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## *Youth Sunday Sermon – Charlie Long*

**A sermon by Charlie Long, Cathedral youth preacher  
The Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year A**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Someone once said, “The human brain starts working the moment you are born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public.” So here I am, standing in front of you, speaking in public desperately trying not to think about that quote.

To be quite honest, growing up, coat and tie was not my thing. You see, for the majority of my childhood, I felt like I was forced to dress up and go to church every Sunday morning and have to sit in an uncomfortable wooden chair just to listen to words that I never understood. I was not a fan.

It was a constant battle between my parents and me to get me to church, mostly because the clothes were uncomfortable and the sermons too long. Never would I have thought that 18-some-odd years later, I'd be voluntarily dressing up in the same uncomfortable clothes, although a much larger size, giving my own “long sermon.”

Looking back, those constant struggles built the foundations of my faith journey and my personal relationship with God. As I matured, I began to realize that the Sunday rituals actually meant something to me and I started to see myself seated in church, wearing my Sunday best on my own fruition. I no longer look at church as a weekly chore, but as an opportunity to learn and strengthen my relationship with God.

This realization came to me around three years ago. I had been confirmed the previous year but still failed to find my place in the Cathedral. So I started to go to youth group and its weekly Tuesday night Bible study sessions. There I was able to surround myself with others my age who were experiencing the same unfamiliarity of faith as I was. At Bible study we were free to ask the tough questions like why bad things DO happen to good people, over a slice of greasy Fellini's pizza. Nothing against youth group, but I'm still working on an answer to that question.

To this day, I still try to attend every Tuesday night Bible study I can, not only for the sometimes meaningful conversations about faith and the free slice of pizza, but also to catch up with some of my favorite people who I wouldn't have met anywhere else; Keith and Will, I'm talking to you guys.

A big part of my life still continuing to now has been my connection to my family, both on a relationship basis and a literal one. For instance, those of you who don't know me personally, my name is Charlie Long, but you definitely know or have heard of my mom, Haven Long. I like to joke with people I meet for the first time and ask if they know my mom, which 9 times out of 10 they do and the connection goes from there. With that, anyone I run into usually refers to me as “Haven's son” or says something along the lines of “Oh my gosh I know your mom!” Now you'd think that being known as “Haven's son” would make me uncomfortable but I actually love it. Everyone who knows my mom seems to love her for a different reason, and being associated with that is a blessing in and of itself.

Similarly, being three years behind my sister in school, but only two years apart in age, set me up for being known as “Lilly's younger brother” to all of my teachers who'd previously taught her too. While I didn't like this one nearly as much, it always put a smile on my face and I learned great things about her and quickly realized she is much smarter than I am.

While I've never been referred to as "Randy's son," I'd like to think I'm the spitting image of my dad. He and I share the same sense of humor, sociable nature, and passion for looking out for those closest to us. As I've grown older, I've started to appreciate some of the lessons he's taught me that have made me the person I am today. It's often the little things that carry the most weight, like making good first impressions whether that be shaking a hand firmly and looking someone in the eyes when introducing yourself or wearing "nice" clothes to the airport and school as a courtesy to others. I could go on for days about what he's imprinted on my mannerisms, but I think y'all get the picture of how influential my family's been and will continue to be for the rest of my life.

At this point y'all are probably wondering when I'll get to the part where I look for and see God in my life; sorry to keep you waiting but you'll have to wait a little longer. I just want to take a moment and thank all of you for coming to Youth Sunday and listen to me ramble on for what I used to consider the most boring part of Church. There are countless people sitting in the congregation right now that I cannot thank enough for being in my life and it's such an honor to be up here speaking about it. I was told to keep my sermon around 10 minutes, so I won't go into too much detail, but my deepest thanks goes out to each and every one of you.

With that out of the way, the majority of the times that I see God in my life may seem unconventional or downright confusing, but I'll do my best to explain it. You see, I've always seen myself as a clumsy person and I have a funny story to back that up.

