

Sermon Grace Received

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Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Matthew 4:1-11

Introduction to the Series:

Today, we enter officially into the season of Lent: a wilderness time in the Christian tradition as we reflect on Jesus's life, teachings, and ministry in the march toward Golgotha and draw nearer to God as we prepare ourselves to commemorate his death and then celebrate his resurrection on Easter morning. During Advent, we looked at how themes from the story of The Grinch resonated with themes from scripture. The series was so well-received and meaningful for so many that I wanted to find some way to do that again. But Lent has a different mood than Advent. While both are times of preparation and waiting, during Advent, we focus on preparation, while in Lent, we focus on penance. Advent builds up to something—the birth of Jesus, while Lent feels much more like we've counting down to something—Jesus's death. Advent builds up; Lent tears down. That might make Lent seem like a downer, but the whole point of Lent is a hopeful tearing down. We tear down in order to make room for God to build up. We empty ourselves so that we might be filled with what is good and holy.

Because Lent carries with it a different mood and intention than Advent, we needed a story that carried a bit more depth and breadth. We needed something to speak to the themes of our faith that would challenge us as a people to wrestle with life's most urgent and difficult questions, especially when the answers are not straightforward. If we're meditating on our own mortality and the need for grace, if we are pondering forgiveness and redemption, poverty and prosperity: we need a heavier context. Enter: Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. As we venture through the Lenten journey in worship together, we will use this story as a bridge to discussing urgent questions of spirituality and life—the book *The Grace of Les Misérables* by Matthew Rawle will be our guide. Let us hear now today's scriptures...

How many here are familiar with the story of *Les Mis*? Have you read the book? Seen the musical? What about one of the film adaptations? Hugo's timeless tale first published in 1862 has been close to my heart for a long time. The story of Jean Valjean first caught my attention when I read it as a freshman in high school. I didn't always love the literature chosen for our classes, but this story was one I fell in love with—and I knew if I wanted to go on the New York trip to see it on Broadway, I'd better actually do well in class. Seeing it on Broadway was a dream—a trip I'll probably remember as long as I live. When the most recent film adaptation hit theaters in 2012, I couldn't wait to see it. Last Sunday, a group of us stayed after worship to watch the movie together and had a wonderful afternoon. Big thank you to Christian Ed for letting us use that TV, by the way!

As we watched the film together, I was reminded again of how big this story actually is! It spans almost the entire length of Valjean's life—from poverty to prosperity, peace to revolution, sorrow to grace. *Les Misérables* is an epic tale with relatable, well-drawn characters that leap from the page/screen. It may not be billed as a Christian musical because it isn't, but as you watch it, you can't miss the primary themes of grace and forgiveness—and there aren't themes more Christian than that! One of the closing lines of the musical is, "To love another person is to see the face of God." I could close on just that line. It's a whole sermon in itself!

For the uninitiated, *Les Misérables* is a story set in France in the 19th century during the time of the French revolution. It is the story of Jean Valjean, a peasant with a desire for redemption after being released from prison in 1815 having served 19 years for the crime of stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's starving child. The story follows Valjean as he seeks redemption and a new life, all while being pursued by a merciless police inspector called Javert. Along the way, Valjean goes from poverty to prosperity, from a life of obscurity to the mayor of a town, from a lonely prisoner to a loving father.

Valjean represents the theme of grace. He's a convicted criminal who "works out his salvation with" what the apostle Paul called in his letter to the Philippians, "fear and

trembling” (2:12). After he is released from prison, a kindly priest takes him in. Valjean repays him by trying to steal his silver. Rather than send him to jail, the priest forgives him. He could have easily let the police lock him away for another 19 years, but the priest decides to show him astonishing degree of grace—bending the rules for the greater good in hopes that Valjean might return grace for grace (sounds familiar, doesn’t it?). It’s a lot like the many instances in scripture when Jesus bends the rules a bit, breaking the law in order to care for people. In Matthew chapter 12, Jesus and the disciples were picking grain on the Sabbath, which violated the law. When questioned by the Pharisees, Jesus uses the illustration of David to reveal that the Sabbath was made for humanity, not the other way around. When we put religion before people, we aren’t showing the love of God. As I noted in my Ash Wednesday meditation at our service the other night: religion is not God. The Bible isn’t God. God is God. Jesus is God. And God is, above all things, love.

God’s abundant love for people causes God to do something is truly unfathomable for most of us: God’s abundant grace is offered freely, without caveat. God offers grace so gratuitously that sometimes we can’t believe it. We’re told that God’s grace is sufficient for all—even those deemed by the world as the worst sinners alive. We, in turn, are called to offer grace for grace, as the priest does for Valjean in *Les Misérables*. That’s a tough thing—something we all must wrestle with. For instance, when we see someone begging, it’s tempting to wonder how they got into that place to begin with. Maybe we scrutinize their clothes. Look, they’re smoking, maybe if they spent less on cigarettes, they’d have more money in their pockets. We ask these questions and often talk ourselves out of giving them anything or offering them a modicum of grace. What if they’re taking advantage of our kindness, generosity, and grace? I’m awfully glad God’s not handing out grace that way, aren’t you? (pause) I wonder what the world would look like if we all gave grace and mercy as freely as God and the priest in *Les Mis*?

