

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
Sept. 11, 2022

At both weddings and funerals, people often ask me “what hymn should I choose?” And, even though it might seem like a lazy choice, I always tell them, “Amazing Grace.” Why? I know of no Christian denomination that doesn't have Amazing Grace in its hymnal, and at both weddings and funerals, you have people attending from all sorts of religious traditions and lots of other folks who haven't ever darkened a church doorstep. And yet? They all know Amazing Grace.

If you haven't paid attention to the text for a while, there is one line I want to lift up: I once was lost but now am found. I remember singing that line as a child and not really having a sense of what it meant. I think you have to get into your late teens or adulthood for a few years before you can start to feel what it is to be lost. What are those moments when you feel like your identity has been changed? At the loss of a parent or as a new parent? Finding yourself in a career that it turns out you hate? When you look around at life and wonder if it is all that it could be. When you find yourself making poor decisions even when you know better. There are all sorts of ways to be lost, but I think that most of us can look at a moment and recall that feeling—a little stuck or a little hopeless.

And then, that grace when we are found! Perhaps it's an attentive friend or family member; perhaps it's communion with God and a sense that all is well. Maybe even it's this church family here at St. Mark's that has brought you into a new and vital emotional and spiritual space. There is something absolutely sublime about the moment when we are seen for who we are and called by name. I once was lost but now am found.

Today, we baptize little baby Quinn. And, what is baptism other than a promise that there is nowhere Quinn will be able to go in this life where he will not be found by God? What is baptism other than an everlasting promise that, just like the coin and the sheep in the Gospel story, if ever Quinn is lost he will be found by a benevolent God who will rejoice in his finding. And please do not forget that these promises made by God in baptism are promises made to you as well. When you were baptized, God promised to find you whenever you needed to be found.

The great reformation thinkers in the 1500s talked about the way in which Christians serve God and their neighbor as a response to God's promises being kept. So, we reach out in aid and support to neighbors, not because we have been told it is the right thing to do, but rather we help our neighbors as a response to the faithfulness of God to God's baptismal promises. And, I would like to take a few minutes to talk about someone who I have seen lean into the joy of God's faithfulness over the years.

As you know, our music director, Steve Wolff, is leaving us to be closer to his family. This will be his last Sunday. I distinctly remember meeting Steve for the first time because his energy and enthusiasm for this church and its work nearly blew me out of my seat. You might not know this about him, but he takes his Christianity as seriously as he takes his music. For Steve, these are not two separate areas of his life but rather one, deeply integrated response to the love that he feels from God. I know that I am the priest here, but I have always gotten the impression that Steve has a much better speaking relationship with God than I do.

There are many ways that Steve has blessed this community – the worship music, the lessons, time with the men’s group, coffee hour conversations about metaphysics that last for hours—but mostly I will remember Steve as a man of faith. A man who knows that the promises we make to God and God makes to us at baptism are true and are the ground and the being underneath our lives. When I see Steve smile, I see someone who knows that God is faithful. I see someone who knows the amazing grace of being found.

Quinn is just at the beginning of his Christian journey. Steve has been dancing the Christian dance here at St. Mark’s for 20 years. And most of us in this room are somewhere in between. The promise from God is that – either on the day of your baptism or toward the end of your ministry – you will always be loved; you will always be cherished; you will always be found. Amen.