Sometimes the easiest problems are the hardest to solve. For example,

**Can every even integer greater than 2 be written as the sum of two primes?**

What do you think? It is certainly true for all of the numbers I can think of. But can you prove it?

Lest you panic, I am not going to spend this time together discuss the Goldbach conjecture, although I encourage you to think about it at some later point. Today will not be a math talk.

Congratulations to the class of 2018.

I assume your presence here means you turned in all of your work the string of pranks is over and that means you are going to be allowed to walk at graduation tomorrow.

How are you feeling out there?

Are you looking forward to graduation with excitement or with trepidation about what is to come next year? I know some of you are ready to hit the road right now.

When I was graduating, the common question I received was along the lines, “What are you going to do with your life?” Being a math teacher you might be surprised to know that I went to college confident that I would be next great American writer.

My college English professor helped set me straight on my first meeting with her to go over my first English paper. The paper was covered with so much red ink that I could barely see the typed words beneath. Finding that I had z-score for my math grades that hovered around a 2 whereas my z-score for the English grade was much lower, I ended up in the science building for most of my college life. For those of you confused by this statistics reference, feel free to talk to any of the statistics students later about z-scores. They will be happy to fill you in on the wonders of comparing different distributions by counting in standard deviations from the mean.
Studies suggest that, on average, you will change careers 4 times before you are 35. But, you have all gone through the endurance test known as high school. The faculty has tried to help you become well educated critical thinkers and we have tried to excite you about some of our subject matter. Your advisors, shout out to my amazing 10 advisees, have tried to keep you sane and centered on this journey. Our chaplain has tried to guide you spiritually and our fabulous senior speakers, Tyler, Alex, Arnold, Claire, Kaleigh, Will and Estelle, shared their stories as their parting gifts of wisdom.

You certainly seem ready to move mountains in whatever field you choose.

Today, I would like you to focus on not what, but rather **who** do you want to be as you move forward. This seemingly obvious question is one that will evolve with time.

Next year you will enter classrooms with new classmates. Transitions like the move from high school to college are wonderful because they allow you the chance to redefine who you are. You will have a clean slate and you will have a chance to try on lots of different hats. Which hats will you choose?

To those quiet souls out there for whom every school comment included the statement “I encourage him/her to speak up,” you will be happy to know that college professors do not write comments. Your choice to speak up or not will be yours alone. I hope you will find opportunities for sharing with others.

We have worked to make all of you quick and informed analytical thinkers. How will you respond to students from less rigorous schools? Will you be quick to judge them based on what they know or will you listen to their views about a world you may not know? Whom will you pick as your friends? Whom will you choose to get to know? Your choices along the way will be part of the process of determining who you want to be.

By a show of hands, how many of you would describe yourself as competitive? I love the adrenaline rush of competition, although my husband might quip that I love winning. Competition and deadlines are great motivators. They can bring you together with others to work towards a common goal and they can move you to action when a comfy couch and a day of binge watching Netflix or playing Fortnite calls to you.

We are a world that celebrates speedy answers and loud voices. As a society we commend those who compete to be the first at and congratulate them when they share their successes and opinions on social media. People who have quick comebacks are thought to be the most clever and those who clap the loudest in support of an idea sway those around them with their confidence. I hope that in your haste to prove yourself, you will not choose to blow out someone else’s candle to try to make yours shine brighter.
In her book *Quiet*, Susan Cain argues that when loud voices fill space, confidence in certain ideas often rise, but we lose the wisdom and insight of the quiet souls in the room who are often more observant than those bounding boisterously forward. She does **not** argue that one type of person is better than another. She actually seems to argue that it is the interaction of these two personality types, the introvert and extrovert, that leads to the best results. Think about it. Apple exists because the extrovert Steve Jobs worked with the quieter Steve Wozniak.

Today in Chapel Estelle spoke eloquently about our use of language as a weapon. I think some of her ideas about the weaponization of language bear repeating.

Growing up as the daughter of a law professor, we had our fair share of debates at the dinner table. We were loud as we tried to talk over each other and we needed to be quick with our retorts if we were going to win an argument. It prepared us for a loud and aggressive world. But I decided that was not who I wanted to be. I have worked hard to counter my dinner table ways and learn how to hold my tongue. This is not easy, particularly for a competitive person. But I decided that it was more important to make connections than it was to “win” arguments.

