but outside FBC as well.

One major wake up call, or experience where I really saw God working through me and showing me that I am sharing my faith through the youth group at FBC was on this past year’s NYC mission trip. Cleaning out the Rockaway house and moving things into storage and organizing...etc., is how I saw that leadership, discipleship, and trust all go together. You have to trust God to lead you and also trust yourself to be able to follow Him, and be honest with yourself to become strong while following him .

As I head off to college in about 3 months, I will look back on my time at FBC and be grateful for the many fun times, and lessons that I have learned in this special place. But I will be most thankful for the opportunity that I had to learn about myself and grow as a believer in Christ; to get to have the experiences of sharing my faith with others, and wanting to be intentional about doing so. I have learned that I enjoy sharing my beliefs whenever the time is right, and I am glad to have had a place like the FBC youth group show me how.

Leigh Hobart

So the day has finally come. Trey Davis has finally persuaded me and several of my classmates to speak to you this Sunday. Anyone who knows Trey knows that there is simply no way of saying no to the man. He has perfected a method of getting the youth group to do what he wants over the years. I think I've figured out how he does it. He starts off walking toward his chosen victim of the youth group with an ominous look in his eyes which is intended to intimidate them and subjugate them to his will. Certain members of the youth group are very familiar with the quizzical look that Trey gives people sometimes as if he is mentally telling you "I'm not mad at you, just disappointed." Wishing not to endure any of that I think you can imagine how I hastily agreed to preach this Sunday. On a more serious note, I would like to say "thank you" to Trey and my classmates for the opportunity to speak today. Having the opportunities and the sense of community that this Church offers are things that I wish everyone got a chance to experience during High School.

Over the years, I have attended a few Senior Sundays, so I have a decent idea about how they are supposed to function. We're supposed to talk about a central theme that we have all agreed on, and give our personal experience regarding the said topic. However, public speaking hasn't always been my strength. In past years I can remember speakers such as Blair Houtz coming up and being in full command of the audience's attention. Draped in his green graduation robes with Golden tassels that look very similar to mine it's almost like he also went to Cardinal Gibbons. When he spoke he seemed ten feet tall, almost larger than life to a little middle schooler like me. How will I ever be like that? I would ask myself. How do I climb the mountain that is the legacy of seniors who have come before me?

Part of my solution has simply been time. Even though I thought Blair was fairly tall when I was in Middle school, in the few years since he was a senior, there came a new height disparity between us. Let's just say that I am no longer the shorter of the two. While time does seem to be a great equalizer, the other part of my solution has not occurred naturally. It's simply a matter of being intentional with my actions.

Cardinal Gibbons has a tradition that all freshmen can participate in the day before school starts. Its called "Freshman Welcome Day". I still remember being one of those timid and somewhat awkward freshman who walked into their high school for the first time. It was a long time ago, so I can barely remember anything but eating a lot of pizza and getting some helpful advice.

At the end of the day, our assistant principal spoke to all the freshman and told us that our four years at Gibbons would fly by and we should take every opportunity presented to us to get the most out of our high school experience. Unfortunately, it wasn't until my sophomore year that I was able to grasp the truth of this simple advice.

It was at this time that I started to get involved in clubs at Gibbons and found that I enjoyed the people I met through these experiences. I thought to myself, If I could apply this lesson to school then why couldn't I apply it to church?

Before my sophomore year I had hardly been involved in youth group, much less had a strong faith life. Going to Sunday night youth group meetings or bible studies were not activities that I was comfortable participating in at the time. However, over the last few years I have discovered that every single thing that I am proud of has resulted from me pushing myself outside of my comfort zone and applying myself to the situation at hand.

The Mission trip to Alabama during the summer of 2016 I remember as the first time I truly took part in a church trip. At the beginning of the trip, I remember feeling left out and I didn't really know anyone particularly well. I certainly didn't understand any of the inside jokes. However, I do remember thoroughly enjoying building roofs in the Alabama heat. It's a long process to build a reliable roof. It involves precise measurements and carefully placed materials. First you have to lay out a sheet of waterproof plastic that goes underneath the shingles. These sheets are laid across the roof, and then hammered in place. They have to be perfectly aligned with each other to ensure that water will not be able to seep through and into the house. Next you have to put the shingles on. These must be aligned as well to ensure that they function properly before they are hammered into place. Even by the end of the week we were only able to put up the front side of the roof on the house that we were working on. Yet, I was still proud of the work that we were able to do. We had taken this bare surface and covered it with a pristine roof that would help to protect the inhabitants of this house.

