
Youth Sunday Sermon – Mary Frances Lacey

A sermon by Mary Frances Lacey
Youth Sunday – The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Good morning and Happy Mother's Day! For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mary Frances Lacey, and I am getting ready to graduate from Holy Innocents Episcopal School. Next year, I will be attending the University of Tennessee. Go Vols!

I have a brother named Brady, I love to hang out with my friends, play tennis, go on runs and do crafts. A couple of weeks ago, while in class, my friend decided to look at the website we use to track our student service hours. She looked shocked and said, "Fran, I don't get how or why people would ever have over 100 hours when we're only required to have 50." I told her I have about 260. Then she asked me why and what I did to earn that many. If you can't tell, another hobby I have is volunteerism. But my understanding of service didn't just start with a school spreadsheet; it was shaped in the pews of the Cathedral of St. Philip and a small but mighty church in South Georgia named St. Thomas.

I was baptized here. I also attended the Cathedral Preschool, vacation Bible School, Youth Group, served as an angel in countless Nativity Scenes and acolyted. I loved it all! In between, my family moved to Thomasville, Georgia. My grandmother was an Episcopal priest, and I spent hours watching her not just lead, teach and start a community foundation, but truly listen to people. She showed me that service isn't always a 'project' like cleaning up a neighborhood; sometimes it's the quiet act of making someone feel seen and heard. I especially honor her today.

Serving as an acolyte also has taught me that service is a form of worship. It's not just about what we do out in the world, but the heart we bring when we show up for God and each other in this sacred space and when we walk out the door.

Service has become a big part of who I am. Whether I am sweating in a big, fluffy bear suit serving as our school mascot or painting a house for someone I just met. The school's requirement never mattered to me, the relationship I was making to better someone's day did.

This brings me to today's Gospel. In John 14: verse 15, Jesus says something very challenging, using but only a few words, "IF YOU LOVE ME, KEEP MY COMMANDS". I re-read this multiple times thinking to myself - what does this even mean?? To me this verse almost sounds like a warning. Like Jesus saying, "if you really love me, you better get to it".

Then I realized it can mean many things, and it has lots of layers. I feel when Jesus tells us to keep commands, it's not only about actions, but also about our motivation and devotion to others. He doesn't want us to abide by his teachings out of guilt or because it will make us feel or look more Christian. But because doing this shows our love for him. Growing up in the Cathedral has meant having a front-row seat to what a 'service heart' looks like in action. Both churches in my life have helped shape me by demonstrating that we aren't just a collection of individuals, but a family called to show up for one another.

It's a lesson that even world leaders recognize. When the King of England visited the United States and addressed Congress recently, he noted that words and actions both mean a great deal. He said, "America's words carry weight and meaning, as they have since their independence. The actions of this great nation matter even more." To me, that's exactly what Jesus is saying in the Gospel. Our words of faith are important, and our actions—the way we show up for a stranger or a friend—are the real proof of our love.

In exactly five days, I will be back here for my high school Baccalaureate service. On the six day, I will be walking across a stage to graduate. I don't even have to tell you that the seventh day will be a day of rest! This transition has made me realize that while my time at Holy Innocents is ending, the real work in serving others is just beginning. And since it is Mother's Day, I want to share the best piece of advice I've learned from the women in my life: actually listen. I realize this is a skill that is hard to master. Kids, this means, hear what your mother is saying. Believe that she loves you and makes decisions based on what she thinks is best for you, as a result of being the adult that she is. Be helpful without her having to ask and don't complain about what she's preparing for dinner. That's service. Teens, have your friends backs and the backs of those who you normally don't hang out with. And adults, don't judge. That takes work. That's service.

When we lead with that kind of compassion, we are simply following God's command and being examples of the One who loved us first.

As I head to the University of Tennessee, I hope to carry that spirit of service with me, and I hope we all find ways to make our lives a true reflection of our faith through our service to others. Thank you and Happy Mother's Day, Mom!