

Hi, my name is Michael Kozma. I am a member of Ignite, the older youth group here at our church. I am currently in eighth grade at Stanley Middle School. Eighth grade is the year that *To Kill A Mockingbird* is read in our English classes. *To Kill A Mockingbird* deals with topics such as segregation, boundaries and values that are similar to both the Joel and Luke readings. In the Joel reading, God proclaims, "And my people shall never again be put to shame, sons and daughters, young and old, and even slaves."

I would say that the majority of the congregation agrees with me, that slaves were at the bottom of the social pyramid. Unfortunately, in the era that *To Kill A Mockingbird* is set, African-American's are pushed to the bottom of the social pyramid because of common social behavior and Jim Crow laws. Scout, the protagonist of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, grows up in a very progressive family. Being young and raised in an accepting household, Scout judges her neighbors not by the color of their skin, but the character and values that they keep.

Then, in the Luke reading, we have a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee thanks the Lord saying, "Thank you for letting me be better than these people, even this tax collector." The Pharisee separates himself from the tax collector who is traditionally lower than he is. For those who have not read *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the antagonist is Bob Ewell. There is no other way to describe him besides the bad guy, but when the story takes place, African Americans are still considered lower than someone as bad as Bob Ewell.

Replacing the words thieves, rogues and adulterers with dehumanizing slave, I can definitely imagine Bob Ewell saying what the Pharisee said trying to separate himself, making himself sound bigger. Related to *To Kill A Mockingbird*, there is a word that sounds out to me in both of the readings: even. "Even" is used to identify what is considered the lowest of the low. Slight word choice and placement, however, give even a positive or negative connotation. In Joel, when God says,

"Even the slaves are included," he invites everyone. He breaks barriers and brings us together.

When the Pharisee places criminals as examples before saying, "Even like this tax collector," he separates himself from the tax collector to look bigger and better. That's not what God cares about though. God placed us on this planet to do his work and rule over it and protect it. God recognizes the value in each and every one of us. He doesn't want us to prove ourselves to him. Making ourselves seem better or higher than someone else is a waste of time and resources. It's not our work. Our work is to help each other, to rule and protect our planet. Who we are as a person, our character, what we do with our time here is what matters.

He views us how Scout would view us. He worries about our values. Segregation gives God no benefit and he is all-inclusive and loves us all. We all have a part in his plan. Charlotte De Novo holds up her part of the plan by doing missionary work in China.

Hi, everyone. I'm Charlotte Dinovo. You might know my mom, Mother Rebecca, or seeing my little sister Abrienne, or heard my brother Grayson. I'm a freshman at Mission Bay High School, and a member of St. James Youth Group, Ignite. First, I would like to thank all of you for your generosity, which enabled me to go on a 14-day trip to China last fall with my classmates from St. Paul's. I haven't had a chance to tell everyone about my experience, but today is a great opportunity.

While there, we learned about the people and culture of China and served in local schools and an orphanage for blind and disabled children. We also did some touristy stuff like climbing the Great Wall, but what impacted me the most were the rural villages and the villagers living within them. For about four days, we biked around these villages, in the middle of nowhere I might add, and interviewed these people we met. Meeting these villagers and witnessing their lifestyle was a life-changing experience for me.

Going in, I thought I was going to pity these people. They live far from urban areas with no technology. When asked if they could go anywhere in the world, they answered Hong Kong because they didn't know anywhere else. All they knew was farm their rice and survive. At first, like most Americans, I thought, "Thank God I'm not like them." To tie this into the Luke reading, I view the Chinese, or at least these rural villagers, like the Pharisees viewed the tax collector.

equally, so why do we compare ourselves to others when each of us have the best gift of all, the love of God?

We can easily put ourselves on a pedestal higher than those who are different from us, and many Americans are like the Pharisees. I was like the Pharisees, but as I ventured on, I no longer felt they were to be pitied and in fact I felt envious. I saw that their lifestyle could be bliss. No, not bliss, because they most certainly had their hardships, but I really envied the simplicity of their lives. Their lives are so focused. It simply consisted of growing and farming rice, ducks and pigs, along with rodents.

Did I just say rodents? Yes, it was one of the last villages we went to and there on the clothesline was a rat hanging on a string being dried out for food. That image snapped me back into reality, and I realized that I'm good with my pizza back at home, and I didn't have to eat rat jerky to survive. And so, I no longer had pity nor envy, but deep gratitude for what I had. The Chinese were happy and content with what they had and so should I? Now, I don't want the message to be, "You should never feel bad for yourself," or the thing everyone is told when they're young, "There are children starving in Africa, so you need to eat your food," or children starving in China in this case.

But the message I want and that I want you to take away from this is that you should be grateful for what you have and to recognize that we are all equal as human beings. We need to stop putting ourselves into the mindset of believing we are better than someone else or that they are better than us. In the Joel lesson we read, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, all people." God loves us