

"Grace: The Long View of God's Love"

February 21, 2021

The Grace of Les Misérables series

1st Sunday in Lent - Livestream

Les Misérables is an unforgettable story with all of the grittiness and messiness of humanity. I've not read the entire book, but I've seen the live stage production multiple times and also film and TV adaptations. *Les Mis* doesn't ever disappoint because it connects on an emotional and spiritual level. I always leave the theater after a good cry at the end.

Even though the story takes place from 1815-1832 in a time *after* the French Revolution, the human condition and the struggles of society are front and center – the haves and have-nots, those who are wealthy and those who struggle to make ends meet. The title is telling – *Les Misérables* - obviously it's about the miserable ones, but it's not always clear who exactly that is because another translation is outcasts, outsiders, or dispossessed. *Les Mis* isn't billed as a faith-based story, but Victor Hugo asks the moral and ethical questions that continue to plague us, especially about justice, forgiveness, and most of all, grace.

And especially as we begin this season of Lent, those same themes are at the forefront as we examine our hearts, confess our sin, and seek to draw closer to God. Lent is a season for the church – a time for those who follow Jesus to focus, be intentional, and be open to God's leading and even to God's work of transformation. There's still work to do in us every day. We're not done.

Jesus' words in the Gospel of Luke challenge us to think about how we treat each other. He implies that we love our loved ones already; he doesn't have to say, "Love your friends." But he has to say, "Love our enemies" – those we have cast aside or ignored or written off – that really kicks us in the gut. We can recite the Golden Rule – *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* – but what about showing grace to everyone regardless of our love for them – or lack of love for them? And if we want to get really uncomfortable, do we want others to love us graciously? And if we do, then how do we love?

Today we take on the nature of grace as we focus on Jean Valjean. He'll be around for the series; his story offers the framework for everyone else. You can the connections on the **playbill** here. Valjean's story is a transformation – a conversion – and a lesson in the power of grace. He is a redeemed criminal – all because of an act of grace in his life that happened after a difficult season.

Valjean was given a 5-year sentence because he stole a loaf of bread to feed his sister's family. His sentence grows to 19 years because of his numerous attempts to escape. When he's finally released, he has to carry papers that tell everyone of his past, and he carries his prisoner number – 24601. That's been his identity, and it's difficult to exist beyond that number and beyond his past.

It's difficult to find work – not unlike those who carry a record these days. Valjean ends up being taken in by a priest who offers shelter and food. There's the first gracious act. Hugo displays the church at its best – the church at our best - through the character of the priest – whose last name (Bienvenu) translates as “welcome.” God welcomes with grace.

While with the priest, Valjean steals silver and runs away, only to be caught by authorities and returned to the priest. When the authorities show the priest what Valjean has taken, the priest makes up a story and says that the silver was a gift – and then proceeds to give Valjean silver candlesticks, saying he forgot them when he left. The priest invites Valjean to use the silver to make an honest living – and also tells him that there's good in him and that his soul belongs to God. The priest offers grace – a free gift of love without expecting any in return – but he invites Valjean to use the gift to do good.

When we planned for this series, someone said, “You can't repay grace, but you can pay it forward.” That was a powerful statement because so many times we struggle to accept grace from others. We don't want to be on the receiving end, even though we've been on the giving end and know how important it is to do something for others when they need help. How many times have you struggled to accept help or tried to keep track of who helped you so you can pay them back? We feel like we have to pay it back when that's not the expectation at all. In truth, learning to accept *grace graciously* may be challenging – and allowing those experiences to transform can be a lifetime lesson.

Valjean is more than his past. He is more than a prisoner number. And it's after this moment of grace and this act of forgiveness from the priest that Valjean has a moment of reckoning.

SHOW MEDIA – *What Have I Done?* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJx1pRCey78>)

This moment is powerful because Valjean is changed. Grace comes. He falls down in humility and recognizes the gravity of the mercy he received. Maybe you've had a moment like that – when God's grace has become very real and raw – and all you could do was remember how much you needed it.

