Senior Speech: Katherine Vella, Class of 2019

Opening Sentences (1 John 4:8):
"Beloved, know this -- there is no fear in love...

...perfect love casts out fear."

Reading (1 Corinthians 13):

1 If I speak in the tongues[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poorand give over my body to hardship that I may boast,[b] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
As my friends arrived at my home after my first day of kindergarten, they turned to me and asked, “What is wrong with your brothers?” I naively responded, “nothing” as I turned to see my eight-year-old brother Robert, listening to James Taylor while wearing a bib and sitting in his wheelchair, and his twin Andrew lying on the floor closely examining the tires of his favorite Hot Wheels car. This scenario was completely normal to me.

Here’s a photo of me and my brothers a few years later. [family photo] There’s me on the left, sitting on the lap of my oldest brother John, and the twins on the right. Anyway, Andrew and Robert were born at twenty-six weeks due to complications of multiple pregnancy. They weighed two pounds each and arrived before medical technology was sophisticated enough to compensate for lungs that are not yet in working order. Both twins have learning disabilities and cerebral palsy, although Andrew is able to walk short distances with the support of a crutch. Robert drew the short straw and developed epilepsy on top of being non-ambulatory and nonverbal, at one point suffering from seizures every forty-five seconds. My parents spent a great deal of time at hospitals, taking turns sleeping at NYU Langone – once for an entire summer a few years ago as Andrew recovered from multiple surgeries and for nearly a month last fall as Robert developed aspiration pneumonia as a complication from back surgery.

I often reflect on the moment my friends opened my eyes to how unusual it is to have two siblings with significant disabilities. It was all I had ever known and my mother loves to tell people that I instinctively participated in their care as soon as I could walk – “toddling off” to the refrigerator to grab sippy cups when they cried. When we walked through Central Park, I eagerly pushed Robert’s wheelchair as we strolled down this path. [park photo] My sudden awareness of their differences was hard to process at the age of five. I loved Andrew and Robert more than ever, but I developed a strong preference for having play dates at my friends’ homes rather than my own.

What I did not fully understand that I do now is that I was learning a lesson in my own home in a sort of dramatic and challenging way that we all need to learn as we live and grow together. I was learning how to love… And by love I mean that I was learning how to give and take, how to place others’ interests in conversation with, or before my own.
This does not mean that learning to love was not a challenge, particularly when the world around me regarded my brothers as “other” or as an inconvenience. As I grew up, I became exceedingly self-conscious of the unwanted attention I received when I was in public with Andrew and Robert. When people did not outwardly comment or stare, their visible discomfort still upset me. Even a short walk down the street with my brothers began to feel like a punishment. I avoided being seen with them or at least tried to walk ten steps ahead.

What I did not consider was how my behavior was affecting my brothers. It was only natural that I felt pressure to conform to my perceived social norms, but my attitude began to hurt their feelings. Just like the people on the street, my discomfort was visible. I placed superficial concerns above my own brothers’ emotions, and, as a result, I felt our relationship grow weaker every day.

Robert moved to the Center for Discovery, a home for children and adults with multiple and severe disabilities and in need of 24-hour medical care, when I was three-years-old. My mother loves to tell me the story of how my brother Robert would ask for me when we were little. He would say, “hold baby, hold baby.” I have seen this moment in photographs, but sometimes it feels so far away because he can no longer speak. I was too young to ever remember, but there are days when it has felt like that’s the only real connection I have to Robert.

When Robert was little, the Center would send us cute, hand-painted cards on major holidays like Thanksgiving or Easter. I remember one time opening one and seeing Robert’s name signed at the bottom. I grabbed my mom’s hand and pulled her into the living room to show her, insisting that maybe he had learned to print his own name. But Robert can’t do that, so someone must have written it for him. My mom tried to let me down easily, but I wanted so badly to believe it could be true. I wanted to believe there was hope for Robert to grow and learn and succeed like me, even just by reaching the littlest milestones.

It still breaks my heart, but many years ago I had to accept that Robert will never attain the traditional definition of a fulfilled life. At Trinity and in life in general, I demand certain standards of achievement from myself. But these will never apply to him. His greatest tangible skill is lifting a fork to his mouth.
In fact, I still do not know how much of the world Robert comprehends. He has brain damage, he is always on numerous medications, and his mobility is limited to his wheelchair.