So at the end of the last school year, as the day was ending and everyone was racing home, I quite literally RAN face first into a door at school and broke my nose. As if that weren't bad enough, the rest of my class saw it happen and I became the butt end of every joke for the rest of the week. Everyone was offering to open doors for me so I didn't run into one again and repeatedly ask how I actually managed to slam my face into a door. You'd think I would've caught myself before impact right? I thought so too!

I like to tell this story not only because it always gets a good laugh out of anyone who's within earshot, but also because it was a time that I saw God in my life. Even through the embarrassment, I saw God in the friends and family who know me well enough to know that I'd rather laugh and joke about it than get lots of sympathy and throw myself a pity party.

I've always believed in the saying that "laughter is the best medicine" and sharing happy moments with those I care about kept my spirits high. To this, I felt God's love even when I managed to break my own nose and reap the consequences that come with having family and friends that think they're worthy of stand-up comedy. But it's not all bad, I'm proud to say that from that day on, both doors of the eighth floor stairwell on the north end of my school building were permanently unlocked.

Switching gears a little, I'd like to tell another story of where I saw God, but in a different way, in a way where I was able to embody Jesus's love and give out grace instead of receiving it.

For context, I used to work at Chick-Fil-A and let me tell you, it was a roller coaster of two years, but nonetheless instrumental in my life. A big part of my job and definitely the most challenging part that no one tells you, was how to stay composed when serving a difficult customer. Now again this is an extreme case but nevertheless it was the perfect opportunity for me to share God's love with someone who desperately needed it but wouldn't ask for it.

The short version of this story goes a little something like this: I was working the window of the drive thru and the orders were backed up, unfortunately that meant the customer had to wait a little longer than they seemed to have time for. When the food came, it wasn't fresh and the fries seemed to be cold, which no one should have to eat cold fries, especially after waiting for their order and keeping the line from moving through. After the customer realized her order was wrong, her first reaction was to take out her frustration on the closest thing to her, which unfortunately was me. I kid you not, she snatched the milkshake out of her daughter's hands and threw it at me, covering me head to toe in freezing cold chocolate ice cream.

While I'd like to criticize her lack of self-control and in the moment I wanted to fire back at her, I took a few deep breaths and instead showed her grace. I apologized for the mistake, wiped the whip cream from my face, and guided her to the closest parking spot where I promised to bring her fresh food and refund her order.

Now I'll never know her name or what she had gone through that day, but I knew that her outburst had come from something out of her control and I think that's one of the biggest points that Jesus preaches to us. To extend grace and show love to everyone we come in contact with despite how rudely they may treat us. Jesus said that the most important rule was to love God with your whole heart, by loving our neighbors as ourselves. The Bible gives us two commandments: to love God and to love our neighbors, and what better way for me to

love my neighbor than to offer this woman a refund and a hot meal.

The book of Acts reminds me that even in the most challenging moments, we are all members of God's offspring. There is no distinguishing or qualifying characteristic that sets us apart from the love of God, which gives me the strength I need in hard moments to remember that God's love is always greater.

What I'm trying to say is that I see God in the little things that keep my life interesting. While it's not always as extreme as breaking my nose or getting a milkshake thrown in my face, any simple gesture or overlooked interaction often resonates with me more than others. In these simpler moments where I now voluntarily put on the itchy necktie, I'm proud to be preaching from this pulpit knowing that in big and little moments, God is always with me. I'm excited for the next adventures in my life that reveal God's work in me and the world around me, each day, each moment.

To end, I'd like to leave you with a few words in prayer:

*Dear God, thank you so much for your steady encouragement in this place I know I can always call home. Thank you for the lessons I have learned and friends I have made that I know I'll carry with me forever. I ask that you would continue to guide and lead me in this next chapter of my life and those of us here today wherever their next years should take them. I pray that you will continue to provide us the strength we need, both in times of darkness and in joy, remembering that your grace bounds above all Earthly desires. I lift up all of these blessings unto you, Amen.*