

Grace...Unearned mercy...love when it is not expected...

This week, the news reports I heard did not have much grace in them. There were shootings, threats from North Korea, assault and cyber-bullying of a 13-year old girl that apparently pushed her to take her own life; a woman throwing her baby on a bus as she lunged to attack another passenger; an Afghanistan airstrike that killed 12 children. A young child in Tennessee picked up a gun and inadvertently killed its owner's wife. And I cannot count the number of people's lives that were ended because of car wrecks or violence this week. Grace can be hard to come by.

A story: A boy loved horses, and, more than anything, wanted to work with horses. He begged Mr. Smith, the owner of the stable, to let him help him with his horses. One day, though, the boy left a gate open so that one of the horses got into the feed room. The horse ate too much, got colic, and died. The boy was so upset that he could not bring himself to go back to the stable. He knew that Mr. Smith was disappointed in him and would never let him near his horses again. A couple of days went by, and then the doorbell rang. The boy went to the door, and there was Mr. Smith. When the boy saw him, he was so ashamed. He broke into tears, sobbing his sorrow. Mr. Smith let him cry for a minute, and then said, "Why aren't you at the stable? I need you. There's lots of work to be done." The boy stammered, "How can you trust me now?" Mr. Smith replied gruffly, "You're the one kid I know won't ever leave a gate open again. Now let's go get to work." (Source uncertain) Grace.

The reading from Acts told about Saul, who we usually know as Paul now. Saul was a well-educated, determined man. He had been brought up into a strict Jewish faith, and when he saw that Jesus' followers were going around proclaiming him alive, risen and life-changing, he couldn't stand it. They were calling that man the Jewish Messiah! Saul could not let such a thing continue, so he sought to eradicate those Christians, encouraging their persecution and even standing by as Stephen was stoned to death. When Saul heard that some Christians were doing a lot down in Damascus, he obtained permission from his Jewish authorities to head down there to make them stop.

It was as Saul was going down the road to Damascus, a man-with-a-purpose, that he was stopped in his tracks. With a bright light and the question, "Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul was blinded and his heart was opened to see the truth of the Living Jesus.

This is a story of incredible grace. Saul/Paul had been so blind, so set on destruction, so sure that his own understandings were the right ones, that he had hurt the people who believed in Jesus. But God, in God's surprising ways, turned everything around for Saul/Paul, and Paul became one of the most fervent witnesses to the Risen Lord Jesus the world has ever known.

Grace. Instead of punishment, God found a way to put the wonderful talents of Paul to great and effective use. The man who would have destroyed the story was given a challenging and powerful place in it. That's the way God works: grace.

The Bible is full of stories of God's grace. Today's Gospel lesson is a prime example. If there is anybody who desperately needed God's grace, God's forgiveness, it was surely Peter.

The gospel lesson tells us unequivocally that Jesus "undid" the dead-end Peter's life had become. Peter had denied even knowing Jesus there at the end of Jesus' life. Can you imagine the pain Peter must have felt over that? Whenever someone close to us dies, it is natural to wish we'd said or done something more or differently. But few of us - if any - have been in such a horrible position as was Peter, for Peter actively denied even knowing his Lord just as Jesus died. He never stood up for him until later, after the resurrection. Peter had left his fishing business and had banked everything on Jesus, but then Peter had totally failed him. Three times Peter had denied his relationship with Jesus; in today's lesson the risen Jesus met him and three times asked him to affirm his love for Jesus. The dead-end was "undone," and Peter was given a clear path, an assignment: "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep...Follow me." Grace.

Yesterday this church building spoke of grace and love as MANY friends and relatives of the young woman, Erica, who was found dead in her room at the YMCA a week ago, were fed by some of you. You knew that Erica's family needed a reception after the Torrington funeral, and so the doors here were opened and food for all those people was provided by hearts willing to feed others. Grace.

Long ago, in their book *The Edge of Adventure*, Bruce Larson and Keith Miller wrote about how people felt that they could go into a bar and cry and tell their stories, but that they did NOT feel free to do the same in a church. In a church, too often folks feel that they have to put on an act and pretend that things are okay. When they feel this way, they cannot experience grace...

