

“The Gift of Love”

March 14, 2021

The Grace of Les Misérables series – 4th Sunday in Lent

In-person & livestream worship

There’s a line in *Les Misérables* that’s so powerful it always produces tears for me. If you picked up a Lenten bag last week, you have a **photo card** with the line: “To love another person is to see the face of God.” It comes toward the end of the story when Jean Valjean has experienced a life of both hardship and grace, love and loss. And it’s the message that speaks to real transformation – when we see God in one another, when we view one another as beloved. Loving God helps us to love neighbor; loving neighbor helps us to love God. They are connected. But what about love? We talk about it all the time.

Grace is our focus in this season, and we’ve looked at grace alongside justice. Last week, we talked about poverty and the toll it takes on so many people. Today we tackle love - doing some digging and connecting. How are grace and love related? Are they the same or different? Joseph R. Cooke offers this thought: “Grace is the face love wears when it meets our imperfection.” When we talk about God, it makes sense. But love is used so much that our understanding of it from a faith perspective can be easily distorted.

Les Mis is a story with many characters and connections, and we’re keeping the **playbill** in front of us to see it all together: Jean Valjean, Javert, Fantine, and today Cosette (Fantine’s daughter whom Valjean adopts) and Marius (Cosette’s love interest). It’s not surprising that an epic story has a love story element, but it’s not really the main story. It’s young love, romantic, and even idealized view of love – at least at the start. Marius and Cosette represent the typical (or accepted) love story: butterflies in the pit of your stomach, mutual attraction, the other person is all you can think of.

But the whole story is really about love on a deeper scale – how love endures and redeems. Beyond the raw and real take on life, including hardship and misery, love wins. Love is strong and powerful enough to transform the world. Obedience to God and loyalty and devotion to others offer a profound arc of the story. Jean Valjean’s encounter with the priest is a beginning point when he receives and recognizes grace, but all of the characters experience love that changes their lives.

Valjean promises to care for Cosette as Fantine is dying. He finds Cosette in the care of the Thénardiens – greedy innkeepers who haven’t treated Cosette well. Cosette and Valjean grow as a family, forging a profound connection that offers grace to both of them.

Young Marius is an idealist who is ready for the revolution, and he offers a cautionary tale about following our whims. Pastor Matt Rawle writes, “Marius’s greatest desire is the last thing he has experienced.” He and Cosette are focused solely on each other, and there’s beauty in romantic love, but love isn’t only about ourselves and our desires.

We can get caught up in that cycle, too – only paying attention to the newest thing, the most recent story, or whatever it is that pulls us - forgetting wisdom and guidance from a deeper source. Keeping ourselves rooted in God’s love can help us stay focused on what’s important rather than simply forgetting, dismissing, or assuming something is irrelevant to us.

So Marius and Cosette are deeply in love, and it happens fast – perhaps the urgency of the moment. At the same time, Marius is connected to the young students who are ready for revolution while his grandfather is loyal to the monarchy, which creates strife between them. Imagine disagreements among family – and even generations. Eventually their fractured relationship is mended, as is the relationship between Valjean and Marius when Marius doesn’t know the full story of Valjean’s sacrifice for him.

We’re going to play the clip of Jean Valjean offering a prayer for Marius’ safety at the barricade even as he’s struggling with the changes that Cosette and Marius’ love brings for him. She’s pulling away from him, which is hard.

For those of you who are watching the livestream, there will be a break in the action because we’re not able to show copyrighted material on the livestream. The link was sent out in Friday’s note, and I’ll send it out again later. It’s 3.5 minutes, so stay tuned!

SHOW MEDIA – Valjean sings “Bring Him Home”

Valjean’s fervent prayer is a demonstration of his faith, even as things are unsure. It made me think about this past year – and even our prayers as we move forward into the future. We have lived in uncertainty and unknowns, and yet God is faithful.

And the most powerful force amid a global pandemic, social injustice, divisiveness, and much more has been, is, and always will be love. We’ve seen it demonstrated in countless ways. Love really is a gift to us. *Love one another* is a constant refrain – repeated again and again in the Gospel of John and in the letters written to the early church. The refrain hasn’t changed. It’s still the message and call for us.

