XXIV SUNDAY (SEP 12) EXOD 32: 7-14; I TIM 1: 12-17; LK 15: 1-32

I once was lost, but now am found." "Amazing Grace" is always listed among the favorite hymns. It is an old one. It goes back to the 18th century. It was written by John Newton, who was on the sea from the time he was a little boy. When he was a young man, he became the captain of his own ship, a ship that brought African slaves to the colonies to work the plantations. Back in England , between voyages, he went to hear George Whitefield preach and was converted. He realized the evil of his occupation, left it, and became a priest in the Church of England and served the rest of his life as the rector of a little church in a town called Olney. He wrote a number of hymns which were printed in a collection called the "Olney Hymns," (a classic collection of hymns in the Church), and "Amazing Grace" was one of them. Even people who are not members of churches, and those who do not profess faith, find something about this hymn touching them. It is over two hundred years old. It is uncompromisingly Christian in its language. It is evangelical in its message, reflecting John Newton's experience of being found. "I once was lost, but now am found." Maybe that is the clue to its popularity, because it could be called the Christian understanding of our relationship with God. God has found us.

That is what we see in today's readings: inviting us to believe in a loving, patient, merciful, and forgiving God. Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel has been called "the Gospel within the Gospel," because it is the distilled essence of the good news about the mercy of our forgiving Heavenly Father. The whole chapter is essentially one distinct parable, the "Parable of the Lost and Found," with three illustrations: the story of the lost sheep, the story of the lost coin and the story of the lost son. These parables are about finding something that has been lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. These parables remind us that we have a God who welcomes sinners and forgives their sins whenever they return to Him with genuine contrition and resolution. The Hebrew term for repentance, *teshubah,* means a return to God by a person who has already experienced God's "goodness and compassion" (Ps. 51).

The parable illustrates the wonder of God's love and unconditional forgiveness. God seeks out the sinner and forgives him unconditionally. Jesus recounts the story of the elder brother as his response to the accusation by the self-righteous Pharisees that he was the friend of sinners. The elder brother represents the self-righteous Pharisees who would rather see a sinner destroyed than saved. He reflects the Pharisees' attitude that obedience to Mosaic Law is a duty, not a loving service. Like the Pharisees, the elder brother lacks sympathy for his sibling and levels accusations at him. As a self-righteous person, he refuses to forgive. Thus, his grudge becomes a sin in itself, resulting in his exclusion from the banquet of his father's love. That is what we all do when we sin. We exclude ourselves from the banquet of God's love

This can be for us a Sunday of self-reflection and assessment. If we have been in sin, God's mercy is seeking us, searching for our souls with a love that is wild beyond all imagining. God is ready to receive and welcome us back, no less than Jesus welcomed sinners in his time. Let us pray today that we will allow God's love and forgiveness into our lives. Let us also ask God for the courage to extend this forgiveness to others who have offended us. As forgiven prodigals, we must be forgiving people. As we continue with this celebration of the Holy Mass, let us pray also for God's divine mercy on those who have fallen away from grace. May their ears be opened so that they may hear that Jesus is welcoming them back home.

JOKE OF THE WEEK: The most unhappy character: The pastor told the story of "The Prodigal Son" to a first grade class. To check on their understanding, he asked; "Who was the unhappy character in the story when the prodigal son returned?" An eager boy raised his hand and stated the simple truth. "The Fatted Calf".