

Thomas Lathan*Epiphany School of Global Studies '26*

I first want to begin with a word of thanks. As seniors preparing to graduate, we know we would not be where we are today without the people sitting in this room. Parents, grandparents, teachers, church members, mentors, and friends have all helped guide us along the way. Your encouragement, prayers, and support have shaped our lives in more ways than you probably realize.

As I thought about what message to share this morning, one thing kept coming to mind: the importance of staying positive and choosing to look for the brighter side of life, even during difficult seasons.

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to go on mission trips with this church to places including Honduras, Black Mountain, and Kentucky, and each experience impacted me in a different way. In Honduras, I saw people who had very little materially, yet still carried joy, gratitude, and faith every single day. In Black Mountain and Kentucky, I saw communities facing challenges and hardship, but also people who continued serving others, helping neighbors, and trusting God through it all. Those experiences taught me something important: positivity does not mean pretending life is easy. It means believing that even in the most difficult moments, God is still working and there is still hope ahead.

I think many of you here this morning understand that better than we do as students. Life brings loss, stress, uncertainty, and struggles that we cannot control. But it also brings opportunities to encourage others, grow stronger in faith, and appreciate the blessings we often overlook.

Another thing I've learned through high school is how important relationships are. Some of my favorite memories are not awards or accomplishments, but simply moments spent with friends — laughing together, supporting each other, and getting through hard days together. Those friendships reminded me that having people around you who care can completely change your perspective on life and help make you a better person overall.

There's a verse that has stayed with me throughout these years. Romans 12:12 says:
"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

I think this verse speaks to every stage of life: being joyful in hope and continuing to believe in what God has planned, patient in understanding that difficult seasons will pass, and faithful in prayer by continuing to lean on God no matter where life takes you.

As my classmates and I prepare for this next chapter, there is excitement, but also uncertainty. We do not have everything figured out, and that is okay. What gives me confidence is knowing that we have people supporting us and a good God guiding us. My hope for all of us is that we continue choosing hope over negativity, gratitude over complaining, and faith over fear. Sometimes the world can feel

heavy, but small acts of kindness, encouragement, and positivity can make a bigger difference than we realize.

Thank you again for investing in us, praying for us, and walking alongside us. We are grateful for this church family and for the example so many of you have set for us.

Wood Mattocks*Epiphany School of Global Studies '26*

I'm very honored and excited to share my message with you all this morning. I've grown up in this church. I was baptized here as a baby, attended preschool across the road, and went through confirmation with some of the other seniors here today. I treasure the strong faith foundation I have received at First Presbyterian Church, and I will always cherish and remember the support system I have here as well. Like Pastor Anna always says, "It is good to be together."

My parents, along with my church family, have been major encouragers in all aspects of my life, especially during the recent college application process. I began ushering with my dad and brother several years ago. Every Sunday, Mr. Chip Chagnon would tell me how great I would do as a lawyer out of Harvard. He always called me "a Harvard man." Now, I won't be a Harvard man — at least not as an undergraduate — but it was always a great way to begin my Sunday morning, hearing someone speak confidently about the great things they believed I could accomplish.

Beginning last summer, I started thinking seriously about college and how important this decision would be. I had my mind firmly set on where I wanted to go, even before researching and touring other schools. Throughout the year, I prayed almost daily that God would place me exactly where I wanted to be. My parents constantly reassured me that things would work out as they should and that I would be happy wherever I ended up. Although I was convinced that what I wanted was exactly where I was meant to be, sometimes God shows us that what we think we want is not necessarily what He has intended for us.

Proverbs 3:5–6 says:

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight."

This is a verse I leaned on heavily throughout the college application and decision process. There were moments during the past few months — with deferrals and waitlists — when I began to doubt whether things were really going to work out the way they were supposed to. It definitely shook my confidence at times. But with each step, I had to remind myself to trust God patiently.

As spring arrived and May 1st decision day approached, I realized I needed to make a choice. After many conversations with my parents about every aspect of each university, I finally made a decision that I believe is right for me. Now, I'm genuinely happy with where I'm going. I'll be pursuing a degree in business with a minor in sports media, and I truly could not be more excited. I've already talked with my roommates and begun building relationships. Everything is falling into place in ways I could not have imagined just a few months ago.

This journey has been difficult, but to the students who will face this process in the coming years, I want to encourage you: keep working hard and never lose faith that things will work out — because

they will, just not always in the ways you imagined. Bring your worries to God in prayer. Whenever you face doubt in life, talk to God and trust that things will unfold in the way that is best for you. This truth applies not only to high school students approaching college, but to all of us in every stage of life. Whether it's a job you hope for, a relationship you cherish, or a place you feel called to live, God's provision and sovereignty will guide you if you are willing to listen and trust Him.

As I enter this next stage of life, I will always be thankful for the foundation this church community has given me. I know the values instilled in me here will continue guiding me through difficult times. I'll leave you with a verse that was engraved in my mind during my preschool years here at First Pres.

Psalm 46:10 says:

"Be still and know that I am God."

