Over and over again, Jesus is reaching out to us. We hear this at the start of John's Gospel, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." And we see it front and center in this week's Gospel, when Jesus is once again standing next to a sinner and reaching out to her. What is so important for us to remember is that God stands with us, and that in turn we are called to evangelize one another through this language of mercy, which always has at it's starting point love and then following the Lord as a way of life, and bringing this mercy to one another.

Silvano Taso isn't a person you'd expect to find in the small town of Pecos, Texas, as his original home was Italy, some 6000 miles away. But for several years he was one of 3,760 federal inmates serving time there, inmate 77806-004.

Silvano was born near Venice, and as a boy thought of being a priest. He dreamed of learning everything there was to know, and of making his mark in the world. He can speak knowledgeably about architecture, music, economics, history and botany - even tumbleweeds - of which there were so many in that west Texas town.

But somewhere everything went wrong.

In his own words, “I lost everything: my wife, my money, my good name. Everything. I lost it all.”

On August 29, 2008, federal agents in South Florida banged on his door, handcuffed him, and incarcerated him. When interviewed for a book called “Loved, Lost, Found,” which is a collection of stories about Divine Mercy, he didn’t get into the specifics of his case, only saying he had led a sinful life - not criminal but sinful - and it caused him a great deal of shame. He claimed he had illegal documents while working on behalf of the Italian government, and pled guilty, serving a 5 year sentence.

His unit was shared with 50 other inmates and it was largely an open room with no privacy. He learned to walk on eggshells and abide by the unwritten rules of the inmate power structure. His cot was against a wall, and he was grateful for that because he was able to prop up an image of Jesus, the Divine Mercy, and a photo of his granddaughter who was “born smiling” as he puts it.

He owned a set of colored pencils and would draw images of Jesus, Sr. Faustina, and the Stations of the Cross and he would prepare notices with these in both English and Spanish of prayer services he arranged for fellow inmates. He'd keep a spiritual journal, a testament to how God works in souls. Of the Blessed Virgin Mary, he wrote one day:

"I wish I could live 1,000 years to devote all my tears to console her broken heart. Why am I so wicked and miserable? O, my Jesus, please take my misery as a token of love toward You and Your sweet Mother, because I truly do not want to sin anymore."

On another day he wrote:

"But I remembered what once a confessor told me: Never doubt if a sin has been forgiven to you in confession. The doubt in itself would be a sin against the Divine Mercy."

He didn't doubt God forgave him, but he had plenty of regrets.

He was raised in an orphanage because his widowed mother didn't have the means to care for him. The sister there told him he should live to "convert souls" and he imagined being a priest. His heart was so dedicated that a priest found him as a child knocking on the Tabernacle door to ask if Jesus was home so he could spend time with him.

He grew up, got married, and seemed successful. He'd remember spending time with his daughter when she was a child, who he was still close with writing to in prison. He rose in the business world, knew the important people in the Italian government, and did some good work on behalf of the dispossessed, becoming a businessman to be reckoned with. He could open up his checkbook at his parish and make things happen. But he looked at himself and realized he had fooled himself. At the end of Sunday Mass, he'd genuflect, then leave and live a life of wretched "adult entertainment" as he put it and pride. And he reckons that when the Feds came it was the best thing that could have happened to him.

He was transferred to the prison in Texas, and after his release he would be sent back to Italy. He was the only Italian there; most were Mexican inmates. But one thing they shared in common was their Catholicism. The inmates called him "Toso Famoso" meaning "Famous Toso," and it was

agreed he could watch a daily Mass on the community TV each morning at 7 a.m.

In this prison though, he began to find his liberation as spiritually, he made a clean, concerted break toward holiness.
Everything changed for him when on a prison library cart he picked up a book: “The Life of Faustina Kowalska: The Authorized Biography,” by an American nun named Sr. Sophia Michalenko. He read bout this Polish Mystic of the 20th century and her visions that gave rise to the Divine Mercy devotions and a Gospel message tailored to the times.

