

Les Miserables

Deut. 10: 12-22

Luke 23: 39-43

June 23, 2013 (5th Sunday after Pentecost) – Youth for the DC Cause
Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker

I. Introduction

One of the Academy Award winners this year as you know is a film adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel and the musical that spun off of that called *Les Misérables*. And many of you know that *Les Mis* is one of my very favorite books and my absolute favorite musical. So, it was kind of an obvious one to preach on when we developed the sermon series, but a couple of you noted to me that I had done a sermon series on *Les Mis* when we did our first fishing expedition in January about four-and-a-half years ago and asked why was I doing it again? And I don't remember what I said four-and-a-half years ago, I can hardly remember last month and maybe some of you didn't get it the first time (!)

But more importantly, *Les Mis* for me is such a powerful story because I think it captures the heart of the debate for Christianity. It captures two very contrasting pictures of what it means to be a people of faith and invites us to choose between them. And I think that's a theme that we need to come back to periodically, because I think getting this right is at the heart of who we are and is at the heart of our ability to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

II. Justice

Les Mis is not a story about the struggle between good and evil. The antagonist in the story of *Les Mis*, Inspector Javert, is not the Dark Lord Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings* or Lord Voldemort from *Harry Potter*. He's not an evil character at all. He's a man, a police inspector, who is passionate and moral and deeply dedicated to doing the right thing.

Les Mis is the story of a conflict between two competing views of what it means to do the right thing, what it means to be good. Those two worldviews are embodied in the two main characters: The protagonist is a man named Jean Valjean, who as a young man had stolen a loaf of bread to feed his starving nephew, was arrested and placed in jail, and then because he tried to escape several times, ends up spending 19 years in prison. Inspector Javert was one of the guards in his prison and so, knew him as a prisoner, and then, is promoted throughout the course of the 40 years of the

narrative to different police positions in which he often finds himself chasing this ex-convict who has broken parole, because Jean Valjean breaks parole and starts a new life for himself.

Les Mis is often portrayed as a religious novel that contrasts justice and mercy or law and grace, with Javert representing justice and law, and Jean Valjean representing grace and mercy. I want to suggest that's a wrong reading of this story, because we believe in a God of both justice and mercy, and of law and grace. And if we see in the story a conflict between law and grace, justice and mercy, then we eventually theologically have to come to a place where we need a little bit of both Javert and Jean Valjean. And Victor Hugo wants us to understand that both Javert and Jean Valjean embody both grace and justice, law and mercy, but in very different pictures of what that looks like. In one of his songs, Javert says very clearly, "There is nothing on earth that we share. It is either Valjean or Javert." You've got to choose one of those opposing worldviews. You can't take a little bit of each.

And I've wrestled a great deal with how to capture the difference in those worldviews, and I'm not sure I'm entirely happy with the solution I've come up with, but I'll throw it out there and we'll process it a little bit together.

I want to suggest that one of the ways to look at the difference in worldview between Inspector Javert and Jean Valjean is as a matter of proximity. And here is what I mean by that. Javert believes in a God who has set the moral universe in order, who has shared with us what is right and what is wrong, has invited us to participate in that moral universe, choosing the right and being rewarded when we do so, or choosing the wrong and being punished when we do so. He sings a song, his big solo, the only song in the whole musical that's in my voice range, sadly, where he's talking about God and God's divine law as the stars that are eternal and consistent, and we always know what they mean and where they are, they are our guide points we can always look to in the midst of a chaotic world. And he says in that song, "Those who follow the path of," -- I'm going to spare you my singing -- "Those who follow the path of the righteous shall have their reward. But if they fall as Lucifer fell, the flame, the sword!"

It's a very retributive view of who God is and how God has set up the world. Now there is grace in it, but the grace comes because Jesus Christ ends up bearing the burden for our sinfulness, which is a theological truth that we want to affirm. But the picture of it here is of a God who demands repayment for a wrong done, and God is going to get God's repayment one way or the other, so, it's either coming from you or it's going to come from Jesus. It's a picture of a God who sits on high keeping very careful tally of the rights and wrongs that we do.

Jean Valjean's God, however, in contrast is a profoundly fiercely incarnational God. A God who chooses not to sit on high, keeping track of the rights and wrongs but being present with us in the midst of all of the messiness all of the time, and Jean Valjean embodies that very powerfully. Jean Valjean's God knows that stealing, for example, is wrong, but perhaps less wrong than watching an innocent child die of hunger. Jean Valjean's choice to steal bread to feed his nephew is not a choice for mercy against justice, not a choice of grace versus law. It's a choice for justice. And justice in that case means siding with a starving child rather than the system that creates children who don't have enough to eat.

Every decision Jean Valjean makes in this story, he makes because he is engaged in the suffering of the people around him. When a man that he doesn't know is arrested because he looks like Jean Valjean, and Jean Valjean has been on the lam for years, Jean Valjean has to figure out whether to let the guy go to prison for him or to step up and take the responsibility himself. And in his song wrestling with this, he says, "Can I condemn this man to slavery and pretend I do not see his agony?" When the prostitute, Fantine, dies, because of his care for her, he takes on the responsibility of raising her child, Cosette and essentially adopts Cosette as his own and raises her as her father. When Cosette falls in love with a young revolutionary named Marius, Jean Valjean chooses to go to the barricades and risk his own life to protect Marius rather than risking letting him die.