There is a Buddhist quote, “The tongue like a sharp knife...Kills without drawing blood.” As Estelle noted, who wins if you only seek to draw blood? I hope you might reflect on this as you decide who you want to be as you go forward in life.

In the opening school letter, Mr. Allman wrote:

“we’re living through profound cultural climate change, and we are suffering through storms of civil division that seem to be pulling our nation apart as surely as tectonic plates separating our coasts from the heartland. In this Age of the Selfie, we seem to have lost the necessary balance in the timeless need to balance our separateness and our togetherness, our differences and the common good, our diversity and our community.”

I would add that we live in a social media induced echo chamber of ideas that pull us further and further apart. We are good at attacking and less good at engaging. Recently as I listened to a podcast called “This American Life. “ I heard a story that reflects the division in our country to which Mr. Allman alluded. The story was about a young woman, a member of a Conservative group called Turning Point. The organization suggested that she set up a recruitment table outside the University of Nebraska’s “free speech zone” (a concept I am not excited about) in hopes that she would draw attention from the campus police and from those who found her presence objectionable. This would give her the opportunity to video interactions that she could share on social media. She was successful on all fronts. The campus police tried to get her to move. Then an associate professor who objected to the Turning Point organization made a sign, paraded in front of her table chanting about neo-facists, and followed this by verbally attacking the student. All of this was capably captured on video by the student and then
quickly shared the video on social media. Both the student and the associate professor left the interaction feeling vindicated in their actions as front line warriors in the battle for correctness. Both remained entrenched in to their own ideologies well after the interaction.

I was struck by a few things. First off, as a Midwesterner I was surprised to find that Midwesterners are not so nice anymore. Then I wondered “who was the winner in this confrontation?” Regardless of your political leaning, you might note that no exchange of ideas took place. Neither individual felt any need to find out about the other. The community at the University of Nebraska was not helped by either participant. All that ensued was further entrenchment of both political sides and some good fodder for the radio hosts.

Would an on-campus debate between the student and the associate professor have been better? Perhaps. Right after the Nazi march in Charlottesville, we had a presentation by the history department that was enlightening. Students in my advisory enjoyed the presentation and noted that they would love to see faculty model how to argue about emotionally charged ideas appropriately. I thought that was a good idea too. Then around that time I happened to find twitter post that made me revisit whether debate is the best tool for exchanging ideas and changing hearts and minds.

The post on Twitter led me to an article about Daryl Davis, a blues musician who has moved many people to leave the KKK. In the article Mr. Davis talked about entering a Jazz club and starting a conversation about the performance with a man sitting next to him. During the conversation he learned that this person happened to be a member of the KKK. Rather than spouting profanity at him then fleeing, as I would have, Daryl Davis, a black man, bravely continued the conversation. This was the first of many conversations they would have and through these exchanges Mr. Davis said that he “began to chip away at their ideology because when two enemies are talking, they're not fighting. It's when the talking ceases that the ground becomes fertile for violence.” He went on to say “If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy — it doesn't have to be about race, it could be about anything...you will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you're forming a relationship and as you build about that relationship, you're forming a friendship. That's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves.”

I think Daryl Davis is a hero. He is exactly who I want to be and hope you might want to be also.

So class of 2018, whom will you become?

As you define and redefine who you are at different stages, think about this. Keep looking for and listening to the stories of those who are not in your echo chamber. I have loved our four years together at Trinity. The mission statement of Trinity says that the conversation between student and teacher is the heart of our school. I can not thank you enough for all of the
wonderful conversations I have had with you over the years. You have challenged me to be a better me and I now challenge you to continue your journey toward becoming a better you. As students of enormous privilege, look to be an ally to those who are not so as lucky. As R J Palacio wrote in her fabulous book *Wonder*, “We carry with us, as human beings, not just the capacity to be kind, but the very choice of kindness.”

Finally, I thought you should know that the Goldbach conjecture is unproven at this point. I hope you will keep pondering the math behind it. Have a good night.