

Sermon Title: “This Great Human Invention”

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Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

Introduction to theme:

As we have in previous weeks of this Lenten season, I wanted to say a few words to introduce our scriptures and theme today. We are continuing our series, “*The Grace of Les Misérables*” based on the book of the same name by author and pastor Matthew Rawle. The book, as well as our Lenten study and Worship Series, cover the intersection of our faith with the story of Victor Hugo’s 19th Century novel, *Les Misérables*, set in France in the time of revolution. In previous weeks, we have discussed grace and its role in the life of the central character, Jean Valjean, as well as the interplay between grace and justice in the dynamic relationship between Valjean and inspector Javert.

We’ve discussed before how enormous this story truly is, how far it spans, and how difficult it is to sum up. So, as we did last week, we’re going to give a brief primer on our central characters for today’s discussion. 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. Inspector Javert vows to bring Valjean back to prison and will pursue him to the ends of the earth. In the course of reinventing himself, Valjean meets the tragic character Fantine, a young woman working in his factory, who has a daughter she has sent to live with a rather unscrupulous family, the Thénardiens, in hopes that she can make enough money to support her little family. The Thénardiens abuse and neglect the daughter and extort greater and greater sums from Fantine. She is forced to sell her hair, teeth, and eventually her body. When she dies, Valjean vows to look after and eventually becomes guardian of her child, who is called Cosette.

Today, we’re going to look at the theme of poverty, that thing Jesus told us would always be with us, and how it operates within the story of *Les Misérables* and our faith.

Poverty doesn't have to be, and yet this great human invention affects everyone and everything it touches. For some it leads to perseverance. For others, it is destructive to both body and soul. What is our role in combating poverty? Before we get into it, let's hear today's selected scripture lessons:

Sermon:

Earlier this week, my wife sent me some photos taken on her morning walk. She took them at one of our favorite places in the entire world, oddly called "The Hoe" in Plymouth. Now, that term does not carry with it the same baggage in the UK as it does here, so stay with me for a second. This is a place along the southern coast of Plymouth that overlooks a blazing blue body of water called the Plymouth Sound, at which it sits on the northern-most edge. The Sound eventually connects to the English Channel and, if you followed that far enough, you would end up in Northern France. As you look out over the Plymouth Sound from the Hoe, you will see rock-lined beaches, rather than sandy ones. You'll see boats, sailing through the vast expanse of water and tiny islands like Drake's Island, full of history dating back hundreds and thousands of years. When people speak of spiritual experiences, we often think of the overt ones that take place in church buildings like this. For me, however, the Plymouth Sound holds a spiritual resonance. The first time I looked out over that water, I knew my life would never be the same. I could feel something special happening within me. It's where my wife and I fell in love and where we got engaged, yes, but it's also where, hearing the lapping of the waves, whether the sun is shining on a warm summer day or the rain drizzles over us as we stroll under overcast skies, that I am struck by the wonders of God's created order. In the vastness of the water, I am reminded of how God has made all that I see before me, from the water to the land to everything that swims, walks, and flies—know, in the past, and in the future. As I looked at those photos Donna sent of our favorite place, I was reminded of how many wonderful days we have shared there and how many more are to come.

The beauty of that place and its meaning in my life today stands in stark contrast, however, to the horrors of the characters of Hugo's story, who lived just across the English Channel two hundred years before our time. For Fantine, what seemed like hope on the horizon, ended in tragedy. I would like to tell you that her story ended happily and was filled with beauty at watching her daughter grow up, but it's important to be honest: not everyone's story contains the same blessings. Poverty doesn't have to be, and yet it is. Fantine's story doesn't have to be, but it was.

When Jesus said, "The poor will always be with you" it wasn't him resigning himself to the problem of poverty. It wasn't Jesus's apathy on display. In the context of the gospel, it is directed at Judas, who is far more concerned with how other people are using their gifts than he is about how he uses his own. It's not an excuse to ignore the poor, although it is often used that way; it is, rather, said to rebuke the disciples who are not using their gifts to help the poor themselves, and yet are critical of how a woman uses what is of value to her, a jar of oil, in service of and out of love for Jesus Christ.

