

Sermon Title: The Gift of Love

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Scriptures: John 3:1-17, 1 Corinthians 13:13

Introduction to Theme:

Here we are in the second half of our Lenten worship series exploring the theme of grace, one of the greatest gifts we have ever received from our Creator. To do this, we're walking through the story of *Les Misérables*, exploring the ways in which its themes resonate with themes from our faith. The author and pastor Matthew Rawle has provided the raw material for our Lenten journey in his book, *The Grace of Les Misérables*, and we're using this book as a guide not just for worship, but also for our Thursday evening Bible study. The book *Les Mis*, was written by 18th century French writer, Victor Hugo, who takes readers on a tour through the life of Jean Valjean, a penniless convict turned mayor turned father, who seeks throughout his life to outrun his demons, learn to give and receive mercy, and find redemption and peace at last. All of this, of course, is set against the backdrop of post-revolutionary France in a time of persistent social unrest. Valjean becomes a father unexpectedly and untraditionally, and learns the value of a life well-lived.

Breathe.

So far in our series, we've discussed how various characters embody specific themes. We've talked about grace as learned and lived through the story's primary character, Jean Valjean. We took a tour through the inflexible mind of inspector Javert, whose strident vision of justice does not quite jive with justice in the kingdom of God. Last week, we took a closer look at one of the most heartbreaking characters of any novel ever written, Fantine, whose life ended tragically after taking a horrific turn into depths of poverty none of us are likely to have ever seen. Throughout all these discussions, we have endeavored to explain how these themes of grace, justice, and poverty are understood or addressed by our Christian faith. This week, we will turn our attention to a subject that is my favorite of all: Love. Let's hear the scriptures before we begin our talk:

Sermon:

Today is Mother's Day in the UK. It's the day my family celebrates our Donna, of course, but also one in which we celebrate my mother-in-law, Toni. Love isn't always what you think of when you think about in-laws. The word "in-law" surely provokes strong feelings, but feelings don't mean love always, do they? Sometimes the only thing we have in common with our in-laws is that we share a love of the same wonderful person. Fortunately, I have found that my mother-in-law and I share a great many things in common beyond our Donna. One of those that I'm sure you can all appreciate is our mutual love for the music of The Beatles. Who doesn't love them, really?

When I think of the Beatles, the first song that comes to mind is: All you need is love. But is love all we need? I think anyone who's been married will tell you that love is paramount, but is it *all we need*? Well, I suppose that depends upon what we mean by "love." Shakespeare wrote, "Love sought is good, but given unsought is better." That quote makes me think about selflessness in love, and that the best kind of love we can achieve is that which asks nothing of the other. What are some other things you think of when you think of love? Family. Respect. Care. Empathy. Kindness. Generosity.

As we can see, love can mean lots of things in our daily life, can't it? Love can point to romantic relationships, it might speak of the love of between friends, or the love of parents and their children. Sometimes we speak of love in relation to our nationality or favorite sports team. I love the movies of Audrey Hepburn, but that's a very different kind of love from my love of my children or my wife. Love has many meanings, but when it's mentioned in scripture, what does love mean?

For an institution that adores a good wedding, it can be uncomfortable to talk about romantic love in the church, especially from the pulpit. Pastor's can't really stand up here and talk about our smokin'-hot spouses, but we can't talk about the story of Les Misérables, without visiting the relationship between Cosette and Marius and the love that blossoms between these two individuals from very different backgrounds. What

makes us uncomfortable about discussing romantic love from the pulpit, I think, is that when we think of this, we often think of physical acts of love, but that's not the primary aspect of romantic love, *really*, is it?

At its core, the subject of romantic love is actually a prime opportunity to talk about the importance of finding someone with whom we might journey through life. Many of us who have found that person can think back on those awkward first moments, when we felt butterflies in our bellies at the sight of our beloved spouse. I still feel those routinely with Donna, as I'm sure many of you do with your spouses as well. Sometimes, the most important person in the universe is that person staring at us across the table at dinner. I remember the first time Donna took me out to dinner. It wasn't meant to be a "date," but as I looked across the table at her perusing the menu at Wagamama's in Plymouth, I got this feeling in the pit of my stomach, planned or not, that told me I knew I'd found my person.

