**24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle C September 11, 2022**

Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14 Psalm 51 I Timothy 1: 12-17 Luke 15: 1-32

‘*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.’*

My brothers and sisters, the theme for today’s readings is God’s amazing grace and this popular hymn rightly characterizes how sweet it is. The Bible can be called the “book of grace,” because it jumps out at us on almost every page. Yet, there is not a definition of grace found anywhere in the Bible. Instead, biblical writers have given us examples and mental pictures of what God’s grace means for us.

My wife, Bonnie, and I have maybe two dozen old photo albums stuffed away in closets along with about fifty shoe boxes of photos of people we love and admire from past events and special places where memories happened. Those photos represent our own personal images of grace which are like the enumerable snapshots of grace in the Bible.

In the three ‘lost and found’ parables Jesus gives us today, he adds his own spin on what God’s grace looks like. Each story captures aspects of what God’s grace looks like but yet they are not strict definitions.

Grace can be a word that is overused in our daily communications. Like describing a ballet performer’s graceful dancing or another gifted athlete’s graceful performance in a sports competition.

A sick child is the recipient of his parent’s tender care and love. He hasn’t earned it, but he certainly needs it. That’s like receiving grace, the kind the people in the Bible experience from God’s loving hands. We don’t earn it, God’s grace comes free of charge and usually arrives when we least expect it.

Grace is what the younger son received from his father in today’s parable. It wasn’t because of the son’s well-prepared apology that his father ordered the servants to slaughter the fattened calf, put a ring on his finger, and clothe him in a royal robe. It was just because the boy was let back into the warmth of home and his father’s embrace. That’s just the way the father was. Isn’t it also what we experience when someone says to us “I forgive you,” even when we know we did something wrong and didn’t deserve forgiveness? We get the idea of what grace is. It comes as a free gift without any expectation of a payback. Can a child ever repay his parents for all their sleepless nights and sacrifices? Sure, thanks Mom and Dad, let me write you out a check! Grace comes by surprise, particularly when we have done something wrong or don’t feel very good about ourselves. Grace often comes at the lowest points in our lives as it did for the prodigal son in today’s gospel. Jesus tells us in the parable just how low the boy had sunk: he “hired himself out…to tend the swine” and he yearned to eat “the pods on which the swine fed.” Now that’s really low for anyone, but especially for Jews to whom swine were a strict taboo.

The story of the boy who went off “to a distant country” is a story of grace, and because it is, it defies our logic. The way grace works is; we get more than we give. One plus one does not equal two in the world of grace, it might equal 3, or 10 or 1 million. In the world of parables some things just don’t make sense according to the ways we think. Jesus tells us this parable without a moral expectation. It is a story that goes outside the box of what we normally consider appropriate behavior. It’s a story about grace, God’s grace. He ought to know more about that subject than the rest of us could ever imagine.

The prodigal son is a lot like the rest of us who have really messed up except he didn’t need to use a smart phone to find trouble. Some of us have really messed up, while hopefully not as badly or foolishly as the younger son, but we still know what it is like to go off on our own, to make a journey to one far country or another. Jesus tells us in the parable we cannot go to any “far country” that can’t be reached by grace. However far we travel from “Home” through our weaknesses, negligence, cowardice, or deliberate scheming, the far reaching arm of grace reaches out and invites us to come home. That’s why we come here to worship, to take one more step towards home.

If the Pharisees had their way, all of us sinners would deserve to be destroyed. But Christ uses all his power and authority to bring sinners back home in communion with God. God feels anxiousness in regards to sinners, not anger. He wants them back and does not condemn them. The Pharisees painted God in their own image. They enjoyed condemning others for being less than perfect than themselves because it fed their vanity and made them feel superior. But Jesus has no vanity, only love.

The presence of grace abounds in our daily life. These are the flesh and blood signs of God’s gift giving presence. Look around and see:

-Your generous brother or sister caring for an ill and aged parent. All you can do to pay back their generosity is just say thank you.

-the extended hand of friendship someone offers to you.

-your spouse or friend who shares your joys and your grief.

-the poorly paid teacher who spends extra time helping children learn.

-the person who visits the sick, brings them food, cleans their house and brings the Eucharist to them from our parish.

And most importantly, the words spoken to us after we confess our sins, “I forgive you in the name of the Father…”

At our Eucharist today we celebrate the many graces we have received in our lives. We are like the younger son after he is welcomed home and forgiven. We enter this banquet with gratitude for what we have never earned, but have been given all along the journey of our lives. Sisters and brothers, let’s pray that we can be pictures of grace so others can see what it looks like.