Sermon Title: “Is Grace Ever Just?”
Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley
Scriptures: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; Luke 16:1-15

**Introduction to theme:**
Today, we are resuming our Lenten journey by stepping back into the world of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, and looking at how the story of Jean Valjean resonates with themes from our faith. As we make our way through this wilderness season, we are using the book, *The Grace of Les Misérables*, by author Matthew Rawle, as our guide. Last week, of course, we discussed the theme of grace and its role in the life of Jean Valjean, a character whose existence was shaped by acts of grace and mercy. The story of *Les* Mis is set in France in the 1800’s in the lead-up to the French Revolution. After 19 years as a prisoner, Jean Valjean is freed on parole, but promptly breaks it. He uses money from stolen silver to reinvent himself as a mayor and factory owner, a man of wealth and class. Javert vows to bring Valjean back to prison. Eight years later, Valjean becomes the guardian of a child named Cosette after her mother's death, but Javert's relentless pursuit means that peace will be a long time coming—this epic tale is difficult to summarize succinctly, but that gives you the bare bones to begin our discussion.

Last week, we discussed that, for us as well as for this reformed convict turned mayor and loving father, it is not just challenging to give grace, which we expect to be tough, but it can sometimes be difficult to *accept* the grace we have been offered. God, we know, gives grace in abundance and unreservedly, but sometimes we find it difficult to receive that. By the time he passes away, we see that, though he wrestles with it all his life, Valjean has, indeed, learned how to receive grace well. A group of us met together on Thursday evening, and expanded on the theme of grace within the story. If you are interested in exploring what we discuss in this series more deeply, I would invite you to our Zoom discussion, Thursday at 7pm.

Today, we're going to look at the theme of justice and how it operates both within the story of *Les Miserables* and in our faith. Let's listen to the readings selected for today:

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Sermon:

What is justice? How does it operate in our lives? How does it work for followers of a God who gives grace as abundantly as ours? When we think of justice, we might think about law and order. We consider the work of police officers, some of whom are our own family members, or of judges and juries. We can look all around us in the news and see stories of justice received and justice denied. Many of the most popular TV shows, films, and books often revolve around this subject. Donna and I have been watching the UK program from the 90s called "Prime Suspect," following a hard-boiled detective played by Helen Mirren as she participates in the justice system, investigating and solving crime after crime, all while facing injustice as a woman within the ranks of the heavily misogynistic London police force. That series shows one way that we know in a world as imperfect and troubled as ours is, sometimes even justice isn't just. We can look at the news stories of people of color disproportionately targeted by law enforcement and know that those who are selected to enforce our laws are just as human, subjective, and fallible as any of us who don't wear the uniform.

Scripture suggests repeatedly that justice is not humankind's, but God's. Justice is divine. Isaiah 30:18 tells us that "The Lord is a god of justice." But what does that mean? What is justice in the biblical sense? Psalm 30:5, poetically declares, "God's anger is but for a moment; God's favor is for a lifetime." When we read passages like this one, or the story of Noah's Ark, or of Sodom and Gomorrah, we can sometimes conflate God's anger with God's justice, drawing a dividing line between anger and justice on one side *and* love and favor on the other. It can be tempting to fall into this trap within our theological perspectives on the world believing that those who have much are "good" and "moral" having received God's favor, while those who have little are somehow "less than" or perhaps even "immoral," believing that they have fallen on

hard times because they've received God's anger. We mistakenly believe that their lack of blessing is a hint at God's enduring justice.

Of course, all we need to do is take a closer look at the behavior of those with much to see that there's nothing unique or special about them personally that would suggest they have earned God's favor. Scripture and our own world are replete with stories where power and money are given to plenty of people who are hardly paragons of goodness and righteousness. Peel back the very thin layers of almost any politician and you're bound to see some things there that aren't quite right. Justice may be divine, but in the broken world of humankind, that justice is all too often absent, replaced in corrupt societies by inequality and crookedness of the worst kind. Justice in our world comes down to issues of law, it is strict, written in black and white with no gray area, absent all of the nuance of a life as complex as our own. This is why a poor man like Valjean must break the law to obtain food to feed his sister's starving child. He steals a loaf of bread to make sure his niece doesn't starve to death and is imprisoned for 19 years, only released at that point for good behavior. We know what Jesus would have done in this circumstance, because he routinely broke the law to put the needs of human beings first. But the law of humankind is not as just as it seems.

Throughout the story of *Les Misérables*, Javert is the face of justice—at least by the standards of the world. His relentless pursuit of Valjean is based on a very strict understanding of what justice is and will lead to his own undoing. Javert does not believe there is room in the law for nuance. In Jesus's discussion involving the woman accused of adultery, he says to the men waiting to stone her, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." No one can cast the stone because none of the men (or any of us, for that matter) are without sin. The woman may have done wrong, we don't really know the whole story, but Jesus's point is that for people who sin to kill another for their sin is unjust. No one is without sin, therefore no one ought to be going around stoning anyone. Javert would not have handled this circumstance as Jesus did. The woman, having broken the law, must be stoned. Period. He is justice taken to the extreme, believing that there is only one right and wrong, which may ultimately be true, but the

problem is the that for him, the law and the corrupt reward of status make up his entire barometer. For Javert, right is right. Wrong is wrong. There is no in-between.

