

Sermon Title: When Only Bloodshed Remains

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Scripture Selections: Zechariah 9:8-9, Mark 11:1-11

Introduction to theme:

As you may know, we have been working our way through the book *The Grace of Les Misérables*, by Matthew Rawle this Lenten season, both in worship and in our Thursday Night Bible Study, which ends today—a Sunday afternoon, in PERSON. The story of *Les Misérables* is a sprawling tale that follows a penniless convict, Jean Valjean, as he seeks redemption and peace. Along the way, he becomes a man of means, a father, and a hero, encountering grace from unlikely places as he learns to give grace in return.

So far in this series, we have visited many themes as exemplified through the characters and their relationships in this story by 19th century French writer, Victor Hugo. We've touched on grace lived out in the life of Jean Valjean, the non-Kingdom oriented approach to justice by the inflexible Javert, the faithful response to poverty differing from that as shown through the tragic story of Fantine, the contrast between Christian love and romantic love by looking at Marius and Cosette, and again visited the life of Jean Valjean looking at how humankind can show the empathy Jesus did. Today, we arrive at the penultimate sermon in our series, which will be the last one to occur in Lent (we'll conclude next week on Easter Sunday). Palm Sunday is a unique day in the church year because, in a time when fewer and fewer people attend Holy Week worship services, we must simultaneously celebrate the triumphal entry into Jerusalem while also acknowledging the pain of Christ's death on the cross. It's a difficult thing to balance, going from jubilation to utter desolation—but if not for the cross, the resurrection would not carry the meaning it does. We can't just skip ahead without acknowledging it.

This triumphal entry is really a thumb in the eye of the Roman Empire. Jesus's presence there was a revolutionary act, an act of defiance from one whose way leads to freedom and love against an empire that leads through oppression and violence. Toward the end of *Les Misérables*, the characters get caught up in a passionate uprising against the monarchy by the "Friends of the ABC," a group which hopes that even violently

replacing the monarchy with a Republic will lead to the freedom and equality they desire. Today, we'll compare these two approaches as we discuss the theme of revolution. But first, scripture.

Sermon:

The 1960s were known as a politically charged time, with the fight for civil rights', equality, and love being at the fore of the minds of many young people, much to the chagrin of all those who wished to maintain the status quo. When the Beatles recorded their 1968 hit single "Revolution," it had faced a long road to release. You see, up until that point, the Beatles had only released one moderately political song: "Taxman." After "Revolution" was written, there was disagreement, between Lennon and McCartney, in particular, about the controversial nature of the lyrics. Not only that, but the original song, had to be divided into two parts because it was too long—and even when divided, McCartney and Harrison argued it was much too slow for a single.

When it was finally released along with "Hey Jude," it received mixed reviews, and not just from music critics. Culturally, its commitment to nonviolence as a tactic to bring about change, was not always given much credit. The Beatles were advocating for an approach to conflict that was unlike what the world's powers practiced or believed in. In that way, they have a lot in common with that 1st Century Palestinian Jew we know as Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, God incarnate.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the city was a powder keg waiting to ignite. He came in riding a donkey, a "beast of burden," rather than a magnificent, royal warhorse. Those in the crowd shouting Hosanna (which means "Save Us!") would have been very clear on the Messianic symbolism of Jesus's chosen transport. They would have been very familiar with the scriptures from the prophet Zechariah proclaiming Zion's king would indeed arrive humbly riding a lowly donkey. All their shouts of welcome and cheers of salvation, however, had another impact as well: they were certain to get the attention of the Romans, who believed the people shouldn't be relying on anyone for salvation but them. This Jesus posed a threat, a very real and present danger to Roman authority that could not be left unchallenged. It will take just one week for the crowds shouts of "Hosanna" to turn into cries of "crucify him."

Meanwhile in the streets of 19th Century France, the characters of *Les Misérables*, are caught up in the rising tensions of societal unrest. The Friends of the ABC had gathered in the streets, surrounded by a mood of confusion, disparity, and inequality. All these emotions mounted to bring Paris one spark away from violence. The funeral of a decorated general provides just such a spark, leading to violent conflict that causes the death of nearly every revolutionary in the streets.