But, there’s this thing... When I walk into the room, Robert smiles. When I sit down beside him, he’ll pull my hair or grab onto my arm—not to hurt me, but to pull me in close to his heart.

There are measurements of intellectual merit that we use to quantify our success, or even our self worth—grades, SAT score, college acceptance... But what is left when you strip that all away? It is our ability to reach out. Our capacity to love one another. And that is what Robert taught me. Robert cannot communicate with me through his words, but his love transcends language. Despite all he has endured and lost, the little boy who cried “hold baby” is still there. And regardless of academic achievements or social connections, we all fundamentally share this impulse to reach out to each other. Even little moments of care—like giving your friend a hug in the swamp or sharing a new song with them—can brighten their day. In this school we attend with the subtle elitism to which we all, including myself, subscribe, Robert reminds me that at the core of every person is a capacity for love and joy.

I’ve learned a lot at Trinity in the last four years, but today I recognize that my brothers are my greatest teachers. Growing up alongside Andrew and Robert has not only shaped who I am, but has molded the lens through which I view the world. My brothers require extensive care and attention from my parents, so at a young age I learned to test my own capabilities and fostered self reliance. I have also learned how much we depend on each other in life. I will forever be grateful to the Center for Discovery for taking care of my brother Robert. I have witnessed extraordinary dedication, patience, and kindness in the doctors, therapists, and educators who have invested deeply in Robert’s wellbeing, and I have been heartened by the many ways they have gone the extra mile to bring joy into his life. I truly owe them a lifetime of gratitude because without their help I would not have had the freedom to develop my own identity. Today, I pride myself on my independence and ability to make my own choices. My parents essentially allowed me total freedom in choosing where to attend high school, and of course I chose Trinity.

I’ll admit, I may in part have come to Trinity because of it’s ranking (shoutout to Forbes 2010) and it’s reputation for academic excellence, but I’m leaving with something so much greater.
Trinity taught me about love. I have always cared for others, but this community gave me something I couldn’t have anticipated in ninth grade—first of all, the confidence to be comfortable with and love who I am. In my old school, I sat quietly in the back of the classroom, meeting expectations but never truly exploring my interests and curiosity. Trinity has taught me to believe in the power of my voice and to pursue what truly makes me happy.

I have also learned to see past difference, to see ability rather than disability, and to focus on the good that is at the core of every person. When I walk down the street with my brothers, I still feel people staring at us. But, I realize something now. Many of these people are staring not out of discomfort or disgust, but out of a selfless kind of love. These complete strangers will stop what they’re doing and offer to help. Be it holding the door, helping carry his wheelchair up the stairs, or just giving a reassuring smile—these random acts of kindness do not go unnoticed. I know that many of you would stand ready to help, too; I see it every day at Trinity.

Before I wrote this speech, I worried how my story would be perceived. As a community, we are quick to dismiss the validity or value of others’ experiences with superficial criticisms. I worried some might deem my message irrelevant or unworthy of this forum because it is not a direct social critique of life at Trinity. Every year as senior speeches roll around, I will inevitably hear someone remark, “What do they even have to say?”

Well, this past weekend at our senior retreat, my class reminded me that everyone here has something to say about love. As we shared our memories from the last four years, kindness and gratitude filled the retreat center. We thanked each other then, and in this moment right here I want to thank you too. Thank you to my classmates, teachers, and Trinity because the most important thing we need to learn at school or that any school can teach is how to love. So, Trinity, I raise you this: Labore et Virtute may be our motto, and a good one at that, but let us please remember to love each other. Because walking away from the senior retreat I see that’s what matters. That is what I will remember from my time here. Ninth graders, sophomores, juniors, maybe you know by now that is your opportunity too.
I have to admit that there was a time when I wondered what my life would be like if my family were more “normal.” While I would give anything to spare my brothers the pain they have endured, I would not trade them for the world. So now when asked, “What is wrong with your brothers?” I stand by my naïve, five-year-old response: “nothing.” But now, I would like to think my answer comes from a place of wisdom.

Thank you.