

Good Morning! Let us pray... Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created And you shall renew the face of the earth. O God who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations, through Christ our Lord. May the words of my mouth & the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight...rock & redeemer of us all. Amen

"The Grace of Les Miserables: A Gift of Love" 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Friends, this season of Lent certainly has taken on characteristics of wilderness and journey that we could scarcely imagine 4 weeks ago. This is our second week worshipping and living in a completely different world impacted by physical distancing and movement.

So in our time together today, we will maintain connection and a sense of what we've been doing together in our Lenten focus of *The Grace of Les Miserables*, a bible study written by Matt Rawle. In fact, this time of sheltering at home may be a perfect opportunity to get reacquainted with Victor Hugo's story, *Les Miserables*. It is available as a musical film and as a dramatic film... check your movie provider... I was able to watch a 2-hour version for free with Prime Video.

A quick recap... we have focused on key characters/relationships in the story and what we can learn in the areas of grace, justice, poverty, and, this week, love. In the coming weeks we will discuss God's kin-dom as revolution and hope.

In looking at the characters of Jean Valjean (JvJ) , Javert (Jv), and Fantine, we were able to see 1) God's prevenient grace at work... the love of God with us before we are aware; 2) God's justifying grace, forgiveness and mercy, extended to each JvJ and Jv and Fantine; 3) conviction and conversion as steps in a process of transformation; 4) God's Sanctifying grace as a lifelong process of becoming more...more like Christ...manifested in our acceptance and response as we live and engage with the world.

As we learned, In Lent, we expect the collision of grace and justice...The biblical narrative presents it in Jesus and Judas; Jesus and Pilate; Jesus and the crowd; Jesus and the cross; Jesus and the criminals hanging with him.

For Javert, justice = you reap what you sow; making amends is done only with a penalty. Fantine is a victim of the unjust system established by human self-interest and greed.

God's grace and justice are, in fact, quite different. Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees is rooted in upholding the letter of the law or the heart of the law. Jesus re-presents the law from his own authority (divinity) and pursues the heart of the law as a right relationship with God and one another. This is made clear in the narrative of the person with a withered hand whom Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Not only is the person healed... but there is restoration within the community... and Jesus asks the Pharisees (my paraphrase), 'if I have the opportunity to heal, even on a Sabbath, why wouldn't I heal, if it restores health and wholeness? Why would I wait for the next day?'

Our scripture passages for today speak of an alternate way, grounded in the very essence of God and God's nature... love. Let me offer another piece of scripture from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, to help understand the gift of love.

2 Cor 5:14-19 (CEB)

The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died. 15 He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised.

16 So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. 17 So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

18 All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. 19 In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation.

Love is evident in the story of *Les Miserables* but it presents many themes of life. Matt Rawle makes this point writing, as the title suggests, *Les Miserables* 'is a story of hardship and misery. But it's also a love story...not in the romantic comedy sense...but a story that shows the enduring and redeeming power of love' (p41, YSB).

We first encounter this redeeming love in the engagement between JvJ and the Bishop. Certainly the redeeming power of love is evident as Marius and his grandfather repair their fractured relationship; as Marius and JvJ repair their misunderstanding; and the power of love is evident in the connection of Cosette and JvJ's parental growth.

So let us ponder our own relationships and reflect

...was there a time you fell out of favor with a family member or a close friend? What brought you back together? How did forgiveness of yourself and another factor into restoration of the relationship?

...reread the passage from 2 Corinthians 5:16-19. What is the difference between seeing people by 'human' standards and seeing them with eyes of Christ as a 'new creation'?

...How can we live as God's people and share the 'message of reconciliation'?

... In John 15:12-13 Jesus says, '*This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends.*' How might these words help us to change our daily patterns during this time of difficulty and social distancing?

LET us pray: God of relationship and restoration, thank you for the stories that teach us about what it means to love one another as you have loved us. Open our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts to ways we can be people of love and reconciliation to our families, our communities and in our world. Thank you, Lord, for never giving up on us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.