Last week, I briefly mentioned the problem of intertwining the ideas of sin and poverty. It's dangerous and erroneous to assume wrongdoing on the part of that mother standing on the sidewalk with her children and a cardboard sign that reads, "My children are hungry, anything will help." No one does that because it's the easy way out. They do it because a confluence of personal and systemic events has led them to that desperate position. Sin and poverty are not necessarily related. One does not automatically lead to the other—don't believe me, look at all the sins in our politics, but all the money that funds it. Being poor is not a sin. It is not a crime.

For Fantine in our story, sin sort of does lead to poverty—except it is not Fantine's sin that leads to it; it is the Thénardiens sin (abuse and extortion) that led Fantine to these dire straits where she must sell parts of herself, and indeed eventually her whole self. Matthew Rawle writes, "this wasn't that Fantine was sleeping in the bed that she had made; rather she was forced to die in the bed that someone else made for her."

If we look back over our lives, we might ask whether our sins were visited on others in the way that the Thenardier's sin is visited on Fantine, then Cosette, and everyone else they try to manipulate, extort, abuse, and steal from. Or perhaps I could ask the question more directly as it pertains to our theme today: How do we, individually or communally, play a role in sustaining poverty? How are our sins inflicted on the poor and vulnerable?

There's a proverb that reads, "give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." This always seemed reasonable enough to me. I've usually fared better in life when I've been taught how to do something versus when I've just been handed something. When our thinking is dichotomous, along a strict binary with no gray area, then yeah, this makes total sense. *Of course* you'd rather learn than just be handed something. BUT. That's not how life works, ultimately, is it? We do not exist in a world that operates in a way so cut and dry. It is not just a choice between either giving a man a fish or teaching him to fish. You can give a man a fish and THEN teach him to fish, my friends. It's a whole lot easier to learn how to fish when you aren't starving. It's hard to learn new things when you are hungry. It's hard to learn how to fish without a pole or fishing line. And even with a full belly, a pole, and fishing line: chances are, someone else owns that lake. Barriers exist in society whether we like it or not, and those barriers are much higher and difficult to overcome if you are poor, black, transgender, disabled or otherwise marginalized. I know we all hate the term privilege because we've been conditioned to think it's a politically "woke" word—but what it really means, is that those who come from decent families or are white, straight, cis-gender, and able-bodied have fewer barriers in their way as they attempt to make their way in the world.

People always like to say to me that God won't give us more than we can handle. When I got lupus, people said that to me, so when I felt like I couldn't handle something, I blamed myself, assuming there was something *e/se* wrong with me if what God had given me felt like too much for me to handle alone. The kind of thinking that says, "God doesn't give us more than we can handle" is problematic because a) it's not scriptural. It

is not in the bible. b) it assumes God is the one giving out difficulties. Thus, it excuses those who would abuse and neglect, coerce and do otherwise monstrous things by saying it was God who visited this evil on people, not the evil doers, themselves.

It is also problematic, because it keeps us from asking hard and important questions about why, for instance, a single mother like Fantine should have to lie about her child to find a good job, why she has to offer literally all she has, including her body, to fulfill made-up debts, *and* why no one around her in the city seems to care.

It's wrong to think that the horrors visited upon the poor are somehow their fault—that their poverty is punishment for poor choices and that the depravity they endure is well-deserved. In our scripture today from the gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 25, Jesus tells a parable about sheep and goats that will challenge both this idea and place the responsibility back on the community to step up. In this parable, Jesus uses the example of a shepherd who separates his sheep from his goats. He says that when the Son of Man comes in all his glory, he will sit on a throne like a king. Everyone will sit before him and he will divide the people as a shepherd divides sheep from goats—in other words, it will be clear to the king atop his throne who is of one kind and who of the other.

