

“Poverty and Our Response”

February 28, 2021

The Grace of Les Misérables series – 3rd Sunday in Lent

Holy communion – Livestream

Grace is our watchword in this series as we journey through Lent. Jean Valjean learns to receive grace well and offer it to others. Javert’s focus on justice to the extreme shows us the dangers of rejecting grace and not being able to extend it while focusing too much on order and rules without any flexibility and adaptability. You can see on the playbill many of the connections, including the one between Valjean and Fantine. He is her boss. We’ll get back to Fantine later as she becomes an important person and a reminder of the lesson of how we treat those in need.

Today we’ll focus on an issue that runs throughout the story of *Les Misérables* - and throughout Scripture - and truly over the ages: poverty. In the story we see how different people respond to living in poverty. Poverty really becomes a character on its own and affects the lives of the characters differently. We know that Jean Valjean steals bread to feed his sister’s family - and Javert responds without a lot of grace to that need. We encounter the moral and ethical dilemmas, and we’re not free from the struggles.

What would I do if I had nothing? What would I do to feed my family? It’s not difficult to find examples, especially in this last year. Current statistics shows that feeding ministries like food pantries have seen a significant rise in the last year. Many are using these resources for the first time ever because of need brought on by job loss, illness, and business closures. Many are making choices about whether to buy groceries or pay bills or get needed medication - waiting in long lines to receive help so that they have more money to pay for those other needs.

Jesus addresses poverty in many ways through his ministry, especially reaching out to those who are marginalized. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says the poor are blessed - is it the poor in spirit or those who are literally poor? And how does that even make sense to us? What does Jesus mean, and how do we respond? How do we respond to the needs around us – not to mention the needs around the world? Looking at the statistics, it’s mind-boggling to consider many around the world who live on just dollars or less every day.

He’s clear that the poor will be always be with us - not as a reason to ignore the plight of those who live in poverty, but as a reminder that this is reality that we live in. It’s our community. Jesus’ response isn’t apathetic, but is actually a response to Judas who is concerned about how a woman uses her gifts to bless Jesus. Perhaps Judas should be more concerned with how he uses his gifts to bless others.

These days, I'm seeing a lot of posts about the beauty of sunrises and sunsets. There's nothing quite like that beauty. The beginning of a new day and the end of a long day mark our time. Soaking in the beauty of God's creation is a blessing. Maybe you've been a part of a mission team, a camp experience, or a retreat where the ending was a blessing and a treasured memory even if it was hard work.

We want things to end well. We want people's lives to end well, but not every story ends well. Fantine is an example of a promised beginning and a tragic end. And she represents so many women over so many years whose lives have been rough for many reasons - some in her control and some not in her control. She could be anyone we know - and maybe we do.

Fantine grew up in a modest family and enjoyed life, according to Hugo's story. She has a relationship with a man and is full of hope. She becomes pregnant, and gives birth to her daughter, Cosette, with the man out of the picture.

It's difficult for her to find work as a single mother in that time because of societal expectations (and still today that struggle is real because of issues like childcare, transportation, and more). So Fantine leaves her child in the care of the Thénardiens who run an inn. They extort more and more money from Fantine as she works in a factory and tries to keep her story to herself for fear of being let go. Fantine's is a life of desperation.

One day Fantine's story is discovered, and she's fired from the factory because she's a single mother. It happens that Jean Valjean (now living under an alias) owns the factory. He is her boss and is also mayor of the town. He discovers what has happened much later after Fantine is making money to support Cosette in whatever way possible - selling her hair, then selling her teeth, and eventually working as a prostitute.

When Valjean figures out that Fantine is in the position she's in because she was fired, he promises to care for Cosette as she destitute and ill. Valjean has learned to be generous because of grace received.

Eventually, Fantine dies - and her hopes and dreams die with her. Fantine has dreams and hopes - and those things are quickly dashed. Her life takes a painful and tragic trajectory, and poverty is a big part of the struggle.

We're going to play the clip of Fantine singing about her dreams, but 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: www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIJXiB5i_q0.

