Good morning. If you don’t know, my name is Ms. Carroll…and most of you DON’T know that, because I’m new here at the Priory. I am a stranger. In a strange land. I have rarely been a stranger at any point during my life, so this is new for me. And awkward. And often lonely. And, at times, terrifying. But, most of all, it has been…strange.

I am a person who always knows where I’m going. Type A. I plan. And I have older brothers, so my spirit of confidence and competition often drove me as I entered new schools or engaged in new activities. In addition, since you don’t know me, it should be stated that I am not shy. I am an extrovert by nature…I know the checkout people at my grocery store and I’ve befriended the ladies in Zumba class and I have far more “friends” on Facebook than someone my age probably should have.

Making transitions to grade school, high school and college wasn’t difficult. I knew many people there already and was familiar with students and teachers alike. I started fresh 22 years ago as a high school teacher at St. Lawrence Academy. I taught there and ran the performing arts program for 22 years. I knew everyone. I had keys to every building on campus. Whether in my class or not, students knew me. Parents knew me. Young children at the elementary school and the elderly from the parish knew me. Teachers came and went…and I stayed. Comfortable in my legacy. Cozy with my friends. Cool with the students…I barely had to lift an eyebrow to get control of a classroom.

I was so complacent at St. Lawrence that I didn’t bother much when new teachers showed up each year. I would be friendly, but I wouldn’t engage. It was…beneath me, almost. There was a Spanish teacher position that was particularly cursed—we had a few years where we switched teachers more than once a year. I am ashamed to admit that I didn’t even bother learning the names of 1 or 2 of the Spanish teachers. I sat with my friends and laughed and told inside jokes and we knew we were the cool kids.

Well, last June, my school closed. And I was blessed enough to find a new home here at the Priory. But now, I’m the stranger. The tables have turned and now, I know how it feels. Yes, people are nice. Students are lovely and say “thank you” after each class. I nod and smile at everyone I see. But I don’t know everyone’s names…and they don’t know mine. I have, on more than one occasion, sat alone at lunch. I often stay in my classroom during breaks because I feel so awkward standing outside just looking at everyone talking to each other.

The worst part of being a stranger is that I find that I’m some other person…someone who is shy and timid, someone who doesn’t want to speak up, or worse, someone who makes small talk about the weather. I am NOT myself. I don’t yet feel comfortable enough to make jokes or be weird or sing and dance. Okay…maybe I do that with my students in class, but I certainly don’t break into jazz hands at faculty meetings! And, perhaps, YOU are holding back at one point too? When you were new or strange. Fearful of standing out too much? Worried that you’ll be judged? I know that I am.

And-- I find that I am ashamed. I think back to when I didn’t bother talking to new teachers. Now, I know exactly how they must have felt—scared, alone, and awkward. Yes, it would have been tiresome to engage in small talk with some stranger. But without engaging with the stranger, one can never discover the friend.

Since beginning to write this talk, I have had some meaningful conversations with students and teachers alike. Teachers are so kind and generous with their time and gifts that it’s hard to feel on the outside. I’ve also gotten to know my people—the drama people. I hear “Hey Ms. Carroll!” far more often while walking across campus. And, I must say, it gives me a spring in my step and a smile on my face.

Christ specifically tells us to welcome the stranger, as he often did, by example. In Matthew 25, Jesus says that we will be judged on how we treat the very least among us—the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the outcast, and the stranger. That, whatever we do for one of these people, we do for Him.

Christ asks us to challenge ourselves. It is never comfortable to speak with someone you don’t know. Or someone who is different from you. Or someone who is simply odd. Our initial tendency is towards comfort—sitting with our friends, eating with our “group,” chatting with our inner-circle. It’s easy to judge who we don’t know—what they look like and what they wear. It takes energy and time and EFFORT to talk to someone new. But that is why it is a CHALLENGE.

But we are asked…no, we are EXPECTED, to ignore our own comfort and do what’s uncomfortable. We are charged with the task of seeking out those who are strangers—both strangers who are unknown to us and strangers who are simply…strange. Living out the Gospel message—and the Benedictine values—is not easy. It requires effort and courage and an open mind.

At the Priory, we have our driving values and, right there, on your schedule book, and on posters, and in murals---it clearly says “HOSPITALITY.” You all walked under a sign to enter this chapel that says “All Are Welcome.” We just sang that song. We didn’t sing “all are welcome…unless we don’t know you…or unless you’re weird…or unless we don’t like how you look.” ALL. ARE. WELCOME. HERE. Inclusion is a hallmark of the church and of this community.

And so, today, as the stranger among you, I present this challenge: Find someone you’ve never spoken to today and engage in a real way. When you sit in class, choose a seat next to someone you might not know very well…or, even better, some one you might not like too much. Take a minute to say hello to someone who may be sitting alone at lunchtime. Say “hi” to a new teacher who might be awkwardly standing around at break. Save your judgment of others, dare to be uncomfortable and choose to welcome the stranger.