When we find our people, romantic or not, there can be a sense of wholeness that springs up within us. We know that God did not create us to live and be in isolation, and so it makes sense that, in the words of the film *Jerry Maguire*, our person "completes" us. A common refrain of our faith is the idea that we were built for community. And that's part of what it means to find our person. Our families are a microcosm of the relationships built among members of broader communities, and that includes the relationships between members of the body of Christ.

When we think about love, though, we must proceed with caution: witness the challenges of any teenaged relationship and you know: love can be fickle. And that's really part of Marius's story in *Les Misérables*. As Matt Rawle discusses in his book, "Marius's greatest desire is the last thing he has experienced." That's part of the struggle of his love for Cosette—we don't know for some time whether it is true love because Marius struggles so deeply within himself.

Has this ever happened to you? You see a new film and you think, “That was one of the best movies I have EVER seen!” and then on reflection, you’re like, well, it was good—maybe not the best. This might happen with books or meals, for me it even happens with commentaries on scripture. In the words of Janet Jackson, we tend to be a “What have you done for me lately” kind of people. We fall in love with the latest thing. Whatever is in front of us is what gets our attention. I think that’s why devices like phones are designed so indispensably and why companies spend so much on advertising. If they wish to remain relevant in a fast-paced, flashy world, they think they’ve gotta constantly be within arm’s reach, front and center. But when our love is reserved solely for the latest thing, we run into trouble. When our love isn’t rooted in things that last, it becomes fickle and shallow. Love ought to be of the lasting kind, shouldn’t it?

Part of the problem is that we live in a throw-away society. We don’t fix things anymore. Button comes off my pants? Time for a new pair. Phone starts going on the fritz? Well then, I’d better get to the Apple store for the latest model. Printers are thought of as disposable these days, too, we’d rather throw them out than replace the ink cartridge. I fear the reach of our “throw away culture”— I think it extends now beyond the material and into our relationships, the most formative and pivotal elements of our existence. Are there people we simply cannot be in relationship with? Absolutely. But more often, we struggle to stay in relationship because relationships require work. If we get irritated or angry with folks, maybe we think it’s not worth the hassle to fix things. We’ll just move on. People are messy. Relationships are hard. We might think, well, I don’t know how to fix another person, just like I don’t know how to fix my iPhone so, it must be time for a new one. When the world around us is constantly begging for our attention, turning us from one thing to the next so fast that our heads spin, the distractions can keep us from seeing what’s important in our lives.

A love rooted in Christ helps us cut through the noisy distractions to see what really matters. It causes us to move from the “throw away” mindset to one that looks for those lasting things. It forces us to lift up what is forgotten, dismissed, or seemingly irrelevant.

You've heard me and other ministers say for your entire lives, just as you've read yourselves: those thrown away by society are the very folks Jesus went into the world to serve. In fact, he came into the world as one of those very people. He wasn't afraid to try to help, heal, or fix "the other" because he was a forgotten, dismissed, and seemingly irrelevant infant born among animals, placed in a feeding trough. People scorned by society were the very people Jesus ate with, healed, fed, and taught.

The story of Marius and Cosette is a complex one filled with challenges individually as well as those they face together as a couple. Finding one another wasn't a given—for Cosette, the abused orphan adopted by the kindly former convict, Valjean, her path to a love match with the romantic dreamer called Marius took many twists and turns. For Marius to gain their permission from his curmudgeonly grandfather to marry her was a work of grace and reconciliation all in itself. It's far too big a story to retell in a single sermon, but the ways in which their stories intertwine and connect display the workings of love in all their complexities. This is not a simple case of infatuation, although it may have begun that way. The love that winds its way in their story is one with tendrils that extend into the lives of those around them. Their eventual marriage is a union that invokes the healing waters of reconciliation, the overwhelming tides of joy, and bright, shining rays of hope in a story that is filled with so many awful things. And yet, it is not joy or hope or faith that sustain and motivate us. For both Jesus and for the apostle Paul (as for us): it is love.

Now, I have a bit of a bone to pick with Matt Rawle in his explication of Paul's poem in 1 Corinthians 13. Rawle doesn't seem to fully appreciate Paul's words here, while I think this is the most eloquent thing Paul's ever written—certainly, it is one of the most beautiful. Rawle writes, "Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church seems to be having a difficult time nailing down exactly what love is. It's almost like we are overhearing Paul ramble, trying to find the right words."

