

Hello St.Mary's community, as many of you know, I am Zoe Faith Czaja and I have graduated from Skyline high school this spring. I would like to thank you all for giving me the opportunity to share my reflection of faith from my time at St.Mary's, even during these confusing and frustrating times. Today I would like to share my experience of growing up at St.Mary's along with a reflection on the gospel reading.

A common phrase my Dad had to hear every Sunday for 10 years was, "But I don't want to go to church!". It was far away, there was too much standing, I didn't understand what was going on, the smell of incense made me sleepy, and it was the culprit of my absences at Saturday sleepovers. But my dad would always convince me with the promise of coffee hour, where I could have donuts and play on the playground with my friends after mass. And for the other times, there was a stuffed animal that was promised. However, my dad had no issue getting me to participate in the Christmas pageant or going to the Italian dinner or helping at the Food Bank. I never failed to love my St.Mary's community, but the Catholic faith was difficult for me to wrap my head around. The only thing I seemed to understand was my middle name: faith; the idea of believing in something you can't prove. I loved the idea of faith and felt so lucky to have it be a part of my name, a forever keepsake of my religious upbringing.

Faith has meant different things to me at different times. I had to have faith in myself when I started high school. I had to have faith in my teammates during soccer games. But then I felt faith in a different way, faith in humanity when I participated in the Youth Migrant Project. Words cannot describe the amount of gratitude I have for the Youth Migrant project. Year after year, I had life changing experiences that brought me closer to God, but I think there's no better example to demonstrate faith than my first summer at YMP. I had no idea what to expect my first year. I remember leaving the St.Mary's parking lot after church and begging my parents to take me home instead of dropping me off at St.James cathedral. Honestly, I was scared. I was just going into highschool and hadn't experienced anything outside of my privileged neighborhood and the idea of trading a week of my summer to serve was terrifying, this was way out of my comfort zone. I guess I wasn't the best at hiding my terror and thank God Tricia picked up on my fear and introduced me to a girl my age from St.Anne's, who has now become someone I share lifelong memories with. I kept an open mind and heart and held onto my faith as we drove to Skagit Valley. That week I worked in the fields, sorted at the food bank, provided child care for the migrant children, and created infinite memories. My faith deepened. We had daily reflections and prayer that truly opened my eyes to Jesus's teachings, I was finally understanding and loving the teachings of God. Returning to my life after my first week at YMP was difficult. I learned to appreciate the little things in life; being able to shower in my own bathroom, having countless food options, alone time, and many other luxuries.

This past year I have had more faith in myself than I have my entire life. This past December I tore my ACL while skiing. Skiing has been something I could rely on, if I was stressed, anxious, or angry, I could just kick my boots into my skis and fly down the mountain and my anxieties would melt away. But as my emotional escape was taken away, I felt my faith deepen. I looked to Romans 8:18: "The pain that you have been feeling can't compare to the joy that's coming" and Isaiah 43:2: "When you go through deep waters, I will be with you". I felt intense grief for the loss of my favorite sport but started to look forward to what God had in store for me in the future and I felt comforted knowing that God was by my side through all the tears and hardships.

Since my surgery in February, I have felt so much joy. I was so grateful to be surrounded by my loving community of family and friends. However, this was of course followed by school closures in March, due to corona-virus. Senior year was starting to feel like one big emotional roller coaster. But i'm grateful for each painful, sad, and hard day in isolation because those are the days that make the joyful days that much better; you can't have good days without bad days and faith is what keeps you looking forward to the good days that God has planned for you.

Shifting gears, I would like to quickly reflect on today's gospel. Something that stood out to me in the reading was "whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because the little one is a disciple -- amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward". God doesn't need us to do big acts to "show off" our faith, he loves and rewards the little acts. I like to think of it as paying it forward to others and to lead by example. Whether it's paying for the cup of coffee of the person in front of you or spreading the healing words of God during hard times, God appreciates and supports the small good things you do. God doesn't want our faith to take over our lives, he wants us to build a loving and accepting community that will encourage his practice and deepen our faith. Finding the right small thing to do is difficult to do when there are so many options. Just as Fr. Armando did, I will be giving you all homework for this week. In keeping from today's reading, hold onto the words from Matthew 40: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me". I challenge all you wonderful people to reflect this week on something, one thing, small you can do for the greater good. You don't have to run through the streets of Seattle starting a revolution, it could be donating to help the crisis in Yemen or signing Black Lives Matter movement petitions. But whatever it is, do it in faith and love for God.