When anxieties are high amidst times of social unrest, it doesn't take much to spur acts of violence. It was true in 1st Century Jerusalem under Roman Occupation, 19th Century Paris, 1960's America, China, and elsewhere, and it certainly seems true today. It's tempting to draw parallels between these time periods and, indeed, parallels exist. But, if we Zoom in on Jesus, we're going to see a very different approach than "The Friends of the ABC" take in *Les Misérables*. True, tensions heightened in Jerusalem during the Jewish festival of the Passover, just as they did for the revolutionaries in Paris, but the difference is that Jesus never, ever calls for violence. Not once. Yes, he spoke out against the Pharisees strict adherence to the law, he overturned the tables of money changers at the temple, and preached against their behavior—but he never calls for a single sword to be drawn. In fact, he tells Peter to re-sheath his sword because the way of God's kingdom does not require such action.

When we talk about the miracles of Jesus, we talk about that he changed water into wine. We like that one. Or maybe we notice how he walked on the water. That's a good one, too. Or when he healed those people? Yeah, those are the kind of miracles we like. Feeding 4-5,000 people by magically making more than enough out of so little? That's what I'm talking about. And yet it is this, this way of nonviolence that Jesus models on his way into Jerusalem that just may be one of his biggest and most remarkable miracles yet. Rather than allow his men to take up arms, Jesus orders them to stand down. In fact, he knows Judas will betray him and hand him over to be crucified and *still* he does him no violence. In fact, he breaks bread with him the very night before his arrest. Peace through nonviolence. What a concept!

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the revolutionaries who built the barricades in *Les Misérables*. They grab up all the furniture and weaponry they can find in hopes that they can sustain a battle and ignite change. They do take up arms, and their revolution was swiftly and violently put to an end. And it won't just be young men who will go to their deaths that day, but also women and, tragically, children. Violence begets violence. Jesus knew what the revolutionaries don't get, what we still don't understand: violence is the answer to nothing.

The scene between Jesus and Pilate is interesting. It's tense. It infuriates Pilate although he's good at hiding it. When Pilate brings Barabbas into the picture, he seems to give the people a choice between Jesus Messiah and Jesus Barabbas and he wastes no time in finally releasing Barabbas. Barabbas may not be friend to the Empire, but Barabbas isn't really a threat to them either. On his release, he becomes just one more sword in a long line of swords Rome will break and end. He releases Barabbas not because he doesn't care or is indifferent to Jesus's innocence, but because he knows he cannot release him. Jesus is a much bigger threat. The very thought of releasing the one who gives the poor a voice, feeds the hungry, heals the sick, and raises people from the dead is wholly out of the question.

Matt Rawls notes, quite rightly, "revolution needs three ingredients—a problem, a solution, and a leader." What are the problems in our world or our country or in our community that need intervention? Let me put it another way, what problems do we ignore? Do we pretend there isn't anything that needs attention? Are there problems we see, but, because it may inconvenience us, we pretend they have no solutions?

You all know exactly what happened in Nashville this week, don't you? A person purchased an arsenal of weapons LEGALLY, went armed into an elementary school—no, no, let me rephrase that—went armed to the teeth into a CHRISTIAN elementary school, and proceeded to kill three children and three adults who tried to protect them. Three little ones my son's age hugged their parents goodbye that morning, went to school where they should be SAFE and able to learn, and were murdered by a person carrying weapons meant for no other purpose than to kill.

And if this were the first time that had happened, well, then maybe we'd blame it on mental illness. We've heard that this was a person who was receiving treatment for such illness and should have been kept from buying guns. Fine. But it's not the first time this has happened. It's not the second. It's not the 100th time in our history or the even 100th time *this year*. Six days ago, the BBC reported that there had been 131 mass shootings in the United States of America *this year alone*. We hadn't even finished March when that number was reported. Many have imagined America as the shining city on a hill, setting the pace for the rest of the world. That's narrative I grew up with. That's the narrative I had in mind when I voted in my first few presidential elections. We're supposed to be exceptional, and I suppose we are. Just not in the way we ought to be.

I can't speak to the heart of those who do these killings, but I must think there is something deeply wrong with them. The problem isn't just one person. It's not one gender. It's not one race. It is one nationality. This is a uniquely American problem, my friends. The killings and injuries are horrific enough. But do you know what's even more upsetting, disturbing, and tragic to me? Our lack of resolve to do anything about it. I cannot tell you the number of times this week I heard people in power say, "There's nothing we can do about this," "there's simply no solution," or "Oh, if only we could do something, but this is the price we pay to live in a free country." I agree with Matthew Rawl when he says that that phrase, "There's nothing we can do," is a common refrain of the powerful when they don't want to supply what the powerless need. There is *always* something we can do, folks. There is always a response we can offer. Always. But we must be willing.