And listen, I know, order is important. There's no doubt about that. Without any sort of rules, it would be painful to discern where my rights end and yours begin. Order matters, but so does flexibility. A man who steals food to feed his family would be, I think, a prime case for flexibility. For Javert, there are no exceptions, no flexibility, no room for any kind of nuance. At least, not for others. Later in the story, we see Javert employ some of the same techniques that Valjean does. I told you that Jean Valjean goes from escaped convict to wealthy mayor and factory owner. From poverty to prosperity. With the relentless Javert on his tail, Valjean knows he can't merely sell the silver and have his life change—money alone won't do it. He needs to become a new person. He begins going by a pseudonym to hide who he was from those who knew him as a convict. In time, Javert will employ a similar kind of deception.

In the uprising of 1832, Parisian students begin gathering arms and building barricades to resist the government. Javert resolves to become a spy, joining their ranks. He, like Valjean, is not merely in disguise, he has invented an entire persona. This upright man of the law with no flexibility for others' bending of the rules has now thrown his integrity out the proverbial window in order to achieve his ends. The contrast between their stories and how we read them is interesting here. Is Valjean's deception morally equivalent to Javert's? Is deception always wrong, no matter the motivation? We use the phrase "little white lies" all the time—is lying always bad? We lie to make people feel better. Your friend walks in wearing a ridiculous outfit, "No, Bill, you don't look silly in that outfit at all. It's striking!" After seeing the 40$^{th}$ drawing of the day from your kid, "Yes, little Jilly, that drawing is truly a masterpiece!"

All of us at one point or other has used deception, even for good reasons. If we look at the world in strictly right and wrong terms, we know what those little harmless, even benevolent lies really are: wrong. But we make the assumption that the little lie for the greater good is one of those flexible moments.

In our scriptures for today, Jesus tells a parable that seems absurd on its face. This is the one called the parable of the unjust steward. It goes like this: there was a rich man who had a manager. Charges are brought to the rich man that his manager was squandering his property. So the rich man calls in the manager and says, “What is this I’m hearing about you? Let me hear an accounting of your management because it sounds like it’s not kosher and I don’t think you can be my manager any more.” The manager is worried, “What will I do?” he asks himself? What he does is this: he goes to the first of his master’s debtors and asks how much this man owes. The man says, “100 jugs of oil.” The manager says, make is fifty. Then he goes to the next debtor asking the same question. 100 containers of wheat? Make it 80! Then he takes this accounting back to his master and is commended. For his shrewd action… his deception. This is a troubling story if we’re thinking about how the world’s economy works. So how do we make sense of this in light of God’s justice?

To do that, we have to go back to verse 4: the manager says, “I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” This phrase, about being welcomed into a home that is not one’s own is said twice in this parable. So when we examine this parable, we have to look beyond numbers and money. This parable is about the world’s economy versus God’s. This is a parable that speaks of transformation of the worldly economy, which operates off of the principle of scarcity (there isn’t enough to go around), and God’s economy, which operates off of the *manna* principle (there’s more than enough to go around when God provides for us). Samuel Martin Wells, an English vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in Central London, put it this way, the manager “realizes that friends are more important than money—or even the job. He moves from mammon [worldly economics] to manna, from an economy of scarcity and perpetual anxiety to an economy of abundance and limitless grace.” He doesn’t need to profit off the debts owed by others because he has found all he needs in friendships. Jesus ends the parable, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

Turning back to our story then, we can look at the contrast between the way Javert and Valjean use deception. For Valjean, it is about people, about life, while for Javert it is about the law, anger, and revenge. Valjean hides who he is, constantly on the run, because he is trying to protect and care for others. Javert hides who he is to follow a misguided, inflexible view of “justice” that is in no way just. Valjean’s deception is about doing as Jesus calls us to do, “love one another.” Javert cares for no one, really, but strict adherence to law and order. For Valjean, it is about justice married with grace, but for Javert it is death-dealing, graceless injustice.

Javert isn’t comfortable with any kind of bending of the rules or offering exceptions, and this is ultimately his undoing. After Javert is captured as a spy, Valjean shows him grace in letting him go. This kind of grace does not compute for Javert. How can a convict be capable of mercy? Crime and righteousness within the same being is not something he can comprehend. This shakes him up severely. If Valjean is capable of forgiveness and grace, then Javert’s worldview is wrong.

There was a time for me when I thought everyone who was on support from the state—call it welfare or Medicaid, whatever—was not working hard enough. They were suffering because of their own doing. There was a time for me when I thought that black people who suffered and died after being pulled over by the police had brought it on themselves by how they behaved. I was wrong on both counts. Sometimes you can do everything right, you can work hard and behave respectfully, follow the law and do good, and still things will go badly for you. You can still fall on hard times. How often do we walk past someone begging on the streets and blame them? Do we ever stop to get their story? How did they find themselves in this terrible position? Do we ever ask how else we can help besides throwing a few quarters in their cup?

As much as we want to think the world works and operates on strict right/wrong, good/evil, black/white lines, it doesn’t. Javert could not admit that he was wrong. He could not accept a worldview that did not align with what he had always believed and it

literally destroyed him. Last week our talk was about the importance of receiving grace well. Javert, our representative of “justice” ultimately reveals the danger of rejecting grace. The parable Jesus presents us with in today’s scriptures seems truly like an “upside-down” kind of worldview. It is not what we expect. But then, that is true of so many things in our lives. When we enter into living with an open heart and open mind, we might be surprised at the ways that God shows up to shake up our strictly held definitions and perspectives. Thankfully Christ knows our faults, our stubbornness, and our failures and, through unfathomable grace, forgives us anyway. That’s good news!

Amen.