

Over the last few days, I have found myself in conversations that usually begin, “How was your summer? What did you do?” Common answers include the beach or the lake. I heard some of you talk about the road trip your family took. Another answer I heard often was camp. Camp McDowell was a popular destination for our family this summer.

For many, camp is a place where we can go and feel more fully themselves. As I reflect back on my formative years, I know that I felt freer to be the person God made me to be at camp. And even when I wasn’t at camp, I felt freer to be myself around my camp friends. I imagine some of you have similar experiences.

I believe one reason why so many of us feel freer to be ourselves at camp or around camp friends is because we don’t feel the same kind of pressure to succeed or stand out at camp like we do in the “real” world.

Winning the camp lip sync or talent show has little bearing on your social status at camp. Winning the “Golden Toilet Seat” for the cleanest cabin isn’t a resume builder. Going 0-4 at the camp softball game isn’t going prevent you from making the All-Star Team. Everyone is an all-star at camp. Everyone makes the team. Resumes are obsolete.

On the flip side, making the dance team or cheer squad can feel like your social life depends on it. Getting into this honor society or into that club feels like a must if you want to be successful in life. Going 0-4 during tryouts feels like the difference between making the All-Star Team and being a nobody. These are all myths we’ve learned to accept in the ultra-competitive world we’ve made for ourselves.

As I consider the consequences of our ultra-competitive world, I am reminded of an episode from a television show I watched as a kid. As a child of the 90s, or as my children say, as a child of last century, I spent many afternoons watching the popular teenage sitcom “Saved by the Bell.” The show followed the lives of six high school students – Zack, Slater, Screech, Lisa, Kelly, and Jessie. Of course, you can’t forget Principal Belding.

The episode that I’m reminded of today centers around Jessie Spano. Jessie is a straight A student and has aspirations of attending Stanford University. Her prospects begin to dim when she starts failing geometry. Her grades begin to suffer when her singing career takes off. In order to try and keep up with all the things, she starts taking caffeine pills so she can stay up all night studying.

The episode reaches its climax when her next-door neighbor and lifelong friend Zack Morris comes over to check on Jessie. Zack finds Jessie pacing around the room repeating the same phrase, “I’m so excited. I’m so excited.” Her refrain quickly changes to, “I’m so scared. I’m so scared.” She collapses into her Zack’s arms and admits she needs help.

Why is Jessie so scared? In her mind, the consequences of her failure will be too great. If she fails geometry, then she won’t get into Standford. If she doesn’t get into Stanford, then she won’t get the kind of job she wants.

If she doesn’t get the kind of job she wants, then she won’t make the kind of money she needs in order to life the kind of life she wants. Jessie is living a life according to the myth of what the best life looks like. In the end, this myth fails her.

Over 30 years later in our own time and place, the pressure cooker of making the grade to get into the best school in order to have the best life has only grown exponentially. This consequences of this type of pressure are detailed in a book that I’ve been reading this

summer entitled *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic – And What We Can Do About It*. It is a good yet sobering read.

The author interviews hundreds of parents across the country about what it is like to raise children in an achievement culture turned toxic. One of those parents talks about how they visited a preschool that featured college pennants over baby cribs. The message was clear. If your infant goes to preschool here, then they are on the fast track to Harvard.

I know it sounds ridiculous, but this is where we are as a culture. Our culture has bought into a myth that believes if we have enough money and resources, then we will have nothing to fear. We can, like our friend in last week's gospel lesson, relax, eat, drink, and be merry.

The reality, however, is that having more means we end up worrying more because we have more to lose. A fall from the top hurts a lot more than a fall from the bottom. No matter how much we have, there will never be enough from a worldly point of view. We will always be afraid as long as we put our trust in the things of this world.

For this reason, Jesus invites his followers to sell what they own and give the money to the poor. While this may seem a little dramatic, the point is clear. If you have nothing, then you have nothing left to lose. And if you have nothing left to lose, then there is nothing left to worry about! And this is what true freedom feels like. Suddenly, the admonition to not be afraid makes sense.

It is that nothing left to lose feeling that God hopes we come to know through the kingdom built through the reign of Christ. In God's kingdom, Christ has done all the achieving we could ever hope to accomplish in a thousand lifetimes. We don't have to step on or over others in order to get there. This kingdom or world is freely given. Why? Because, as today's scripture reminds us, it is our heavenly Father's good pleasure to do so.

For me, camp is the closest place in this world to the kingdom of heaven on earth. As one camp song goes, camp is a place where God's people can run free. And that is the kind of world God dreams up for us in his kingdom established in Christ – a place where we are free, a place where we matter before we've achieved anything.

The kingdom of heaven, after all, isn't something that you have to earn through your good works. God's kingdom isn't exclusive club that you have to try out for or audition for. You don't have to go through Rush. You don't have to make an A in Bible 101. You don't have to make six figures in order to purchase a house there. Your residence has already been purchased through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ our Lord. It is that simple.

But, for some reason, that isn't enough for us. We are a proud people. We need to feel like we've earned our way into the kingdom. We constantly feel the need to justify our existence. And for the most part, we've learned to justify our existence by comparing ourselves to others for better and for worse.

And we've learned to justify ourselves by comparing ourselves to others because of an achievement culture turned toxic. We've learned that there is only so much to go around. This concept of scarcity creates a kind of fear that blinds us to the truth that true life is not found in the abundance of possessions but in the abundance of God's love for us in Christ Jesus. This fear imprisons us to a life where we feel the constant need to prove ourselves. No wonder we are exhausted all the time.

But here is the thing. Our existence has already been justified. Not because we've proved our worth but because it is our Father's good pleasure to do so – a truth we are baptized into with Christ. We have nothing left to prove. We are in. We've made the team. We are beloved children of God. God hopes this truth frees us to be the person we were made to be. God hopes this truth frees us to live in a world that is truly "real."

I am reminded of a sermon preached at Camp McDowell by a former bishop of Alabama – Furman Stough. In that sermon he named how it is hard to go back to the "real" world after a week at camp. He went on to say that camp is "real" world and it is our job to take the real world back to our homes and schools and offices and athletic complexes and grocery stores.

Most of us don't have the opportunity to live at camp year-round. However, we at Ascension work to model God's heavenly kingdom through our programs and ministries. I hope you'll join us following the service for our Ministry Fair to learn more about these programs and ministries. Our ultimate aim is to give this community a taste of the freedom given in God's heavenly kingdom.

The prayer is that the taste of the freedom given in Christ and his kingdom will begin change the narrative we've learned to live by in a world so often fueled by the fear of not having enough. The prayer is that the taste of this freedom will begin to transform an achievement culture turned toxic into a culture where there is plenty to go around. The prayer is that this freedom will make space for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven – a kingdom where all of God's children run free. Amen.