Jesus said love your God and love your neighbor as yourself, on these two commandments rest all the law and prophets. Where is the love in our response to mass shootings here in America? Where are followers of Jesus in response to the gunning down of our babies in their classrooms? When will we value our children's lives more than we value our AR-15s? I am sick and tired of standing up here in this pulpit and praying for families who have had to bury their babies. I am sick and tired of sitting

down to write a sermon and struggling to come up with words *again* —again and again— to speak to the evil that is our lack of response to these mass shootings.

Friends, it's hard to fix a problem you can't name. To put it in more faith-based terms: it's hard to know where to shine a light, if you can't see the darkness. But even if we're bold enough to name the problem, giving voice to a problem without moving toward a solution means that violence will continue to rear its destructive, deadly head—and here, that happens unchecked and unchallenged.

Now, some of you are going to say I'm getting too political—but I don't care. If my addressing issues of life and death of children in our communities is political, then so be it. But, my friends, this goes beyond politics. This is life and death. This is the heart and soul of our nation. This is the heart and soul of our commitment to love God and love one another. Jesus said let the little children come to me. We say: Don't let the little children read the books. Don't let the little children talk about their periods. Don't let the little children know LGBTQ+ people exist. But don't take our guns away from us.

We're supposed to be beholden to our Lord, instead, we're beholden to our guns. We're supposed to follow Jesus to the ends of the earth; instead, we follow the second amendment to the end of our children's lives. When Jesus says, "my kingdom is not of this world," he doesn't mean that this kingdom is "up there and out there." He means that his kingdom doesn't play by the rules of empire. Jesus wasn't afraid to challenge the status quo even though it made him unpopular with the Roman *and* religious authorities. He didn't play their game; he took their rule book and turned it on its head. Maybe it's time we stopped playing by the rulebook of the special interest groups and their lobbyists.

Late in the evening on the day of the resistance, the French National Guard attacked the barricades behind which the "Friends of the ABC" hoped to win their revolution. The rebels each hope against hope that the bullets cutting down their comrades won't cut them down, too. Valjean, our titular protagonist, he's joined the fight—but he sees the writing on the wall. As the final barrage of bullets cuts through the rebel ranks, almost all of the revolutionaries are slaughtered with three notable exceptions: Valjean, Marius

(who is saved by Valjean), and Javert who was posing as a revolutionary to catch Valjean.

Sadly, our allegiance to the second amendment leads us directly down the path of the “Friends of the ABC” in *Les Misérables*. Like us, they took up arms. Like us, they put the idea of armed resistance at the foundation of their response to injustice even if it meant the end of their children’s lives. It didn’t end well for them. How do we think it will end for us?

As I looked over the lyrics to the Beatles “Revolution” this week, I was struck by the lyrics. “You say you got a real solution,” “you say you’ll change the constitution,” in particular, made me laugh a bit. That’s not what the Beatles are really getting at with this song, but we aren’t even saying any of those things. Far from a revolution, we’re allowing a devolution. From greatness and safety to silent resignation to violence and despair.

As we make our way through Holy Week, the cross comes squarely into view. We know well that Good Friday is coming. We’re left to ask, how does the cross inform our response to the violence around us? Think about Jesus and who Jesus is. He could have resisted that slow walk toward the cross. And if Jesus had simply resisted, he would have been king of Israel and died a powerful, wealthy man. Jesus also could have just resigned himself to death, accepted “the end” and left it there. If Jesus had simply accepted the cross, we could visit his grave with great adoration. But that’s not what Jesus did, is it? In fact, Jesus did none of those things. What Jesus did, in the words of Matthew Rawle is that he “overaccepted” the cross. What do we mean by that? He took empire’s rule book and responded in a way that still awes us to this day. We build an entire liturgical season around the idea that Jesus overaccepted the cross. Jesus didn’t just accept his death, instead, he transformed an instrument of death into a means of eternal life. He wasn’t Frank Sinatra, but you might say Jesus did it “his way,” turning the world upside-down in an effort to show us that this world and its death-dealing ways will never have the last word. And yes, as I look around today, I can’t help but think we’ve forgotten that hope. We’ve resigned ourselves to letting the world’s death-dealing ways win.

Perhaps, the prevalence of pain, suffering, and injustice in our world is begging us to find a path toward how we might overaccept what's happening around us. I wonder, what would be Christ's response to the crosses we bear? If we believe, indeed, that we are supposed to pick up our crosses and follow him, I think we'd better figure it out.

Amen.