Keep that verse close to your heart, as I have, and always remember that God has a plan for each and every one of us — and it is good.

Lily Huber*Epiphany School of Global Studies '26*

In the same way Paul thanked the Lord for the Philippians' faith and support, it seems only fitting for me to do the same for those who have impacted my journey, my future, and my relationship with God. Before anything else, I want to thank God for bringing me to this moment.

As I prepare to leave for college and begin a new chapter of life, I've spent a lot of time reflecting on the journey that brought me here and on the people who shaped me, supported me, and helped me become who I am today. When I think about those people, my parents are the first to come to mind.

Growing up, I was blessed with parents who believed in me even during moments when I did not fully believe in myself. They created a home where I felt supported, challenged, and encouraged to become the best version of myself. They did not simply tell me how to live — they showed me through the way they lived their own lives.

My mother has always been someone whose love and support never wavered. She has been a constant source of comfort and encouragement throughout my life. During difficult moments, she always found a way to remind me of who I was and what I was capable of becoming. Her ability to balance work and family with such grace has shown me what it truly means to be a woman. Through her career, she has broken barriers that were once placed before women and has taught many people — including me — how to speak up for themselves when they did not know how. To me, she represents strength, intelligence, confidence, and leadership, and I hope one day to become the kind of woman she has always been.

My father has also had an incredible impact on the person I have become. Through his example, I've learned the value of hard work, commitment, and staying true to what matters most. Some of the lessons that have stayed with me longest came simply from watching the way he carried himself every day. Ever since I was a little girl, my father has given me one piece of advice that has remained with me. Every morning before I leave for school, just as I say goodbye, he calls out: "Do your best." He never expected perfection from me — only effort, perseverance, and hard work. That simple reminder pushed me to keep going even when things felt difficult and to take pride in the effort I put into everything I do.

As I prepare to leave for college, I know life is about to change. There will be new experiences and challenges that push me to grow. But even as I step into something unfamiliar, I know I'm not entering it without a strong foundation. The values my parents have given me will stay with me wherever I go. The lessons they taught me will continue guiding me long after I leave home. Their support has given me confidence in myself and faith in what lies ahead.

As I begin this next chapter, one of the things I'm most grateful for is the example they have set and the love they have shown throughout my life. No matter where I go, that will always remain part of me. Thank you, and *Happy Mother's Day*.

Millie Kate Wilson*Parrott Arendell Academy '26*

I am very honored and excited to be speaking with you all today. First Presbyterian has always held a special place in my heart, ever since preschool, where I first became friends with many of the other seniors you have heard from today.

When I was little, every single night before bed, my mom would sing me two songs: The first one being the *Tarheel Fight Song*, of course, and the second one being *Pass It On*. For those of you that aren't familiar, the song goes:

*It only takes a spark
To get a fire going
And soon all those around
Can warm up in its glowing
That's how it is with God's love
Once you've experienced it
You spread His love to everyone
You want to pass it on*

The lyrics, *once you've experienced it*, have always stood out to me. I used to wonder, "How will I know once I've experienced it? Will God come down from the clouds and give me a big hug? Is that how God will show me his love?" I now know that no, that's not exactly how God shows his love. I now know that no, that's not exactly how God shows His love. Although He has not come down from the clouds and given me a big hug just yet, I know that I *have* experienced His love. I've experienced it sitting in church trying to suppress a laugh when my sister Josie makes a funny face at the worst possible moment. I've experienced it at home on the couch, starting a new TV show with my dad where nothing really happens, but somehow it still feels like the best part of the day. I've experienced it on long car rides to school with my friends, windows down, playing country music, and laughing at things that probably were not that funny. I've experienced it watching the sun sink into the water after a long day at Cape Lookout with my family. I've experienced it at school when a teacher notices my confusion and patiently explains something again without making me feel small.

I've come to realize that God's love is not rare or distant. It is not something reserved for big, dramatic moments. It is steady. It is subtle. And it is everywhere, woven into the fabric of ordinary everyday life. Over time, I've understood that what we call love, in all its forms, carries something of God within it. But most of all, I've experienced it in my mom and in the quiet, unspoken sacrifices she makes every single day.

I've experienced it in the thoughtful meals she cooks, even when she already knows Josie and I will probably end up grabbing a bagel instead. I've experienced it in her showing up without hesitation to every tennis match and every soccer game, no matter how far she has to drive or how late she gets home. I've experienced it in the way she lets me borrow her things with full awareness that I will

almost certainly misplace them. And even in the smallest, most invisible gestures, like insisting that I have the last sip of water she packed for herself. I cannot explain God's love without talking about hers, because aren't they really the same thing?

Now, standing here with all those experiences behind me and an uncertain future stretching ahead, I find myself asking a question I cannot yet fully answer: *Who will I become?* Honestly, I do not know. And maybe I will not know for a long time. But what I do know is this: because of you, Mom, I want to become someone who notices love in the everyday. Someone who gives it freely. I want to pass it on. So, thank you, Mom. And *Happy Mother's Day*.