

Lenten Series: Lessons in Grace, Justice, Love, and Hope from Les Miserables

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

Poverty, A Human Design in the Midst of an Outbreak

Good morning friends, how are you? Here we are, gathered together. It may not be a gathering in the same way, but God is good, and we are in fellowship, wherever we are, as we tune in and listen. And so I share this message with you.

Let me give you a little bit of context, of where we've been, what we've been thinking. Take a look here, at our Altar installation. The word, the flowering word, as you can see, the center piece is Grace.

So this Lenten Season is about Grace, and the lessons in Grace in God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying Grace that is made evident in the story by Victor Hugo, in Les Miserables. We've been walking through this story, looking at each individual character, and a Bible study by Matthew Rawle, that has aided us in this series of Lent, focusing in on the lessons of Grace, Justice, Love, & Hope found through the story of Les Miserables.

The key character, Jean Valjean, stole bread, and the first Sunday of Lent we focused in on the Grace that's available to all, through the bread, the body of Jesus Christ, and the blood that he shed for us on the cross. The second week we focused in on Javert. The challenge is that Jean Valjean, having stolen the bread and being captured and sent to prison, he encounters the cold hearted, law-and-order chief of the prison, Inspector Javert. Their stories weave in and out. We looked at what it is, when we follow the law blindly, without understanding the heart of law that law is given by God in Love, for relationship with God and with one another.

This week we turned to the concept of poverty as seen in the characters of Les Miserables, particularly in Fantine, a young woman who starts as an 'every woman'. She has what she needs in her family. They're modest, not too wealthy, not too poor, just right in the middle. As things would have it, she makes choices and decisions that impact her life. She ends up a single mother, with a child. She can't find work, because as a single mother in the early 1800's, that's just not proper. So she is forced to decide what to do about her child. She leaves the child in the care of an innkeeper, who turns to extortion. And, so to pay not only for her child and the welfare of her child in the ever rising cost, caring for her child, charged by these innkeepers, she is forced to find work that is beyond what is available. She finds work in a factory. Come to find out, Jean Valjean is the owner of this factory. He is also the Mayor of the town. He does not know of Fantine, until much later, when she has been fired from her job, for being a single mother. She is forced to scabble around, the best she can to earn money to

send back to the innkeeper to care for her daughter. Long story, short, she ends up at Jean Valjean's doorstep, destitute, deathly ill, and ultimately, she ends up on one of his guest beds and dies. Her fall from a modest living into despair and destitution could easily be found in any day and age, in any country.

The challenge for us, friends, is to look at where we are, what scripture tells us about tending to one another and choosing to work for the good of all. So friends, that's the challenge of Fantine. The deep illness that takes hold of her.

You know, I was walking through the grocery stores these last couple of days, today, yesterday, and the day before. Earlier in the week, the energy in these stores was amazing. Each day it was a little bit more. Each day, the people that I encountered in the stores (and I didn't just go to one store, I traveled to several different stores), there was less and less care of one another. It ties right in to a spirit of despair and desperation; managing our way through a Pandemic, an outbreak, not just in a country around the world, but here, in our own country, near our own homes and our communities.

There's a lot to be said for the way that we treat one another, in the observations I made, as I walked the aisles of the grocery stores that I was in. I talked with friends this week as well. In the last few days, they talked about how there were more elbows, not just six foot places, but elbows being used, as if we were perhaps on the basketball court or on the hockey field, or playing Lacrosse... That we use what we have, so that we might get what we think we need.

When we are that self-interested, when we are that self-focused, we lose sight of all that are around us, in the opportunities that we might have, to share Hope, to be a peace keeper, rather than one who is fighting for oneself.

So, this bit of rambling is anchored in Matthew's gospel that was read in the previous clip. Sure, it's a parable, so we know it exaggerates. But, the key thing is that it's about responding to the needs of those around us, not to ourselves, but around us, that we encounter.

Honestly, grabbing as many supplies that you think you may need for the next several months, probably isn't keeping the needs of others in place. It's also fascinating.

Let me just share with you what I encountered in the aisle for the toilet paper. There was a store employee, a young man (maybe mid 20's). He could have been a student in one of my Special Needs classrooms, or a classroom where students are mixed together, because students learn best with their peers. This young man was trying to restock a pack of toilet paper. There were no visual cues because there were empty shelves, so he had to read the labels to see where this packet of toilet tissue should be

placed. There was a father with two third or fourth grade students with him, coming up behind the store clerk. The store clerk tried hard to get utterances out to make complete sentences. He stuttered a little bit. The father's focus, however, was on that package, that he might take that package home. "May I have that package", he said, while the clerk was trying to put it on the shelf. "I need to find where it goes", all the while, stuttering to get his utterances out. Finally, I think the father caught on, and he simply asked the right question, "May I buy that package?" At which point, the clerk said "Oh, yes sir." He turned it over so the man could put it in his cart, and be on his way.

I share that story because, as a person who's been attentive to students and people with special needs in my family and in my classrooms, I saw the need for the store clerk to do his job. What I saw in the father was his own need, and not paying attention to the need that the clerk had, in his abilities to do his job. But, finally, it appeared that the light dawned.

Friends, in this time, more than ever, we are called to be the ones to tend to one another's needs, not of our own, and not in ignoring them, but in the balance of the needs of others, so that truly, we might be instruments of God's Peace.

Let that be our challenge in this next week, as we ponder how it is that poverty is truly a human invention. How we treat one another, how we care for one another in the moment and in planning for long term, it matters. It matters for our communal health. It matters to our God.

So, in closing, let us pray the prayer of Saint Francis.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console.

To be understood, as to understand.

To be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

And it is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Wise words from Francis of Assisi. Let us go forth this day, friends, in peace. Let us continually hold one another in prayer, our leaders in prayer, for our state, for our nation, and even this world. This too shall pass, and we have no need to fear, for our God is with us. Amen .

Note: A huge thank you to Nancy Janson for transcribing the video sermon! <3