Since Alabama, I have sought to become as involved in church activities as I can, from going to bible studies on Tuesday nights, to Kure beach retreats. First Baptist has been instrumental in the shaping of my faith. It has given me the opportunity to explore my faith and core beliefs.

After my time in the youth group, I have come to a conclusion about my faith. It's like constructing a roof. It's a step by step process and we are the builders. No one wakes up one morning and miraculously happens to have a strong connection to God and lives their lives as Jesus wants us to. Instead it takes dedication and effort to live the way he wants us.

I believe that this message is reflected in Scripture. In scripture we looked at last week, John 3: 1-3, It says "Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the

signs you are doing if God were not with him.”³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Even though Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin, who does not see eye to eye with Jesus in many cases, he still comes to Jesus. Even a powerful and esteemed member of Jewish society such as Nicodemus wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. Even though Nicodemus may not have agreed with everything that Jesus told him, he was open to hearing a dramatically different viewpoint than his own. Being open to new ideas and challenging our beliefs is how we grow as people and how our faith can be strengthened as well.

As Trey said last week, Nicodemus’s encounter with Jesus was just the beginning of a longer process of growing his faith. He, too, took many other steps, each one is important like the steps of putting on a new roof. Each one required Nicodemus to take a risk, to step outside of his comfort zone.

Just as Nicodemus reached out to Jesus, we too should look for opportunities to broaden our understanding of our faith. For me, being involved in our youth group has provided me with these opportunities. Pushing myself outside of my comfort zone has given me new experiences that I would not have otherwise. It has resulted in me getting the most out of my high school years, not just at church. I cannot thank this church enough for continuing to support me and this youth group that has been instrumental in my life these past few years, and for allowing me to share with you this morning.

Keller Hobart

Part of me always wanted to preach this morning. I felt like it would be something to be proud of - gathering the courage to write it, thinking of something clever to say, and getting up here to preach. For as long as I can remember, each year throughout my entire life, I have seen graduates do this exact same thing. When I was younger I used to wonder if I would ever grow confident enough to have the courage to do this. Part of me always wanted to be one of these high schoolers standing up here, seeming as if they have their lives together enough to stand and be vulnerable; to tell the entire church who they are.

Another part of me never thought that I would gain the courage to do this. Up until a few years ago, I was very shy and quiet. When I got called on to read in class, teachers and other students would say “Mollie we can’t hear you!” I couldn’t even comfortably order my own food at a restaurant until about 6th grade. Whenever I needed to call someone and ask them a question, I made my brother, James, do it for me.

I’m no longer in 6th grade and I order my own food all the time. People can hear me when I talk. Two weeks ago, I gave a presentation at a school event about my experiences at my internship in the NICU at Wakemed. I was

nervous, and it wasn't perfect, but after I did it, I felt glad that I did. I was proud of myself for being able to stand in front of many people and share an experience I had.

One experience where I noticed myself growing into my voice was last summer when I attended the Shelton Leadership Challenge at NC State. This is a week-long camp, where you learn how to be a leader and learn about the different elements of what a leader is. To be honest, I was not excited about this and I really didn't want to go. I thought, "I'm not a leader and I never will be. This isn't for people like me". While I was there, one of the adults that worked at the camp made a comment about how quiet I was and that in order to effectively do whatever it was I was trying to do at the moment, I was going to need to be louder and seem stronger. This really hurt me at the time--it felt like he was insulting who I was and how I was. It felt like these were the parts of myself that I couldn't really change. During the camp, we were split into teams of about 10 of our peers. Each day, a different person got a chance to lead their group in the activities for that day. That person was responsible for getting their team to places on time, and making sure everyone was where they needed to be. When it was my turn to lead, I felt like I needed to prove a point. I wanted to show everyone who thought I couldn't do it, that I could do it, and do it well. It was hard at moments, and sometimes I had to put in a lot of effort to make sure everyone was listening to me and hearing me. However, several of my team members came up to me afterwards and told me that they liked my way of leading because I actually listened to what they were saying and didn't just yell instructions at them. This made me realize that even though I wasn't a leader in the conventional assertive, loud, obvious way, I could do it, and my strength as a leader comes from listening to others and empathizing with them. Finding my strength as a leader through listening has helped me grow in other ways such as speaking. Having gone through this experience, I felt more confident to put together a message for today.

