

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ ” Matthew 22:36-39

Despite differences in culture, race, and beliefs, parents around the world generally desire the same thing for their children. They want them to grow up to be happy, healthy, and contributing members of society. As Catholics, we take this one step further and look to instill a love of God and neighbor. I remember when my twins were born. I didn't know a lot about being a parent, but I did know that I would always and unconditionally love and support them. I would give them the tools to travel the road before them which would be filled with challenges and successes. I also knew that by teaching them about Jesus, they would be able to better navigate their life's journeys. I firmly believed that if they were introduced and guided to develop a life of faith they would grow to follow the above words from Matthew's gospel. My ultimate hope was, and still is, for them to grow to be faith filled adults who are humble, compassionate, and kind. I want them to be thankful of how much they have and be mindful that others are not always as fortunate. One way that I strive to drive this point home is by taking advantage of opportunities to serve and help others whenever possible. Service is, I believe, a wonderful way to practice the words echoed in the two Bible verses that we find in Matthew.

At our preschool, we try to offer a variety of ways to perform acts of service, even at this young age. Even if those acts have to be done with hand-over-hand assistance or are only able to be partially completed, children should be allowed and encouraged to help others. At preschool, we regularly build into the calendar specific times when the children will be able to participate in a service project. Opportunities range from small to big, from on-campus to off-site groups, and from very specific to more open ended. One of the first projects of the year which coincides with the feast of St. Francis, involves making dog biscuits for the local SPCA. Classes learn that there are not just people who need our help, but animals too. The 4-year old classes participate in hanging the ornaments on the Advent giving trees that are placed around the church. Cards for the homebound are decorated with all of the creativeness that only a preschooler has! Some service projects involve collaboration with The Franciscan School (TFS) and the church community. Rice and bean kits are put together with some of the students from TFS and preschool. It's a team effort to scoop, measure, and fill the bags; it's also a unique opportunity for big kids and little kids to learn and teach each other! This past year, with the help of a parent, TFS, the church, and the preschool collaborated on completing a project which benefited the Helene Foundation, an organization helping families in which the mother is undergoing cancer treatment. What a great example of joining forces to do great things for the community!

Another important piece to our focus on service is that the students learn that it's not just adults or animals who might need extra assistance but other children, just like them. For one particular project in January, our preschoolers make hot cocoa kits for other children whose parents can't afford such extra treats. I have yet to meet a preschooler who did not appreciate a treat! They have had times in their young lives when their parents have said say 'no' to extra sweets like hot chocolate. What if your parents didn't have the means to say 'yes' to a special delight like hot

cocoa with whipped cream? Even though they can't see the recipients of their kit making efforts, they can relate to having and not having a special goodie.

By being members of a larger society filled with those who are struggling and at a disadvantage, but particularly because we are Catholic educators and parents, we are obligated to instill in our children the importance of sharing kindness and helping those in need. We must open their eyes to the gift of service, both in big and little ways. We must teach them that God's presence is in everyone and everything. All those we touch with generosity, all the selfless acts that we do, and all the grace that we share are ways that we are following in Jesus' footsteps to eternal life.

To learn more about becoming part of our wonderful preschool family and the opportunities we provide, please visit our website at www.preschoolatstfrancis.com or contact Shelley Freeman at: shelley.freeman@stfrancisraleigh.org.

With Joy,

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