

**THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST,  
PROPER 12:**

**JULY 29, 2018**

II Kings 4: 42-44, Psalm 145: 10-19, Ephesians 3: 14-21, St. John 6:1-21

**PICTURES OF GOD'S GRACE**

A useful saying: Justice is getting what you deserve, Mercy is not getting what you deserve, Grace is getting what you don't deserve.

These readings from Holy Scripture and our sequence hymn are all about the grace of God. But it may take a bit of explaining to see what this means for us this morning.

A week or two ago I was clicking through the television channels as we men are inclined to do, and came across the 1997 film, "Amistad". You may remember it. It was based on an historic event from 1839; the capture by American naval forces of a Spanish slave ship that had wandered into the waters off New England.

This film was directed by Steven Spielberg and was one of the first motion pictures to show graphic, detailed and shocking images of the brutal nature of the slave trade. I well remember seeing it and the impression it made on me even though it was about 20 years ago.

It seems the cargo of slaves, captured from their homes in West Africa, had somehow escaped from their chains, killed some of their captors, and took over the ship on which they had been human cargo, headed for Spanish colonies in the Caribbean. Now they were on land and under arrest in America, and the Spanish authorities were suing to have them returned as property of the King of Spain. The major portion of the film was an account of the dramatic and controversial trial that eventually brought them their freedom.

But one of the most remarkable things about that film and the story it told was how these human beings managed to have enough hope to eventually have victory, not merely over the brutal reality of slavery, which included humiliation, hunger, fear, dehumanization, and unimaginable physical brutality, illustrated in graphic terms in this film, but also to triumph over the seeming meaninglessness and hopelessness of their lot in life! To put it in Biblical terms, these were truly "strangers in a foreign land," totally lost from all the things that normally give human life its meaning; people on a journey to a living Hell with no positive end in sight.

The only portion of the film I watched a few weeks ago was the brief account of the slave leader, the main character in the film, and his interaction with a fellow slave who had been given a Bible. That Bible had given him encouragement to have hope even in the face of what seemed an obviously hopeless situation. The young man could not read the words of the Bible, of course, **but the book had illustrations:** and among them, pictures of:

Moses leading the people of Israel to a promised land;  
Jesus feeding the multitude;  
Jesus, suffering and dying on the Cross, and finally,  
Jesus walking on the water!

**I was struck by the power of these illustrations for people who had never heard the stories they depicted and yet who, in a unique way, were able to identify with them.**

There, in seeing these *pictures*, illustrating God's power, and love, in short, illustrating *God's grace*, they found hope, hope that some benevolent power beyond themselves, beyond the seemingly insurmountable and brutal forces that had taken away everything from them, that Power and that Person truly cared for them and would bring them victory!

They had no idea who Moses was, but they knew what joy it would give them to be delivered from bondage and led to a new land;

they had suffered near starvation on the slave ship, and here was One who gave the gift of food, in abundance, to all who hungered;

they had never heard of Jesus, but they could relate to a man who suffered much as they had suffered, on an instrument of torture that resembled the mast on the ship that had carried them away from all they knew and loved;

and, finally, the One who walked on water to reassure his followers gave them hope to walk back across the sea to their homes.

***The God of this book, the Bible, who could give them all these promised gifts, even though they were lost, miserable, barely surviving, and considered less than human by their captors, was indeed a God of Grace!***

It occurred to me upon reflection that *here* in a profound sense, is the real value, the authentic meaning, of the readings we have heard today. Modern people like you and me sometimes get bogged down in trying to explain to our skeptical friends, maybe even to ourselves, how to understand some of the Biblical stories.

How did Moses pull off the Exodus from Egypt. How did Jesus (or Elisha in our first reading!) manage to feed all the people with meager resources? How can the cruelty and suffering of Our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross, bring us Good Friday and the improbable victory that followed, and did Jesus really walk on water?

My point here is that each of these challenging stories, accounts from the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Testament, (and many more like them) have much deeper, much more profound meaning than our usually inadequate attempts to explain or rationalize, or even to understand them in terms of life as we know it. Each of them is a vivid and dramatic example of God's extravagant love for his human creatures, love far beyond our deserving...we call that "**Grace!**"

I am sure you have heard it said many times that we are all on a journey; it is one of the major themes of Holy Scripture. Some have a more comfortable journey than others. Some live what we might consider "charmed lives," successful, fulfilling, no worries in the world. At least that's the way it looks!

The reality is usually quite different. We may not be captives, chained on a slave ship, (that's a pretty extreme example; that's what made this film so remarkable and memorable!) but we sometimes find ourselves going through our own personal challenges: worried about our future, alienated from one another, aware of our imperfections, lost in our doubts and fears. In theological terms, this is called the human condition! That's why confession of sin is included in our worship: if we are honest with ourselves, we are aware of our brokenness. In so doing we

acknowledge our need of the healing and love and reassurance that only God can supply.

It is into this “human condition” that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ. That is why we are here today; no matter where we are on our journey, Our Lord Jesus Christ meets us with God’s extravagant grace, often through other people who care for us. If we could see the Biblical stories of God’s power and promise through the eyes of the young slave in “Amistad,” we would not be bogged down in making them fit ordinary life as we know it, but rather as visions of hope in the face of our times of hopelessness, encouragement and confidence in our times of fear and doubt, and the key to ultimate victory in the face of all that discourages us.

God’s chief desire is to lead us to healing and peace, to feed us with the Bread of the Holy Spirit, to win for us eternal life by the blood of the Cross, and to reassure us that we do have a true home, safe in God’s presence.

That is what God’s extravagant grace is all about, if only we would see those illustrations, those pictures of grace, with eyes open to God’s loving presence and guiding hand toward our victory of faith.

It is beautifully put in the last lines of our reading this morning from the Epistle to the Ephesians, and with this I will close:

**“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.**

**Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,**

**to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.” Amen**

The Rev’d. W. Gedge Gayle, Jr.  
Third Rector of St. Martin’s Church