I don't think this is Paul rambling at all. Love is not something we can define in one word or two. Paul's explanation of love is complex because love is complex. Paul is

describing love at its best and purest form. This passage is often read at weddings—it was read at mine, in fact—but it's not about romantic love. It *can* be what romantic love looks like between two people, but this kind of love is not isolated to the love shared between two people who fall in love and choose to spend their lives together. Paul is writing of love between people who serve in the church.

Paul writes, "Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." This revelatory poem on love is not rambling, as Rawle states; it is incredibly coherent. This is Paul at his very best (in fact, it's so good that there are scholars with some questions as to whether it was he who actually wrote it). This is Paul writing a letter to a church with members having a hard time with the concept of being in relationship with one another—they don't understand how to love each other within the body of Christ. There are some who seem to have missed Christ's teachings on how to treat the least of these. There are others who place themselves before everyone else, who race to the eucharistic table, who have forgotten the greatest commandments. Paul breaks down what faithful, mature love looks like so that those very human members of the church can see what it means to put away childish and competitive notions of status and pick up the greatest virtue of all: love.

For Marius and Cosette, love meant that nothing else mattered other than each other. For Christians, what matters, aside from a love for the One who created, cares for, saves, and sustains us, is the community—the world full of people made in the image of God. We can, perhaps, make the biggest impact locally, but we are called to see all of God's creation as sacred and to act accordingly out of love for God and love for others.

When England's Queen Elizabeth II married Prince Philip, much was made of her side of the vows. Would she, future queen of England, *obey* him as well as love him and honor him? Would their love be one in which the *queen of the British Empire* was,

indeed, subservient to a man? I'll leave it between them and God as to who really wore the pants in their marriage, but I've always thought the word "obey" in marriage vows gives off the wrong impression. Marriage isn't a hierarchical type of institution, or at least it shouldn't be. We obey God, yes, but we obey out of love, we don't love out of obedience. If Her Majesty obeyed Philip in any part of their relationship, it wasn't because she had to, it was because she chose to out of love. If my wife asks me to do something and I obey, it is not out of obligation, but out of love. If I ask you to do something for the church and you "obey," you do so not because I'm any kind of boss (because that's really not how the church works), you do so out of love for God and the community you serve.

Rawle puts it this way, "The longer I walk this earth, the more I experience that love out of obedience will never be the kind of love Christ offers." Naturally, there are times when obedience prompts our actions or impacts our relationships, but if all we do we do out of obligation that's not really love. The difference between loving out of obedience or being obedient out of love is a lot like the difference between living according to the law versus living by the *spirit of the law*. As we discussed a few weeks ago: Jesus lived and acted in the spirit of the law, not out of strict adherence to the letter of the law. That's what he talks about in John 3, which does not tell us God loved us because God *had to* love what God had created, rather, it tells us that such was God's love for the whole world, that he let his incarnate body live a human life in poverty and service, going so far as to suffer and die on a cross to show us what real love looks like. Jesus lived a human life grounded in love so that we might know what God desires of us. Not because he had to, but because he loves us. Obedience without love is authoritarianism and no one wants that.

1 John 4:8 does not say "God is obedience;" it says, "God is love." If we believe God is love, if we believe that God's Spirit is alive and active in the world, then we can assert that love is not a static "thing;" it is a dynamic force. It is a force that empowers us to fix what is broken, heal what is hurt, and bring a spirit of joy to all we do to follow God's call. When we are grounded, when we are *rooted in love*, when all we do comes from a

place of love, being faithful to God's call is easy. Our study this Lenten season is about grace within the story of *Les Misérables*, but we should remember that grace (from God and others) is given out of love. Jean Valjean discovered this as he sought redemption not by merely not doing wrong, but by actively seeking out what is good: I show love when I am merciful and gracious. When I am merciful and gracious, I do what is good. No matter what we've done in our lives or what has been done to us, we can do that, too.

If we are truly rooted in love and God *is love*, then, my friends, I think perhaps the Beatles really were right: Love *is* all you need.

Amen.