SHOW MEDIA - *Fantine sings "I Dreamed a Dream"*

It's a powerful song, especially as we consider Fantine's story. It's so easy to dismiss "the poor" as a group and generalize about cause and effect. So quickly we can

strip humanity and dignity away if we don't know someone's whole story. We can easily turn to judging others and assuming we know how they ended up where they are. But we need to be clear that poverty and sin are not necessarily cause and effect.

For Fantine, it was the Thénardiens' abuse of power and extorting money from her that caused a part of her struggle. It's not true to say that she caused all of what she had to deal with because she didn't. It wasn't just one choice, but a series of events that led to her tragic end. How she was treated as a vulnerable person matters, too.

And whenever I hear that song about dreams, especially as we're in this series, I think about the dreams and hopes that people have - no matter who we are and where we are or where we're from. Those who have and those who have not - we all have dreams. We want the best for ourselves and our families. And so many things contribute to success - support and encouragement from others whether it's family or friends or neighbors or community, education about how to handle money, and more. Not one of us is "self-made." Most of us have had some kind of support. If we're successful, there are probably at least a few people who have helped us along the way.

The same is true for those who struggle. Yes, we all make choices - some of them wise, and some not. We all make choices about finances - some wise, and some not. Some of us have been in desperate situations and have received help when we needed it. When we talk about poverty and our response, both personal choice and systemic failure both come into play when we consider poverty.

If you've ever been in that position, what was most helpful to you? If you can only imagine being in that position, what would you want for others? We can probably all agree that judgment isn't helpful.

The Gospel directive is to help those who are in need - hungry, thirsty, in need of clothing, housing, care and support. And there are consequences when we don't respond to the needs around us. There's a word about community and how we're called to live together. This parable is just as much as what we don't do as it is what we do. And it's a reminder that God is always concerned about the most vulnerable - and calls us to be active in alleviating their struggles in whatever way we can - offering support, encouragement, and practical aid.

There are harder questions. How do we contribute to systems that keep people in poverty, and what's needed to break the cycle? Maybe we start with opportunities to be in ministry with the poor - knowing that we can learn something from them. It's not just about giving something to someone. It's not just about doing something for others, but investing in others' lives. We have local opportunities to engage with people and understand them more fully rather than assuming we know their story.

Making a meal for Family Promise and then actually spending time eating with our guests is a blessing. I've had my assumptions challenged time and again when I hear about people riding a bike to work through the snow or navigating school, work, and childcare - and trying to find affordable housing.

When I broke my arm in January, I called my doctor's answering service right away, went to the emergency room in a reliable vehicle, and was able to get an appointment soon after with an orthopedic surgeon. I had a fleeting thought about how much the bill would be, but also had insurance. Looking at the bills as they came, I can only imagine how it is for someone who doesn't have insurance and how much they would worry about how to cover the cost. I realized how much I take for granted - and how much work there is to do to make healthcare more affordable and accessible. Those are not easy issues, but they're real. And talking to some who work in healthcare reminded me that people come in worried about how they'll pay the bill all the time.

And perhaps that's a part of what Jesus wants us to know more deeply - more completely. When we follow him, when we live in God's grace, our work of Kingdom-building isn't ever finished. There will always be those who need food, clean water, clothing and shelter, a place to feel welcome, care, and compassion. And we're always called to respond - and to work for a change in the bigger system to bring hope and healing and freedom and peace.

This is about the transformation that he works in our lives. Jesus' words drive us into community with each other. Our perspective about those in need changes - we can always see need around us. If I listen to Jesus, then I'll be more aware of the needs. We're compelled to respond because we know that Jesus is still found where people are struggling - where there is hunger, thirst, isolation, loneliness, need, illness, and separation. So what do we do? We respond. We do something.

When we come to the table this morning, and every time we come to the table, there's always enough. This is God's table of grace. It's not ours to dispense, but ours to receive. We come to the table, receive this simple meal, and then offer our seat to someone else. It's a table that God calls us to extend as much as we need to - to make sure that all are welcomed and cared for. And that requires our attention to needs and our intention to understand others' stories and situations - along with a willingness to extend grace as much as we've received it. So my prayer as we journey in this season and hear those who Jesus names is that we're convicted and challenged to do something.

May God help us to be filled with compassion, generosity, and a desire to transform the world.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray as we come to the table...