Jean Valjean is never afraid to be touched by suffering and makes decisions about what is just from that place of connection, from that position of engagement, from the place of love, which is why in sound Christian doctrine, justice and mercy are never contrasting and law and grace are never at odds. They are two elements of the same truth.

In our passage from Deuteronomy today, Moses reminds the Israelites that their story as a people began with a God who chose to engage them in their place of suffering, reminds them of God's promise to hear them and to be with them and to free them from bondage in Egypt, and then goes on to say that everything we know about justice grows out of that fact, so that justice for us is always about choosing to be with those who suffer. Justice is always about caring for those in our community who are most vulnerable. And Moses lists those in this passage from Deuteronomy -- widows, orphans, immigrants, people who have no rights in our society. That's where we're to place ourselves.

III. Pursuing Justice close up.

I'm going to even broaden that a little bit and say Victor Hugo's thrust here appropriately was on social justice and social suffering. But this is true of suffering of

all sorts. When people find themselves with long illnesses, one of the struggles is that the people who were their friends and their support network often fade away because we don't like being in a place of suffering. It's easy for us in this lovely Northwest Washington church to not have to look at places in our society where there is suffering. Those are easy places for us to ignore because they're not always within the scope of our vision.

And this is, of course, our struggle. This is what made *Les Mis* such a profoundly challenging book for the France of 1862 as well as it continues to be a struggle for us now, because it's so easy for us to insulate ourselves from the suffering that happens around us. We don't have to look at it, and therefore we can get detached from it. And then, our response when we're detached starts to feel a little bit like Inspector Javert. We're not evil, we're not bad folks, but it's very easy to fall into judgmentalism and blaming when we're not connected with those that are suffering.

One of my wife Jeannine's legal clinic colleagues gave a speech recently in which she said, "When I walk outside and it is cold, I automatically think about the people who are going to be cold all night. I don't want to have this thought. It has become a reflex because of where I work.

When school is cancelled because of snow, I think about the kids who get school lunch and will go hungry that day because they have no school lunch. I don't want to. It's a reflex. And I wonder when we lose that reflex because I see it in my children that discomfort when someone asks us for food or money, or their consternation when they see people who are hungry outside of grocery store teeming with food. But somewhere along the way as a society, we lose that reflex."

The whole reason that Victor Hugo wrote this book, he tells us in the introduction we heard this morning, is to keep us mindful of the suffering that is around us all the time -- "So long as there shall exist by reason of law or custom, a social condemnation that artificially creates a hell on earth, books like the one you are about to read are perhaps not entirely useless." The whole purpose of *Les Mis* is to remind us that we live in a world where suffering occurs and that our call like Jean Valjean is to place ourselves in its midst.

This is what Deuteronomy says in this very graphic phrase of circumcising your heart, removing those things that keep us at a distance, that keep us separated from feeling the suffering of the people around us, the physical suffering, the emotional suffering. That it's an invitation for us to connect with people that we're going to want to have an instinctual response to separate ourselves from.

We have set up a whole range of wonderful opportunities in our church to do just this. Our junior highers tonight are leaving on a week out of home, they're living

down at our St. Luke's Mission Center for the week and engaging in a project called Youth 4 the D.C. Cause where they're going to be engaged in a variety of service projects around the city, not simply to do some good stuff, but to be present in places of suffering and in that way be transformed. In two weeks, our senior highs are going to be heading out on the Appalachian Service Project, again, to do some good house rebuilding. But that's not what changes them. What changes them is meeting the families whose houses they're working on, it's experiencing what poverty looks like, not theoretically, not in an economics textbook, but talking to a person, making a connection.

The reason, dear friends, that we continue to house our shelters in our churches is not just because people need homes, but because we want to make sure we have an opportunity as a church family to be connected. We could house our shelters someplace else, right? We could rent some space someplace and house our shelters. We don't do that. We don't want to do it because those shelters are not simply about providing a roof for someone who needs it. They're providing us with the hands-on opportunity to engage, to be present with people who are struggling, and in that process find our lives transformed.

So, I want to invite you to spend a little time this week figuring out where it is that you have the opportunity to be present, physically present in the midst of suffering. It could be as simple as providing a meal to one of the shelters and spending the evening having dinner with the guys there. It could be visiting somebody in the hospital who is struggling. It could be having a coffee with someone in your life that is going through a rough patch. Where are the places this week that you can connect with someone who is hurting, to just be present, and in that presence start to watch how the work of God's justice and God's mercy happen?

IV. Conclusion

Our gospel lesson is a very powerful visual for these two pictures of Christianity. You've got a God of distant justice who has condemned two thieves to death for their crimes, not unjustly, not inappropriately for the law of the day. But you've got a picture of a Javert God keeping track of all the rights and wrongs and punishing the wrongs as they occur. But then you've got Jesus who hangs there in the middle of them, not condemning, not judging; present, experiencing their suffering with them, and in that, inviting the response from one of those thieves, "Remember me when you come into Your Kingdom," and Jesus accepting the gift of a life transformed responding, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Amen.