

You've heard me speaking before about how I had the good fortune of spending summers at the Jersey shore. As a young boy, it was awesome hanging out with several other boys from our neighborhood. We were thick as thieves.

One summer we decided to build a fort under the boardwalk. We collected discarded wood and constructed a fort with several rooms. It was a place where we could read comic books, talk about our beloved Phillies, and share our opinions about everything we were experiencing in our young lives.

Our club was exclusive. No one outside of our group could be part of that club. As boys of that age are inclined to do, we decided that no girl could ever join our ranks. It wasn't long into the summer, though, before we realized what a stupid rule that was. Little by little we came to the realization that girls were actually okay. They were nice to be around. And with that, our exclusive club became coed. It was a pretty smart and sweet move.

Today's first reading comes from the prophet Isaiah. The audience that Isaiah was addressing was convinced that salvation was reserved for members of their race and religion alone. The group assumed that those who lived in Israel and Judah were at the top of the "being saved" list. Those Jews who lived in far away lands were in danger of losing their place in the Kingdom of God because of pagan and outside influences. And those of different faiths or no faith at all...well, let's just say it would have been better if they were never born.

This reading is taken from the last chapter of this prophetic book. Isaiah, prophesying on behalf of the Lord, offers up something previously unheard of - that God wants ALL people to be saved. He speaks of those Jews and even non-Jews from areas we know today as Spain, Libya, Asia Minor, and the pagan territories around the Mediterranean. The reference to “chariots” and “dromedaries” seems to indicate that even those apart from the Jewish faith can, by the grace of God, be saved. Furthermore, Isaiah challenges his audience to help bring those folks to a knowledge and love of the Lord.

The same theme is found in the gospel. One of Jesus’ followers wonders who is to be saved. I’m guessing he was hoping that only the members of the exclusive “boys’ club” which he and the other disciples belonged to would inherit the Kingdom of God. After all, it was that group who shared meals with Jesus and gathered together as they listened to Jesus preach. But Jesus shook the boys up when he said that salvation won’t be offered because of the casual relationship one has with him. Instead, salvation is offered to those who we are fully immersed in a relationship with Jesus. Being in relationship with Jesus means that we put him first; that we seek him above all else; that we love others and are merciful to others, just as Jesus is with us.

Jesus adds that salvation will be offered to those from the “east, west, north, and south.” He is making the point that his offer of salvation is extended to all people, to all cultures, and even to people of different religions. As a sign of that inclusivity, think of the story of the Good Samaritan or the Samaritan Woman at the Well. Luckily for us, Jesus offers salvation to those beyond

his immediate circle, beyond the boys club he first put together. Again, his gift of salvation is offered to those who have accepted him and continually commit to live like him for others.

I find it interesting that some individuals spend more time thinking about how to keep people outside of the Church than including them in the Church along with the salvation the Church offers. I've shared with you before about how I've led instruction sessions for extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. It is not unusual that one of the first questions asked by the participants in those sessions concerns who should be denied the Eucharist. The reasons they offer for denying Holy Communion go something like this: I know these people; I know what they're like; I know they're living in sin. In contrast, I reminded the participants at those sessions that their first job is to offer Holy Communion to those who request it. Period.

There's an old joke that goes something like this. A group of Baptists go to heaven. The Lord welcomes them, but warns them to be quiet around room number 8. A group of Lutherans appears before the Lord at the pearly gates. Jesus welcomes them but cautions that they should be quiet around room number 8. Finally, several Methodists appear before the Lord in heaven. Jesus welcomes them but says they must keep quiet around room number 8. After talking with each other and realizing that they've all gotten the same advice from Jesus, they decide to ask Jesus what's the deal with room number 8. Jesus says, "that's where the Catholics are, and they think they're the only ones in heaven."

Now I've heard that joke told many times. Sometimes the last group mentioned are the Baptists or the Anglicans. But the point is the same. God wishes to save all his people. Not just a select few or a select group.

If you watch the news and there's a report of a fire, you know it's serious when it is reported that a building is "fully engulfed". That description means the fire has consumed every part of the building. In that sense, it's a bad thing.

But relative to our faith, it would be a compliment saying that we are or should be fully engulfed in the way we live out our faith. Imagine being all in when working on our relationship with the Lord. Imagine being all in when leading others to Christ instead of bragging about how we've kept others from experiencing the glory of heaven.

Perhaps all this can be reduced to one expression you may have heard regarding helping others. When asked about why they are involved in a particular ministry, I've heard this said, "I do this, not because those folks are Catholic, but because I am Catholic!"

I pray that the readings today challenge us to be intent on bringing people TO God and his Church... and NOT turning them away. The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who offer that kind of welcome and hospitality to all. May we be counted among that number.

Amen? Amen!

