

Sermon: February 15, 2009
“The invitation to succeed”

It's so easy in life to get labeled. Labels and stereotypes cause such divisions ... and they really don't have to be there. So, Quinton and I are walking across the Riviera parking lot ... a place where he goes to play and I go “in search of total fitness.” I swear ----- when I'm walking in the door ... an alarm must go off:

“Liberal reverend entering building ... let's get him!!”

Sure enough ... I meet one of my “pals” just inside the door. And he starts going-off on me ... as if I am the one in charge of the economic stimulus package. He rakes the new administration over the coals.

It's ok, I guess. People ... especially these days ... need to talk. We need to vent and share how we feel. My gosh ----- Quinton and I are doing our best. Every Saturday we are involved in the “Dollar Store Economic Stimulus Program.” They don't care whom I vote for or what my political persuasion is ... as I long as I continue to buy 60 toys per week.

I must admit ... I get disheartened by how quick we are to judge. It seems like we are developing a “culture of negativity” ... wherein ----- instead of doing our best to help others succeed ... we would rather point out another's shortcomings, then if he/she fails ... we can smugly say: “I told you so.”

NOT HERE.

HERE ---- *we are the body of Christ.*

We are here to walk in Jesus' sandals.

Jesus was incredible. Not only did he walk & preach with an amazing combination of grace and courage. But ... when people tried to put him down, or pull someone else down ... he responded ----- not with anger or judgment or vindictiveness ... but with an outrageous kind-of love, grounded in the very power and goodness of the human spirit.

So, I turn to my “Riviera pal” ...

Yes, I am liberal ----- when it comes to how much I work, how much I love my family, what I will do for my church, buying “stuff” for the kids and when it comes to loving people like you, who would rather judge me than get to know me. Yes, I'm as “liberal” as they come.

I am also incredibly “conservative” ----- when it comes to spending other peoples' money, especially the church's money. When it comes to raising my family and making tough decisions ... yes, I am conservative.

And, by the way ...

Not long ago ---- then President Bush hosted a lunch. He invited his dad, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, and President-elect Obama. Afterwards ... as they left ... President Bush looked Barack Obama in the eye:

We all have differences, he said ... some of them run very deep.

But ---- each of us has occupied the oval office. We have one wish for you:

As President ... we want you to succeed.

Jesus wanted lepers to be healed.

Jesus wanted the Pharisees to teach goodness.

He wanted outcasts to have a place.

He wanted Jews & Gentiles & Samaritans to be able to worship in the same temple.

So, yesterday Jude and I drove north. My cousin Jill died a couple weeks ago. She was the fun cousin ... the life of the party, when she was younger. Along the way --- some things happened. She lost her way.

Made some bad choices ... tried to turn it around ... but it never really worked.

Two beautiful kids ... five wonderful growing-up grandchildren. Some of those relationships weren't all they could have been.

It's kind-of ironic. In her final days ... she was a bit of a recluse ... cut-off from many ... kind-of alone.
No church ... so they got me!!

70 people crowded into her daughter's living room for a memorial service.
I said ----- Jill was lonely and tired in her final days ... but now, in death, she bring her friends
and family together.

Sure --- a lot of people had "opinions." There have been some "judgments."
But, in the end ----- death is our rabbi ... death is our teacher. Death brings us together ... and we reflect on
what's important and what's not.

Some bad choices ... some people hurt along the way ... unfinished business.
I look at myself. I've made some bad choices ... I've hurt some folks along the way ... I, like all of you,
have unfinished business.

I remember my parents ... may God rest their souls.
Whenever the subject of "Jill" came up ... my dad would say:
We will do whatever we can to help Jill succeed.

I was 24 years old. A student pastor at a large church just outside Denver, Colorado. You think I'm a bit "off"
now!@!! ... back then? ... 36 years ago????

I'm in the office ... Monday morning ... and "the main pastor" is on the phone.
"Chuck ... who are you calling?"

"Oh, I'm calling some of the other churches ... making sure our attendance was more than theirs yesterday."

I'm trying to figure out the point of these calls ... then he continues:

"You know, Don ... a lot of the other churches are struggling and not doing very well ... makes me feel a bit
better about our ministry here."

As I walk back to my office, I'm thinking ----- the fact that someone else is struggling ... it makes
"you feel better"?????

So, a long time ago ... as I sat in a humble office, miles away from home ... wondering what the future
would bring ... well, I made a pledge to myself ... I said a little prayer:

*"Lord --- I have no idea where your spirit will lead me ... or, at least, nudge me ...
(I sure didn't expect to be in Orland Park!!)*

*but Lord ----- wherever I am ... wherever I go ... may I never delight in the failure or
shortcomings of someone else."*

I have enough of my own.

Success ... is never a one-way street.
Jesus teaches us ... success is a shared journey with those who love us.

Don Borling
All Saints Lutheran Church
13350 LaGrange Road
Orland Park, IL 60462
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www.allsaintsjoy.com allsaintsjoy@sbcglobal.net 708-448-2939