It doesn't mean that Valjean's life is free of problems or struggles, but ripping up the paper is significant – knowing there's more than what has been. **RIP PAPER.** As we'll

sing today, “my chains are gone; I’ve been set free.” Valjean no longer sees himself as a criminal, but as someone whom God loves and redeems. It wasn’t 19 years of hard labor that reformed him, but the grace and mercy offered by a priest – by God – that changed his heart.

And though it may seem like Valjean’s conversion is quick and done, he reminds us that grace is a long view of God’s love. If we’re honest, giving and receiving grace, how that interacts with forgiveness and reconciliation are lifetime lessons.

For Valjean, “choosing the good” is a constant battle. He plays a cat and mouse game with the law – namely with Inspector Javert. He gains power as a business owner and mayor and has to decide how to care best for his community and employees. When another man is falsely accused and thought to be Valjean, does he disclose his true identity and answer for his crimes? What is good, and what is right? So many times, we come up against situations that challenge our “this or that” thinking. Most of life is much more gray.

Valjean struggles with the same things we do - obedience to God and love for God and others. Pastor Matt Rawle asks it this way: *Do we love because we are obedient to God, or are we obedient because we love God?* How do we understand God’s grace at work in us? Grace is a free gift that takes on movement in our lives, and in our Methodist tradition, we have some names for that movement. **SHOW SLIDE:** Movement of grace

Prevenient grace – “comes before” we even recognize it, prepares us to accept God’s love. This is why we practice infant baptism – because we believe that God’s grace is already at work in an infant’s life. God’s love is there from the beginning – preparing our hearts to love God.

Justifying grace – makes us right with God, restores us, that moment of accepting Christ. In order to understand justifying grace, we have to understand why we need it, so we have to acknowledge and be convicted of our sin.

Sin is sometimes described in archery terms - “missing the mark.” If you’ve ever tried to hit a target, it’s a great image. We do the things that we shouldn’t do; we don’t the things we should do – and all of that grieves God’s heart. We can’t save ourselves. Grace means that in spite of sin, we are made one with God through grace because of Jesus’ saving work on the cross. Our broken relationship with God is restored by God’s grace. And even though we have that relationship with Jesus, we’re not done. There’s more work that God does in us.

Sanctifying grace – helps us to grow in holiness of heart and life, works in us by the Holy Spirit, *Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart...*

These three create a movement of grace and remind us that our life of faith is a journey that we're on with God and each other. It's not static, but incredibly dynamic. John Wesley even used the image of a house to explain it. He saw prevenient grace as the porch that invites us to come further. Justifying grace is the door into the house that we must open and come inside if we truly are to experience and know the whole house. Sanctifying grace is learning to live in and grow in the whole house. Ultimately, grace changes us.

Grace is a free gift, but it's not a free pass. Grace is unconditional love and affirmation of who we are as beloved by God. Grace doesn't discount the need for accountability or responsibility. As grace works in us, we grow in holiness. Valjean recognizes grace when it's given to him and extends it to others – and finally to himself.

At the end of his life, Valjean is faced with a decision about telling the truth about his whole life. At first, he only confesses his faults to Marius, who loves his daughter, Cosette. That brings conflict between them. Valjean doesn't tell the good he has done, including saving Marius' life. Eventually the truth is revealed, reconciliation comes, and relationships are mended.

But even as we know the importance of confession, we also need to share the power of grace – the ways that we've changed because of God's love. Those stories serve to give God glory.

What's your story of grace? Maybe you have a moment of conviction and a journey of conversion. Maybe it's not a dramatic tale of changing your identity, but what does that movement of grace look like for you? What are those moments when you've experienced grace and been transformed? How do you claim your identity in God – not by anyone else's assumptions or predictions, not by a past, but by a future lived in God's love?

How can we share God's love for us, our value as a beloved child of God, and our affirmation of your gifts from God? That's part of grace – that long view of God's love – being able to claim it and share it. As we journey with Jesus to the cross – to this moment of amazing grace – I invite you to hear a word from First Corinthians 1:18 - *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

The power of God displayed in sacrificial love. The power of God displayed in every day grace. Grace is God's love – a free gift – a powerful gift – working in you and me – and if we believe it – in everyone. So as we journey through Lent, may we pay attention to grace and know the long view of God's love for us and for all. Thanks be to God. Let us pray...