

The Reverend Mary Bea Sullivan  
The Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit, Alabaster, AL  
October 23, 2016 Proper 25 C

We were assembled in one of the large lecture halls at seminary. It was the first day of a new class and we had been asked to introduce ourselves.

Most of us had already been together for a couple of months and so the introductions seemed to be primarily for the benefit of the professor.

“I’m not exactly sure why I’m here.” Piped up a new voice, a new story. I turned around and made eye contact with Francie, a woman who would eventually become one of my closest friends at seminary.

She continued, “In my prayer time for the last few years it kept coming up that I needed to come here to study. I have no desire to be ordained. I simply want to be open to what God is calling forth in me.”

After months of hearing we “wannabe priests” share our perceived, but rarely, unique call stories, Francie’s was clearly a different story.

Her vulnerability, her honesty, her humility, a beautiful contrast to some of the posturing and false humility that we Christians, and perhaps especially we clergy, can parlay.

I remember cynically wondering if she was for real.

Well if the fruit of our labor is one of “being real’s” markers, Francie is for real.

Her gentle reminders to trust in “the slow work of God”<sup>1</sup> were a welcome counterbalance to the frenetic pace and competitiveness of the seminary environment.

As a student, Francie was asked to help overhaul of some of the spiritual formation offerings at the seminary, and even became the spiritual director to an entire staff of a large Baptist congregation.

As the accolades and attention began to come her way, her life and her words said, “This isn’t about me; to God be the glory.”

As she poured herself out the Spirit filled her with courage and inspiration. The world around her was changed for the better.

Francie is not perfect, and her experience was not without its challenges. Being a layperson studying alongside future clergy can feel as if you are the younger child begging for your parent’s attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Teilhard de Chardin.

The Church has developed a structure which can make it seem as if the ordination of lay people at their baptism is less important than the ordination of deacon, or priest, or bishop.

We do well to remember that each of these is a calling from God—no one more important than the other, just different—bishop, priest, deacon, and layperson all ordained by God to spread the Good News.

The most numerous of those called of course being laypersons—you the very foundation of the church.

The author of the letter to Timothy was saying good bye. The letter is attributed to Paul, but most likely a follower of Paul who was about to be martyred wrote it.

There had been disagreements w/in the community and obviously there was great danger. The letter writer wanted to leave Timothy with this parting information—God has not forsaken him in all of his troubles. And for any of the good that had come, to GOD be the glory..

As I prepare to leave, I'm grateful we have not experienced much in the way of disagreements or strife, I am grateful it is not dangerous for us to practice our faith here.

So much has gone well these past few years at Holy Spirit; I anticipate that will continue for you. I am also aware that transitions can be challenging. I stand here feeling as if there is still so much to say and so little time in which to say it.

In this little bit of time together I want to lift up what, with God's help. YOU have done these past few years—

You have supported the introduction of numerous new worship offerings include taize, celtic, and healing Eucharists.

You have begun the revitalization of this nave through aesthetic changes, adding an organ, and increased the seating by 15%.

You have expanded your ministries to include supporting the Alabaster City Schools, Habitat for Humanity, Oak Mountain Missions, and the Keystone community.

You have created 2 new staff positions—Tara's and Julia's, and greatly increased support of the music program with Peg.

You have installed a columbarium—I am sorry the garden will not be started before I go.

You have become a welcoming and affirming congregation with IWC and by voting to support the marriage of same sex partners. Pledging and membership has increased by 50%.

You have instituted new social and fundraising events like the holy smokers and Taste of the Spirit

The vestry has reorganized how it functions and is phenomenally supportive of one another and healthy in its relationship with the clergy.

Yes, clergy leadership matters and I give thanks to Stan, and Alison, and Malcolm for their supporting you and supporting me.

But let's be clear—it is to God be the glory.

God was with Bill King, Lee Lowery, and the many others of you who started this congregation 13 years ago, God was with you through your last interim time, God has been with us these nearly 3 years, and God is not going anywhere. God will be with you in this next phase of life for Holy Spirit and the next phase of ministry for me

All of our readings today serve as reminders of the importance of humility.

In Sirach we read, "The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal." v21

and in Luke, "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

There is humility in our realizing that every good gift we have—our physical bodies, our intellect, our homes, our families, our incomes are all gifts from God.

Take one moment—I invite you to say out loud—for whom and for what are you grateful?

Our participation here—be it in worship or volunteering or financial support is at its core a simple returning to God what God has already given to us.

There is humility in realizing we are beholden to God for everything—everything.

I expect you will find this in your new clergy leaders, the supply priests, interim, and your new rector—seek out humble and generous hearts

We still have two weeks together, but in this moment I want to encourage you to continue to:

humbly support and love one another  
support and love your clergy  
support and love your vestry  
support and love your search committee  
and remember to GOD be the glory

There is a certain humility in realizing our time here on this earth and in this place is limited. What we start, others will finish. God asks that we pour ourselves out with love in the task at hand.

As we stay focused on Christ, humbly returning to God a significant portion of who we are and what we have, we are like libations poured out to the renewal and refreshment of the world.

My friend Francie and I still stay in touch. She has revitalized a retreat center in the Diocese of Easton and our beloved Santosh is her new bishop. They have already connected on a deep level.

One of the questions Francie will often ask is, "I wonder what God is up to here?" This is a question I pray we will ponder in our times of transition.

"I wonder what God is up to here?"

And as the answer begins to reveal itself, we will give thanks and remember, to God be the glory. Amen