

Sermon: Where is the Empathy
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Scripture: Psalm 130 and John 11:30-45

Introduction to theme:

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, we are venturing once again into the streets of 19th century France with the characters from Victor Hugo's beloved classic novel, *Les Misérables*. As we have been throughout this Lenten season, we are going to continue exploring the intersection of our faith and themes from the story and its characters. The author and pastor Matthew Rawle and his book, *The Grace of Les Misérables*, have been guiding us through this as well as our Thursday evening Bible study. The book *Les Mis* takes readers on a tour through the life of Jean Valjean, a penniless convict turned mayor and eventually surrogate father, a man seeking redemption while learning to give and receive mercy. The story is set against the background of post-revolutionary France in a time of tireless social unrest.

Breathe.

So far in our series, we've zoomed in on 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. We examined one the heartbreaking narrative of Fantine, whose life ended tragically after taking a horrific turn into depths of poverty none of us are likely to have ever seen. Just last week, we visited the love story between Marius and Fantine's daughter, Cosette, and the ways in which love for Christians contrasts with romantic love and ended on the thought that God is, indeed, love. Throughout it all, we have worked hard to identify how grace, justice, poverty, and love are understood and addressed by our faith. Today, we are venturing into an area Matt Rawle does not directly address, but which is every bit as important as anything else we might discuss: empathy, as we

Let's listen to the scriptures as we prepare to open our minds and hearts to the message God means for us to take with us today.

Sermon:

“Whatever happened to the values of humanity? Whatever happened to the fairness and equality? Instead of spreading love we’re spreading animosity... Father, father, father help us. Send us some guidance from above? Cause people got me questioning, where is the love?” So say the great and wise Black Eyed Peas in their hit song from 2003. Where is the love? Mother Theresa, now a saint, once wrote, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” As I look around at the anger and hatred spreading throughout our country and infecting the relationships between individuals throughout the world, I think that may have been her most astute observation.

It’s often easier for us to withdraw into our own little worlds, worry solely about ourselves, and to push back against those things we don’t understand or outright ignore the suffering of others because “it’s not our problem” or “they aren’t our people.” We have forgotten that we belong to each other and that there are enormous problems in the world with actual solutions. Schools regularly go into lockdown in this country, but instead, we’re worried about men dressed in costumes reading to school children. Black men are afraid to be pulled over by police even for a broken tail light, but instead we’re worried about what’s happening in consenting adults bedrooms. Children are starving and dying of thirst in 2023, needless war ravages and kills innocent men, women, and children in staggering numbers, but instead, we’re worried about the fictional harm that might be caused by a Renaissance sculpture of a biblical hero.

Whatever happened to the values of humanity? Where is the love?

These are questions that could just as easily have been asked by the characters in *Les Misérables*, and that were, indeed, explored by its author, Victor Hugo, as he told his sweeping, epic tale. After he steals bread to feed his family, Jean Valjean is locked away in prison and becomes prisoner number 24601. It’s easier, you see, to forget that the convicted are human beings if they are referred to by number only—this is a secret that Inspector Javert knows and uses, as he later doggedly pursues Valjean, obstinately insisting to the very end, “once a thief, always a thief.” The problem for our pig-headed,

justice-minded police inspector, of course, is that people are capable of growth and change. People can turn their lives around. They can learn better and then do better. But in order to understand that, you would first have to accept something that our dear inspector never will: 24601 is not a number, he is Jean Valjean, a human being created in the same image as Javert, himself. Valjean could have given into this dehumanization, and at various points he does, until a kindly, empathetic bishop decides to show him a grace he doesn't believe he deserves, and he begins to turn his life around.

A similar dynamic works in the short life of Fantine, the character whose life will be characterized by the abject poverty and degradation it ends in. Caught in a web of societal injustice, Fantine will do everything she can to try to make a life for her daughter, Cosette, but she is taken advantage of by malevolent forces, led into a life of prostitution just to pay the bills. She is treated as an object by men and then ostracized by everyone around her for the decision she had no choice but to make. It isn't until Jean Valjean re-enters her life that she is seen as a human being, but by that time, it is too late. Fantine is on her death bed, fearing for her daughter, enslaved by the cruel and evil Thenardiens who have principally participated in creating Fantine's ill-fated, wretched circumstances. Valjean will recognize her as a human being, and offer to care for her daughter, to ensure she is safe and able to grow up. His act of empathy does not just save Cosette, it allows Fantine to go to her death with some measure of peace, a gift we should all be so lucky to receive.

Valjean's empathy will show up throughout our story, arriving at last in the selfless act of saving the life of the man Cosette loves, even if that means he must give up his own. *Les Misérables*, while beloved, isn't a story we often associate with joy, is it? It is a hard story, powerful, but emotional, one that prompts us to examine our lives for the places perhaps we have fallen short so that we, too, might be moved to acts of kindness and empathy like our hero Valjean.

In our gospel passage today, we listened to the story about Lazarus's death and how, upon receiving news of this heartbreaking event, Jesus, feels the loss deeply. We're

told Jesus sheds tears precisely three times in scripture, but this passage from John is the most moving as we get what is the shortest verse in the KJV of the bible, John 11:35, which simply reads: "Jesus wept."

