

All School Convocation
Holy Innocents Episcopal School
August 23, 2012
The Very Rev. Rob Wright

Good Morning!

I am glad to greet you this morning in the Name of all that is Good and Beautiful and Holy. Glad to greet you in the Name of all that is graceful, unifying, righteous, loving upright and merciful. In other words, I am glad to greet you in the Name of God. Of course we know God by many names...some call God Allah and Yahweh. But when I greet you in the name of God, I mean the face of God that I know the best and that's Jesus! Which face of God do you know best?

Thank you to Mr. Bratek and Chaplain Ned for this invitation to be with you today. I love being at Holy Innocents'. From the Primary School, to the Lower School; from the Middle School to the High School and especially to the Seniors Graduating this year, the awesome class of 2013! Please know, we are proud of you. Our highest hopes and best wishes are with you this year.

Thank you also to all the people who work so hard in this place: to those who clean and take care of our facilities; to the people who prepare and serve our food; to the people who teach and coach; to the people who administrate; to those who serve on the board and to the army of volunteers who make HI a school with a heart and a soul. Thank you for what you do here, you are making a difference!

You heard a wonderful snippet from the bible this morning. 3 verses from the 4th chapter of Philippians. But we don't have to call it a bible verse, let's call it a text message. One of my all-time favorite people sent it. His name is Paul. Paul was quite

the writer. If Holy Innocents' was around when he was a kid, I'm sure he would have been a student. Paul's text message is just what we need to hear as we begin a new school year. Paul said: "**Rejoice in the Lord always....**" (Philippians 4.4) So if you want to text that to someone today that's RITLA!

What was it that gave Paul so much joy, and why should we care? Good question, I'm glad you asked! Paul discovered something in his travels, in his studies and in his service with people. Paul discovered that "*God was very near!*" (Philippians 4.5) Paul discovered wherever he found himself, on the good days and the bad, God was near. Paul discovered that God was near whether he had lots of money or he had none. Paul discovered that even when he felt alone, bullied, abandoned and even when his friends turned against him, God was near. Paul actually discovered this good news on one of his worst days ever. Ever since that day, Paul told everyone he could tell about his discovery. Have you ever had some good news you just had to tell everybody?

Did you notice that Paul didn't say be "happy". Joy is better than happiness. "Happy" tends to fade away just as soon as the happenings stop happening! You have to chase after happiness. But, joy, joy chases after you! If happy is the color lavender, then joy is purple. If happy is a field goal, then joy is a touchdown!

Paul said rejoice twice in the same sentence. Which is joy super-sized. Epic joy! What brings you joy? Is it friends and family? Is it the beauty of the ocean? Is it your favorite song that says exactly how you feel? Or, do you get joy from writing, singing, playing an instrument or participating in a sport? God is near in all of those things.

In God, Paul found something so wonderful that he devoted his whole life to writing and talking about: God's trustworthiness. Now there is something I would like you to take away from our time together this morning. God is trustworthy. Really, God is trustworthy. God is real, able, good and generous. That's what Paul found out one day long ago and that's why he sent the text message, RITLA.

People always get a little tongue tied when they try to describe exactly what it means to be an Episcopal School. By now I think I have heard it all. I heard one person say that to be Episcopalian is to be "Catholic-lite." Another person said to me, that to be Episcopalian means *not* to believe in very much at all. But those descriptions couldn't be more wrong.

What does it mean to be an Episcopal School? It means we teach that God is big, creative, loving and wise. We teach that truth is complex and it takes a lifetime to understand. You have to use your head if you're going to have faith. We teach that love is the authentic and central message of God. We teach that no one group or religion has all the answers, so we pay attention and respect what others have to say.

We teach that science and faith are not opposed. We teach that science and faith are siblings. We teach that God is not an American and Jesus is not from Georgia, which is to say, God has many children from all over this world. And Jesus has many friends and they look very different, and many are not Christians. To believe in this way means we can pray both for the men and women of our armed forces at war, and for those they war against. We talk in terms of a human family, not a human race.

We don't teach giving with guilt and obligation, because we know, *"God loves a cheerful giver."* (2 Corinthians 9.7) We teach that all we have is gift, all of it: bright minds, trust funds and healthy bodies.

We value diversity not because it's politically correct, but because a diverse staff and student body reflects the kingdom of God! We believe a good life is a balanced life, balancing excellence, service and charity. We believe that self-centeredness frustrates grace, but being other-centered is divine.

In short friends, the mission of an Episcopal School is to minister to the whole child: academic rigor for the head, compassion to enlarge the heart and the work of our hands focused by service to neighbor near and far. That kind of school has a bright future, that kind of school makes God smile and God's people rejoice.

Let me insert a story right here. There was a man who lost a golden pocket watch. He had been working in a barn filled with hay all day. And, somehow, his most prized possession, a family heirloom, his pocket watch, fell out of his pocket and was lost. After an hour of searching, he was almost in tears. Just then a young boy, probably a fourth grader, said to the man, "I can find your pocket watch. But, you have to leave and close the barn door." Desperate to find the watch, the man reluctantly agreed. The boy went into the barn filled with hay and closed the door. Thirty minutes later, the barn door flew open and out came the boy with the shiny pocket watch in his hand. "How did you find it, the man said? I looked everywhere." The boy answered, "All I did was lay down in the hay and when it got real quiet, I could hear the tick, tick, tick of your pocket watch."

Why did Paul send the text message, and why should we care? Because Paul wanted us to know, what he discovered. Because, if we will be still long enough, amidst all the loss and the chaos of this life, we will be able to find what is truly precious. We will be able hear the tick, tick, tick of God's heart and we will know Paul's joy, and we will share Paul's joy.

Text somebody today, RITLA. "Rejoice in the Lord Always...." Have a great school year. And, may the God of all love and mercy bless you today and always.