He read of how Christ instructed her to write down words directed to the whole world, and of how without cooperating with His grace, we are nothing but sin. What he learned is that God loves us so deeply. He heard from the author of the book, Sr. Sophia after writing him and she became his spiritual guide. Through her, he grew in faith and learned about the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. He began praying it daily, and prison officials eventually allowed him to lead a group prayer where it was said. When he started doing this, he received graces immediately and peace of mind. He continued reading her diary as well which increased his devotion. When

interviewed for the book, his copy of her diary had been read so many times it looked like it had been put through the wash.

But he also did what Jesus does in our Gospel today; he met people with mercy, helping inmates to know what the woman came to know: that God loves them. When a prison official asked for prayers for a medical issue, he prayed to St. Faustina and heard in his heart the official should go to confession and receive Communion; she did and later she thanked him. He prayed for his inmates too, and he notes that if Jesus leaves the 99 souls for the 1 lost, Jesus needs some help which is the role of us all. In his own diary he wrote: “Who cares if I am in prison. Who cares if I am not outside enjoying my life. Who cares if all of my projects, big or small, have come to a halt. I am finally doing what I was supposed to do since I was seven. Help save souls by the bunch.” His confessor said of Silvano he is a man who wants to do the will of God; “He worries that they are not being exposed to the full Church and its teachings. But I see what he’s doing. He’s a very sincere man, a very good man, and the inmates respect him.”

Looking at his release, he said he knew the following:

Satan is real, but he’s an idiot, for the devil doesn’t stand a chance to those who turn from sin and unite themselves to the Lord.”

He knows he was put into prison to be rescued.

That all else is secondary to striving for the love of God.

To be sincere in prayer.

But above all else, God is not just an “abstract theological being” but a real, loving, Person to be loved. He knows life moves moment by moment and every moment is an opportunity for conversation or a booby trap to sinfulness.

And as for the tumbleweeds that he is so familiar with in Texas, he notes a tumbleweed is an amazing thing. Once it matures, he says, it retracts its roots and yields to the whims and ways of the wind. It looks as though its nothing but dead, dried twigs, but its dispersing seeds as it tumbles. And after its come to a dead stop, it absorbs water once again.

“Amazing, isn’t it,” says the man who was all but dead, but who tumbled till he came to a standstill upon the baptismal waters of the Divine Mercy.

Over the course of our lives, we always are striving to become better - and it’s mercy, the love of God, that makes this all possible. Our Gospel this week gives us a portrait of what this looks like in action; namely God making that move towards us, the challenge to become better people, and with it the challenge to not be like the accusing crowd who wants to condemn, but to take a page from our Lord and Silvano and liberate one another from shame and sin by giving them mercy and hope.

Humans have always been good at noticing the splinter in their brother’s eye, and this week we meet a crowd who has somehow caught a woman in the act of adultery. We don’t know how this happened, but they’ve taken upon themselves to be her judge, jury and executioner. Notice the man involved is not there, just this poor woman. The crowd wants to condemn her. And she does not at any point deny that she has done something wrong. But what is striking is that she comes across as a poor victim here; the mob makes her stand in the middle. It’s implied that she is on the ground, maybe looking down in fear and shame. And notice what Jesus

does here. He gets down on the ground with her. He meets her with compassion. We aren't sure what he writes on the ground, but he flips the script and makes her accusers realize that they are sinners too. And then there is the gaze; the same gaze and message of peace the apostles will hear after Easter. That Jesus does not condemn her at all, but rather meets her with mercy. "Neither do I condemn you."

Sin does to all of us what it does to that woman. Perhaps she had made a series of bad choices or been in a lifestyle she wanted to get out of for some time. Perhaps she had been mistreated by one man after another. Perhaps she saw no way out, and just lived in shame in this society. Our sins so often cut us off from one another; we think how can I get out of this, how can I stop this, what would people think. But the starting point is mercy, Jesus becoming one of us and bending down to meet us where we are at. Getting down in the dirt with you and me. And this is why it's so important to remember the power of mercy - that Jesus wants us to come to Him so we can be fully free.