Offering grace is one thing, but responding well to grace isn’t always easy, is it? Society loves stories of radical transformation like this one and we triumphantly proclaim them as if they are the norm, but they’re simply not. What’s compelling about *Les Mis* is that

Valjean's story gives us a much more realistic picture of how grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation are challenging. They are not automatic—they take time. Throughout the story, we see how Valjean struggles with “choosing the good” even till the end. A little later in the story, Valjean has earned his place in the world, changed his name, and become owner of a factory and mayor of the town. Even so, Javert, the merciless policeman, is still hunting for him. When a man who looks like Valjean is arrested in his place, Valjean must wrestle with whether he should keep his identity a secret for the sake of his factory employees livelihoods, or reveal who he is for the sake of the man falsely accused. He must ask if it is better to save one person falsely accused than to provide life and well-being for many? Do the number of affected people matter? Ultimately, he does confess, unwilling to let an innocent man do time for him.

Fundamentally, though, it is obedience and love that Valjean struggles with—do we love because we are obedient to God, or are we obedient because we love God? It's a little like marriage: does a couple keep their vows because they love each other or love each other out of obedience to those vows? The hope, I think, is that love is the ultimate goal and motivation. Valjean's story reveals that very thing, but also illustrates that reaching that goal doesn't happen overnight. Valjean's story is a study in many things, among them the challenge of what it requires of us to do the right thing even when it doesn't feel good. Sometimes doing what is right in God's eyes looks absurd to the rest of the world. As Paul writes in his letter to the church at Corinth: “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” Goodness sometimes looks like foolishness to those who would live according to the laws of power rather than love. The priest's grace and mercy when Valjean stole the silver, Valjean's confession even though it would mean potential return to prison—these acts of love, obedience and sacrifice are exactly what we are called to as people who choose to follow the risen Christ.

As the story of Jesus's life and ministry show us, when love leads the way, it doesn't mean life will be easy. Jesus's great love for others will send him to the cross. The entire Lenten journey, which begins in earnest today with the story of Jesus's time of

trial and temptation in the wilderness, show us to what lengths God will go to show us what that love looks like. It is God's great love for us that makes us want to return that love, to model it, and to let it transform us and others. We enter into confession during Lent not because we wish to beat ourselves up or proclaim we are the worst of the worst, but because we wish to empty ourselves of those things which have kept us at a distance from God. We want to shed all the death-dealing ways of the world so that we can embrace the life-giving message of Jesus Christ.

The end of Jean Valjean's story offers an interesting perspective on the nature of confession—both what confession looks like and what confession does for the soul. You'll recall me mentioning that Valjean becomes a loving father to a young girl called Cosette. This young girl is one he rescued from a horrible life after her mother Fantine passed away when she was a child. Cosette may have ended up suffering a fate similar to Fantine if not for the love and care of Valjean. When Cosette grows up, she falls in love with a young revolutionary called Marius. Marius and Valjean do not have the easiest relationship. Initially Valjean confesses only his faults to him, which leads Marius to despise him. Eventually the truth of the good that Valjean has done is revealed, which includes saving Marius's life after a great battle of the revolution, so that he might be reunited with Cosette. This results in reconciliation and mended relationships which occur just before Valjean passes away. If they hadn't gotten a better understanding of his story, they may have harbored resentment and ill feelings toward Valjean. This is a lesson in how important it is in life to get a fair hearing of the story—we need to have a fuller sense of what's happening to see the big picture. Confession can go a long way toward helping us see that.

Confessing our sins is necessary Christian practice, it is foundational to who we are especially in this Lenten time. We often think of this as being only a way to share our failings, but sometimes we forget also to acknowledge the times that we have revealed Christ's light through our actions. We might think that sharing our value with others somehow amounts to bragging or a lack of humility, but we shouldn't hide our God given gifts or the times we have followed Christ's call because it makes other people

uncomfortable. As Jesus himself says in the Sermon on the Mount: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to [God].”

Confessing not just your failings, but also your own value and giftedness as Valjean eventually does, is essential to life as part of the body of Christ. Doing this is a life-giving practice. That’s what your faith is all about—far from the death-dealing, soul-stealing ways of this world, to follow Jesus means committing to a way of being that gives life!

This is what grace well-received means—to acknowledge how the grace of God has transformed you, letting your life witness to the glory of God. At the end of his life, as he sits with his daughter and Son-in-law, Valjean finally feels the “peace that surpasses all understanding” that only a grace well-received can offer. Lent isn’t just about fasting, prayer, and penance. It is also about giving. One of the greatest gifts we can give others is to shine forth the light of Christ by how we live and what we do: by returning grace for grace.

Lent gets a bad rep as being a downcast season full of depressing messages. That’s not its intent at all. The beauty of Lent is in its contrast to the rest of the year—in its willingness to allow us to wrestle with the challenges of life, the shades of color that are just a bit less bright. Lent forces us into the winter of a life spent searching only for Spring. And yet even amidst this winter, there are glimpses of Spring. Every Sunday, in fact, is a considered “Little Easter.” We may not utter the A- or H- word in this wilderness season, as we await the exuberant and joyous celebration of Easter morning, but we do not ever forget the resurrection and its meaning in our lives. Even in Lent, there is still good, joy, and most importantly, there is still love and grace. Valjean’s life was difficult, there is no getting around that, as is ours, but amid it all, we can’t forget that there is light, there is love, and there is grace. He just had to be willing to receive it. In this Lenten season, let us show how well we can receive grace, too.

Amen.