Jesus asks his disciples to make a commitment to love. To continue to love. To make a firm decision to love. To keep on loving. And then he calls them friends because he has shared his mission with them. He came to love, and asks them to love.

Jesus goes against that model of teacher and disciples and invites them to be his friends.

Think about the power of friendship. Friends share confidences. Jesus keeps no secrets when it comes to living out our faith. Friends are those who are loved. Jesus is clear that our friendship isn't based on how good we are, but on his love for us. Jesus doesn't call his disciples friends as a way to give them power or privilege, but rather to call us to sacrifice, care, and serve.

So friendship with Jesus means that we're obedient to God's commandments – the call to love God and love each other. This isn't an obligation, but rather how we view that relationship. Sometimes obedience is the force behind our actions, but if that's all and all it ever is, then resentment can follow. Jesus invites us to be grounded in love that leads to faithful obedience as followers who walk in his way and find joy in that relationship. Learning to love leads us to a faithful end – bearing fruit that lasts.

But before we think it's easy and wrap it up neatly, I offer us these words from Paul about the more excellent way of love, which were written to the church:

SHOW SLIDE: I Corinthians 13: 4-8a

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ **Love never fails.**

We use the word *love* a lot. English just has one word for "love." I love coffee, and I love my husband, but those forms are not the same. But in Greek, there are four different words used for "love." **SHOW SLIDE**

There's *eros* – romantic, intimate love – that's where we get the word erotic. There's *storge* – family love – love for people who are like you. There's *phileo* – friendship love – think of Philadelphia or philanthropy. In all of these forms of love, it is given and received in return.

Here in Corinthians and in John, *agape* is used. Agape love seeks goodwill for another...promotes another's well-being....sacrifices for the sake of others. Agape has more to do with attitude and action – not so much with emotion and feeling. Agape love gives – receiving nothing in return – or at least not expecting a return.

Agape love doesn't look for a reward. Agape is cultivated in us when we consider Jesus' love for us. Agape shows in acts of care, support, and justice. Dr. Cornel West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private."

When we consider the gift that love is, perhaps it's when we've experienced agape love. And it's a challenge to each of us - to love agape style. We have to love, which doesn't come easily for us. We have to choose to show agape love. Did you hear the words? Does anyone else get caught when you read that list? I get caught after "Love is patient..."

So how is it possible? If God wasn't loving toward us, would we ever take notice of others? I wonder – I think that's grace at work in our lives. Could we even attempt to use our spiritual gifts, to serve for the sake of Jesus Christ, if God didn't love us with God's steadfast, never-changing, never-failing love? No! This agape love begins because of Jesus coming to be with us - to be incarnate - in the flesh. And we're able to love this way because Jesus takes up residence in our hearts.

Our most powerful witness is who we treat people after this time of worship. This isn't just coming to church, but being the church. Whether you're here in-person or joining us online, the most important thing we do is love. Our mission together is to make disciples – to be disciples of the One who calls us to love and who shows us what love is.

The Good News is that love is real. God's love in Jesus can be trusted. It doesn't fail even when we feel like we've failed. Anyone ever feel like you've failed? It doesn't stop even when we feel like we've given all we can give. Anyone ever been there? It doesn't quit even when we want to. Anyone ever want to quit?

Love never fails. And in a year when so much has happened, when we felt worried and weary, when we wailed and we wondered, we also trusted in the promise of God's love – that nothing can separate us from God's love. And that love will win because God is with us in those small acts of love and kindness matter like cards and texts and praying hand emojis lifted for you and birthday parades, whatever has been that act of love that reminded you that love never fails even when a lot is happening around us.

The witness of the church matters as we give and serve, that people can come together to support each other – sometimes even virtually. It's happened for a year. The church has never been closed as long as the people of God have loved one another. That is true. That is Good News. Love never fails.

The power of love is real and relevant to the world. And I needed to hear it again – love never fails – for me, for you, for everyone. It is amazing grace that saves us, redeems us, and sends us!

May love be our first and last thought. May love be our grounding and our guide. May we see love for the gift that it is for us and for the world God loves. Thanks be to God! AMEN.