The world hungers for grace and meaning and hope:

A teenager is overwhelmed. Her parents are splitting up, and they are so busy arguing that she has not been able to tell them of her own troubles. She is flunking at least one of her classes, and two of her friends have pressured her into shoplifting. On top of it all, her period didn't come this month, so she may be pregnant. She doesn't know where to turn.

In another part of town a man tries to figure out how to fill out his tax return. His wife always did their taxes, but she died this year. He looks at the confusing form and feels the loneliness and wonders - again - why she died first. Every day seems dull and uphill.

In a city nearby a man has been laid off from a job he can't afford to lose--he's too far in debt. His wife has just left him for another man. He is angry, bitter, and resentful of those who seem to be happy. He puts on the uniform he wore in Viet Nam, takes his rifle, and decides to get even with those who he sees as destroying his life.

Any of us--at some time in life-- can be overwhelmed or undone by accident, illness or bad choices. Even the most successful people--by the world's standards-- will encounter that dark night of the soul when they have to ask themselves "Why am I doing what I'm doing? What does life mean? Is there any way out of this situation?"

After Peter and his friends had experienced Holy Week and the visit of the risen Christ there in the locked room, what did they do? They went back to their boats where Jesus had first found them and began fishing again. So what did it mean that he had risen, what difference did it make? They went out for a night on the water, returning with their nets empty. These professional fishermen had caught nothing.

When the dawn came things changed. They saw a man standing on the shore. He called out to them, directing them to cast their nets once more. Surely the disciples wondered, "What for? We've done this all night; it's useless." But they did it anyway. Suddenly their empty nets became full of fish, so full they have trouble hauling them to the shore. As this happened, they realized who the person on the shore was.

These men gained new direction, a new meaning, for their lives. The resurrection event was not something that was to be left in the past so that they could go back to doing the same old things. A new purpose, a new energy, a new mission, was before them---God was with them, and their lives were full. Grace.

Their story is also our story. Easter is over, the leftover lilies have lost their much of their beauty, we have returned to the routines of life. But things are not quite the same, for God is here and we are hungry. The Risen Jesus calls to us, offering comfort or challenge or hope, depending on our needs. And God surprises us in the midst of our weaknesses with a mission.

We need to notice that in both the story of Saul/Paul and the story of Peter, it's really all about what GOD is doing, not about what human beings are doing. The Risen Lord approached Peter and Saul and made a total difference in how they lived out the rest of their lives. That's what God does! The same Lord offers us a life-long, life-giving job! Feed my grace-hungry world, follow me.

You've probably heard about William Wilson. In the 1920's he had a successful career in New York City. He had money, he had things, ---but he also had a drinking problem. The worse his problem became the more his life began to unravel. An accident caused by his intoxication forced him to realize the need to bring himself out of his addiction. He joined a group called the Moral Rearmament; an organization that tried to show people that they could help themselves on their own--a kind of self-salvation. Instead of salvation, Bill experienced depression; he was not able to pull himself up by his bootstraps. He felt worse than ever about himself. He drank to excess and ended up in a Manhattan hospital. Feeling utterly helpless and hopeless he tried something new. He tried prayer. He asked a friend what God was like, his friend suggested that he pray to God however he imagined God to be, however he needed God to be. He prayed to a strong God, a God with the power to raise Christ from the dead, a God who could raise him from his despairing depths. Bill later wrote, "It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than myself, nothing more was required."

From this humble beginning came the organization: Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill Wilson found a reason to live, and a way to share life with others. "Feed my sheep..." Grace. Dead end undone.

What about us? If we don't experience bolts of lightning from the sky or resurrected Messiahs telling us where to fish, what does Easter mean to us today? Do we return to business as usual, or do we dare to believe that God may have a new direction and a new challenge for our talents, our resources, our time and our faith, even our weaknesses? Just where we find ourselves hurting, or feeling weak or useless, or very unsure, the Risen Lord may come to ask us, "Do you Love me? Feed my sheep." And God's loving strength will be poured through our weaknesses so as to be a blessing for someone else. That's God's way. That's the power of God's grace. Dead ends - even ours - can be undone! May we all be surprised by the way God's power can work in our lives! Amen.