But how can this be? Jesus is God. I grew up being taught that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, which was then and is still used to explain why the passages we read in scripture that seems to preach against same-sex love should apply to all relationships between all people for all time. God is unchanging, Jessica. If God is unchanging, how can God be moved to tears? What does it mean that Jesus, God incarnate, God made flesh, Emmanuel, the Messiah, Son of God weeps over the death of a puny human being?

I think it shows that ours is a God who willingly came to be among us and to truly be in solidarity with us. It is Jesus, again giving us an example of how to love and that is to allow ourselves to feel what we feel, intimately. Our Psalm today, 130, begins with a plea to a God the Psalmist *must* believe will hear him: out of the depth I cry to you, Lord; hear my voice, let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy." This is a psalm writer of faith in a Divine entity that *cares* about what happens to him. A psalm writer who places his hope in a God who can be moved to compassion and empathetic action out of love.

Hebrews chapter 4 verse 15 says that Jesus is not some high priest, wholly separate from unable to sympathize with us, but one who has been through what we've been through, felt what we've felt. Paul reminds us of the power of stories to produce empathy and provoke action. In chapter 2, he goes so far as to say that Jesus is able to help we who suffer and face many tests, because Jesus, himself, suffered and was tested. The gospels witness to the powerful impact of Jesus on the people, while at the same time testifying to the impact of the people on Jesus as he is sometimes challenged by the realities of the very human life he is inhabiting.

And here, in the gospel called John, we get a perfect example of Jesus's humanness as Jesus feels what Mary and Martha feel at the loss of their brother, Lazarus. While Jesus could well have moved forward with the knowledge that Lazarus would rise, instead, he

allows himself to feel one of the most painful of human emotions, grief, alongside Mary and Martha. This shows us that ours is not an aloof god in the sky unable to empathize with us, cold, unfeeling, angry, and vengeful; but a loving, merciful one who came to be among us, to live as we live, to feel as we feel. Jesus shows us that God can relate to us. Empathize with us. This means that our God knows all too well how much mercy and grace we really need, and yet we're told that mercy and grace is offered in abundance.

Stories that allow us to see life through the eyes of others really make a difference on how we perceive the world. This is not just true for us as limited human beings, but also for the limitless God. Jesus chose to become a *part* of humankind, to live human life and die a human death. He chose to relate. Like Jean Valjean does even when he's breaking the law, God in Jesus chose to be led by his compassion and, in doing so, be moved to bold action on behalf of those he could have left behind. Valjean didn't need to adopt Cosette or save Marius. He didn't even need to steal that bread to feed his niece or confess his identity to stop an innocent man from going to prison for him. He chose to use compassion, to see with empathetic eyes, and to act from a place of love and care for God's kindred creation.

Throughout our lives, there will be many forces which try to assign to us our worth. It might be our families. It could be schools. The government at one point or other is going to have a go. Our work will, too. Friends, enemies, and strangers alike will look at us and make assumptions meant to define our worth because we live in a world bent on devaluing the individual. But we know as Paul did, that the ways of the world are not the way of Jesus. We are told early in scripture that we, all humankind, are made in the image of God. Within each individual, no matter who they are or where they come from, there is the same Holy Spark. The work of the church is to see that and to help people reclaim their identity as bearers of the Divine image. We cannot do that if we are dehumanizing, looking down upon, or completely avoiding "the other" because we are afraid or disgusted or too busy. We must see in them a reflection not just of God, but also of ourselves.

No one in this room is any more important than any other individual here. I'm not. You aren't. And, more to the point, none of us is of any greater worth than the sex worker, the prisoner, the orphan, the homeless, or the widow. We aren't better or more loved by God than is the transkid worried and confused trying to figure themselves out; or the terrified, closeted lesbian in a small town inundated by messages telling her she's going to hell for who she loves; or the young black man fearing for his life after being pulled over by the police. We in this room are not better than those we have more or less money than, or who are older or younger than we are, or who we are more or less healthy than. Every single person who is living, has lived, or will live was created in the same image of the Triune God. If we believe that, then we *must* learn to see with the eyes of God—we must teach ourselves to look at “the other” as a kindred spirit, someone deserving not of our pity, but of our compassion and care. We must learn to relate to them as Jesus related to Mary and Martha as he reflected on the death of his friend, Lazarus, even as he knew Lazarus would yet live.

The Black Eyed Peas ask “Where is the love?” but a more apt question might be “Where is the empathy?” Because as we see through the story of *Les Misérables* and the story of Jesus and Lazarus, ours is a God who empathizes and empathy is the foundation of love. We cannot love if we cannot feel. Friends, if you believe in nothing else this book talks about. If you balk at the miracles. If you look with doubt upon the historicity of *all* the stories and find it all a bit too far-fetched. If you just can't wrap your head around the idea of the resurrection or the virgin birth. At least allow yourself this one thing: believe in a God who feels for what that God has created. Believe in the power of empathy and the ways in which it can move us to great acts of love if we let it. At the end of the day, that's the one thing Jesus elevated above all else. That's what the covenant between God and the Israelites is based upon. The love of a God who can relate to God's creation. Victor Hugo wrote, “To love another person is to see the face of God.” Father, father, father help us. Send us some guidance from above, help act so people no longer need to question: where is the love. Amen.