

Good morning! I first came to St. Catherine's at the age of three, for preschool. I graduated as a member of the class of 2002. Here is my tassel to prove it. The preschool gave me a solid foundation to begin my academic career in the Cobb County School system. In 12 days, I will be honors graduate from Wheeler high school. For 13 years, I passed this church, my church, on the way to school. Sometimes, my parents would even go into autopilot and begin turning into the church instead of heading on to school. Hard to believe that this chapter is ending and a new one is beginning. I cannot remember a time when St. Catherine's has not been a part of my life. That is why I wanted to speak with you this morning. I wanted to reflect on what St. Catherine's has meant in my life.

My parents and this community have largely shaped the way I think and who I have become. In a college application, I was asked to meaningfully describe myself in 140 characters, the length of a tweet. I wrote "Openminded/hearted to possibilities. Ready to notice, chose, and act. Making a life that is not just impressive on the outside but feels good on the inside."

The essence of who I am was greatly influenced by what I have observed and experienced from the people of St. Catherine's.

Starting with my time in Catechesis, I became very aware of my spirituality and how "church" fostered that concept. I gave back by assisting with children's chapel. I even started pledging. I knew to do these things because I was observing the many hands at work here. I wanted to do what others were doing.

When my mom became sick when I was ten years old, I saw how my church community and neighborhood rallied around my family in the midst of surgeries and rehabilitation. So many people lifting us up in prayer, visiting, and cooking. It was a hard time, but I saw faith in motion. I saw the importance of community; I saw the face of God in the actions of others.

This was a moment where I understood that giving to others was important and it made me want to do that for other people. The people of St. Catherine's played a big role in that lesson.

I have tried to give back and make a difference. St. Catherine's opened the door to many of my early volunteer experiences...vacation bible school, Gobble jog, advent wreath making, rice bowls, serving on the youth director call committee after Amelia left, and operation Christmas child. Those positive experiences gave me the courage and desire to branch out right about the time that I entered the youth program.

Every time we mention our baptismal covenant of "honoring the dignity of all people," I think of my service. Did you know that the first family St. Catherine's housed for Family Promise had a son that went to school with me? An example of this church helping me to become open hearted and minded to a world in need. That world just a school desk away. I can see the faces of many people in the places I have volunteered that are mistreated and misunderstood. I notice these underserved people, choose to make a difference, and act on that desire. St. Catherine's encouraged me to stand beside ALL people while visiting the Emmaus House, dealing with some characters on the Chicago subway, and feeding and dining with the women at the Extension.

My service to others is given in so many places and to a variety of people through school, girl scouts, military yellow ribbon events, and church. "Going in peace to love and serve the Lord." That is what the people of St. Catherine's do. Of course by giving, I learned another important lesson: that I got much more out of volunteering than I ever expected. Through serving others, I realized that we all need to push ourselves to explore unknown territory that stretches our thinking. By exposing myself to different people and places, I have grown. I am not just transforming their lives; they are transforming mine. I feel really good on the inside after I volunteer.

That is a gift. My church has given me many gifts.

I cannot leave out the pilgrimage to Ireland. Complete with many God filled moments that would not have been possible without the generous donations of goods and services from this parish. You embrace the

importance of our youth pilgrimage by bidding CRAZY amounts of money on auction items. I thank you and the youth thank you!

I want to share a powerful lesson or moment on that Ireland pilgrimage for me... one that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

It begins with a mountain...I think all good stories do.

As I climbed down the nearly vertical path of unstable rocks with tears streaming down my face, I could not help but get emotional as I reflected upon my journey. This was the rockiest mountain I had ever experienced at the tail end of the rockiest time in my life. Six months prior, I had lost control of my left foot and arm. Therefore, climbing Croagh Patrick, a religious site, was not going to be an option for me regardless of what the pilgrimage itinerary indicated. Tests confirmed that I have a chronic neurological condition. I had to learn to cope with a diagnosis that affects the rest of my life, for which no average teenager is prepared. Meanwhile, my friends at church planned our physically demanding trip to Ireland. I worked hard in therapy and regained ninety-eight percent of original function in my foot and arm. As a result of my condition, I am susceptible to losing feeling in any of my limbs without much notice. Because of that uncertainty, I decided that I would not participate in climbing Croagh Patrick. Until the morning of the climb, that was my plan. While standing at the base of Croagh Patrick, however, the need to tackle this mountain overcame me. This was the first of many God filled moments. I started my journey with the slowest group. At some point, a fellow climber informed us that the relatively close point where the path seemed to stop was the end. That news gave me a burst of energy and I separated from my group so I could quickly reach my goal. That visible end in the path was not actually the end of my climb. This false sense of being almost there occurred several times. Throughout my life, I have experienced a similar sensation. Whether it relates to school, friendships, or my health, I see an end to my challenges and, yet, I am sometimes deceived. I face a decision: to give up and turn around or to persevere through tough times and finish the trek. I have always been determined to persevere, despite obstacles in my path. Over the years, I have watched this community of faith deal with challenges-my family included. God is with us, sometimes not answering our prayers the way we have asked for but God provides for us. I have learned about faith and God's presence from this St. Catherine's community. I take those observations and experiences with me in any situation. My journeys have always stretched and expanded my perspectives. They have prepared me for future endeavors. Now, I was on Croagh Patrick... Every time I thought I reached the top, I became more determined to discover the real peak. God had given me everything I needed to be successful. My intellectual curiosity, strong drive, and medical story carried me to the top; I pushed through hours of reminiscent physical and emotional pain. The tears this time were of joy, celebrating the young adult I have become. When I reached the real top of Croagh Patrick, I realized I was only half way done. I rested and celebrated for a few minutes, but started to descend shortly after completing the ascent. I climbed down, down, down, and Hours later, at the base of Croagh Patrick, a few pilgrims and an ice cream cone greeted me. I was awfully excited about the ice cream cone, but those pilgrims overshadowed that excitement by enthusiastically cheering for my accomplishment. I too was proud of myself for enduring life's challenges with God's help. That moment will forever touch me and stay ingrained in me.

St. Catherine's, I thank you for the past 15 years; my church and its people have provided so many memorable moments and lessons.

I will take them and two moving trucks with me to Ole Miss.

The irony that I am starting a new chapter just as St. Catherine's is starting a new chapter at the same time is not lost on me. I know there will be many changes, emotions, and new experiences for us. We will grow. We both have a strong foundation as we move forward. Most importantly, God will be with us. AMEN!