The king will say to one group, you are blessed and welcomed into the kingdom I have prepared for you, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Those righteous, welcome people, not remembering ever seeing the Lord or offering him so much as a crumb, ask, “When did we see you hungry or thirsty, in prison or naked?” And the king says to them, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Then he will turn to the other group, presumably the goats, and will tell them to depart from him. They are not welcome in his kingdom, because he was hungry and they gave

him nothing to eat, thirsty and they gave him nothing to drink, a stranger and did not invite him in, he needed clothes and they did not clothe him, he was sick and in prison and they did not look after him. This group of the unrighteous, confused, ask a similar question to the first, “Lord, we don’t remember seeing you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes, or sick and in prison. When did we see you and not help?” And the king replied, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.” This parable is calling to us to get off our collective bottoms and *do something* for others. It’s calling on us to ask ourselves collectively: what is our responsibility to the poor and the marginalize? This parable is warning us not to turn a blind eye toward suffering—hunger, thirst, sick, or homelessness, no matter who is suffering.

Jean Valjean has a hard time turning a blind eye toward those who suffer. Time and again, he reaches out to help even when it may get him into trouble. He knows he is strong, so he lifts a cart of a man suffering in the street, even though it may expose who he is to others. He confesses to being prisoner 24601 when another man has been arrested in his place, even though it means he will return to prison. And when he sees Fantine dying and suffering doubly from fear for her daughter’s future, he reassures her that he will find the girl and care for her even though he has no responsibility to the girl or her mother. Fantine’s story makes her one of “the misérables” in *Les Misérables*. She is a young ingénue with a future full of light that ends in abject poverty, crushed under despair, abused, oppressed, destroyed. Fantine’s end is not a happy one. And yet, amidst it all, Jean Valjean will leave her with some hope. He will find Cosette and raise her as his own. Cosette will get the happy ending her mother never could. She will find peace, and help Valjean find it, too. Her life will be blessed and she, herself, will be a blessing.

Far too often, people of means view the poor as “other.” We talk about them instead of to them. We feed them, but don’t eat with them. There is a difference between preparing a meal for the “other” and making room at your table to eat with them. I love the idea of building bigger tables as the ideal metaphor for what an inclusive ministry looks like. But

Matt Rawle makes a good point that a more gospel-centered approach may be to leave your seat and offer it to someone else. Think about our communion table. This table is small. There's not enough room for all of us to sit at this table or stand here at the same time; instead, we come, receive, give thanks, and then leave, thereby making room for others in our midst. If we get possessive of that table, which isn't ours, but Christ's, insisting that we deserve to stand there because it's our church, then there's no room to feed others, is there?

Donna and I have a favorite place on the Hoe in Plymouth. We call it "our spot." It's nothing too spectacular at all really, just a little cement step that seems almost like a built-in bench cutting into the embankment that goes down into the Plymouth Sound. It's not a private spot, but it's somewhat more secluded than standing on the sidewalk at the height of the roads or sitting at a waterfront cafe. It's quiet-er, away from the crowds on the hoe, and from that spot you can really hear the peaceful lapping of the waves and get a sense of calm as you look out over the beauty of God's created order.

Now, imagine we invited all of Donna's family and friends to that spot to see it with us. If we all attempted to crowd onto that step, someone would get crowded out, unable to see the same view we were all seeing and too loud to hear the peace of the waves. But, if Donna and I went down there, took in the view, and then got out of the way, there would be plenty more room there for others to experience the feeling we get there. If they followed suit, taking in the view and then getting out of the way, there would be room for still others. If we want everyone to see the beauty and breathe in that peaceful calm, we must be willing to get up to make room for others.

It's hard to look at our blessings and see other people suffering. It's easy to want to blame that person to alleviate ourselves of guilt. We don't want to give up what we have to help others we deem unworthy of our gifts. But their worth is not ours to determine. Scripture and the example of Jesus are clear: everyone is worthy and we belong to each other. "Whatever you did or did not do for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did or did not do for me." We all have a role to play in combatting poverty. It is

primary to our call as Christian people. In our efforts to live the way of Christ, putting the gospel to work in our lives and the lives of others, perhaps all of us who have means should learn to take in the view . . . then get out of the way.

Amen.