Despite this, I still found it difficult. I really struggled to put words on the page. I thought this would be easy. I would just go to Starbucks, sit down, and start writing. I would come up with a general idea of what I wanted to talk about, and the words would come right out. This was not the case. As I sat, trying to figure out what I could say that would be good enough to share with my church family on this important day, I kept thinking, "Well, I just can't think of anything". The truth was, I could think of little stories, feelings, experiences, and instances in my life, but none that I wanted to share or felt were good enough to share. I kept thinking - "Trey is going to read this, people are going to read over this to make sure it's good enough. How do I make sure it's good enough? Is this really what I want to share on my one chance to do this?"

Maybe more than anything, I find it hard to be vulnerable. When I tried to actually write something down, all I could think about was: how will others see me? Everyone is going to be staring at me and focusing on what I'm saying. (Not really, I can see my brother sleeping back there.) Everyone will be judging me. Noticing that my hair doesn't look great, and wondering what clubs and activities I was involved in at school to get these cords. Trying to analyze these past

four years of my life and what I was able to accomplish. Because that's what graduation is about, right? Everything you were able to accomplish in four years being on display. When it came to writing a message, I was paralyzed at the thought of being vulnerable with this many people.

In the book of Joshua, after Moses has died, God calls on Joshua to lead the Israelites. He says to Joshua, "be strong and courageous." This seems so simple. God doesn't really give much elaboration or other instructions. It's as if all Joshua needs to know in order to lead thousands of people was that he needs to be strong and brave.

In real life, it feels much more complicated than this. In the text, God doesn't really give details about HOW Joshua is supposed to be strong. He only says that he needs to, because that is what is deemed necessary for the task that Joshua needs to complete. Each time I encounter a situation in which I need to be strong or brave, these characteristics demonstrate themselves in many different ways and for many different reasons. Sometimes those ways and reasons can be difficult to identify. It's especially hard to put into words HOW to be strong, or HOW to be courageous.

But is it really? With a little faith, can't we simply just be strong and courageous in everything that we do and trust that this will be enough to get us through all that life brings? Strength and courage are just small parts of what is necessary. They are only two elements of who we are and who we can be.

As much as I would like for it to be as simple as it is in Joshua, and as nice as it would be if this was the case - that we could simply trust that God would give us strength and courage and it would happen right away, that's not always what I experience. I kept thinking that writing this sermon would get easier if I just trusted God, but I kept struggling to find words. I'm going off to college in a few months, and there are things that I'm afraid of, like sharing a room with a complete stranger and being 2 hours away from my favorite Starbucks. Just kidding, being hours away from everyone I love, and the place I've lived my entire life. Even though I feel like I have faith that these things will be okay, it doesn't feel easy to feel strong and courageous.

Joshua is a character who never seems afraid--he seems almost perfect in scripture. He seems like someone who never worried about being vulnerable with people. The fact is, I'm not perfect, I don't have my life together...and that's okay.

We struggle to be vulnerable with people because we worry about how others will view us and judge us. We worry that once we let people in and show them parts of who we really are, they won't like what they see. It is important to be honest with ourselves and with others about who we are. God knows who we really are and he loves us no matter what. Focusing on others opinions of us means we're not focusing as much on God as we should be. In the end, how others view us matters much less than how God sees us.

I am working to see myself as God sees me. As someone who can be strong and courageous and confident. Doing this requires faith, vulnerability, and humility; and doing this leads to strength. Finding my identity in how God

sees me gives me hope for growing in faith, vulnerability, strength, and leadership. Because of this, I know I can get through whatever life brings and whatever challenges I may face, even a sermon on Graduation Sunday.

Mollie Clary