With this though there is a challenge. Silvano read about Divine Mercy, but he truly changed. Before he'd go to Mass but not really live his faith out;

now he was heeding the words of Jesus to avoid sin. He recognized his mistake. And this is what follows from mercy. Surely this woman, Silvano, and all of us will sin again. But once we encounter mercy, hopefully there is a change. Last week, we did not get a follow up to the end of the parable but were it a real story, hopefully the younger brother would have sorted his life out and the older brother let go of his anger, living together again in harmony as a family. When we fall, we embrace mercy, but we also strive to become better. We learn from what happened - why did we do what we do? What can we do to change it or remove that sin(s) in our lives? It could be praying more, removing things from our homes or lives, learning how to think differently, coming up with a plan of action when tempted, having a loved one hold us accountable, or listening more to our consciences when we are aware of something. We also strive to learn our faith and the moral teachings of the Church to guide us and challenge us. Mercy is always needed, but so too is the work of becoming a saint. Paul says it best: “I continue in my pursuit in hope that I may possess it.” He’s not there yet - but he got there - and so can we. But it takes work to lick our various sins for good.

And lastly, the question is how do we become an evangelist? Paul in our second reading is prepared to set aside everything to do just this, which he does. Evangelization isn't easy. Silvano though brought that to the prison, as Jesus did to the woman, and so can we. But remember, it requires not just a knowledge of our faith, but empathy and mercy. Sometimes someone means well, but what if a child just learned what they did wrong and not what they did right or there was not an emphasis on love? The child might think God is just out to judge and condemn them. It's important to know what's right and wrong, but the starting point always needs to be the compassion of God's love. Jesus gets down into the dirt with this woman. So how do we do that with one another? At home, a wise parent knows what their children go through at school, and what makes each child unique and their emotions. They reaffirm them over and over that they are loved even when they make mistakes. With others, do we know their story, what they've gone through, and try to be patient with them? The mob knows the law in the Gospel, but they don't know mercy, and have zero compassion for this woman and care nothing about her story. So often people in life don't learn the faith at home, or are exposed to things they shouldn't be at an early age, or learn negative things from friends or family. Especially with children, Jesus warns us that it's better to have a stone tied to your neck

and be tossed into the sea then to cause a child to sin. As such, especially with kids, it's important to remember a lot of culpability isn't with them if they miss Mass as they can't drive, or see things they shouldn't see and sense shame because they weren't properly protected. So how are we as people, both within the family but in the larger world, helping one another? We do it by knowing the faith and what we speak of, but also must remember we have to start with the heart, helping one another to see that they are loved and a son or daughter of God, and from that moment of mercy, help them to live a life where they follow Jesus by choosing the good and rejecting the evil. It's not easy pursuing towards that goal as Paul tells us, but when we truly journey with one another, we can do so much to help them across the finish line.

So many people go through life in pain. Some years ago I read the story of Mary, an unnamed woman who had a developmentally disabled boy named Michael. He was high functioning, but battled frustrations in his life because of his mom drinking while she was expecting him. For years she lived with the pain until one day as a boy he became aware of what she did. He mentioned it in a car ride, saying "did you drink when you were expecting me." Mary was a doctor, and knew the risks, but alcoholism took

over her life for a time. She went through rehab, but the true healing came when he asked if she were truly sorry; when she said yes through her tears, he said to her “I don’t mind, I love you mommy.” And that’s when it clicked for her - he forgave her, now perhaps she could forgive herself, and truly live. Mercy. It is powerful stuff indeed. As Sister Faustina reminds us, Jesus desires us so much to come to Him. So may we open our eyes as the woman in the Gospel does and gaze upon the truth she did - which we see in the Eucharist held up upon the altar - that we are so deeply loved. Every saint had a past; every sinner has a future. May we strive to make our future in the heavenly kingdom by trusting in the Lord’s mercy and responding to it, for when we do, we will truly find the happiness and peace that is our deepest desire.