

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: Javert: Where Grace and Justice Collide”

2 Timothy 3:14-17; John 3:1-17

Lent is a set apart time for intention, focus, and centering. This season, we are looking at the theme of God’s Grace, Justice and Love that comes into focus in the biblical narrative through Jesus’ life and ministry leading into Jerusalem. We are also walking with the characters of Les Miserables for lessons in this theme of Grace, Justice and Love. Last week we spent time with the key character (protagonist), Jean Valjean (JVJ). JVJ stole bread, was caught & sentenced to 5 years in prison. He failed at escape attempts which added years to his sentence. One time he was successful. Seeking refuge, JVJ encountered a priest which resulted in a moment of conviction.

Have you experienced a moment of conviction?

It can drive you to your knees, flood you with tears and an overwhelming sense of love and presence, maybe even requiring you to pull over while driving because you couldn’t see through the tears.

In a moment of conviction, JVJ receives grace. But how hard it is to receive God’s grace!?

Following Christ is more than ‘not sinning’. More than ‘thou shall not’!

Being ‘convicted’ by grace challenges our ‘now’ assumptions... JVJ is challenged to believe he is more than ‘less than a dog’! However, in truth, his personal point of conviction came when JVJ ‘came to his senses’ as he was about to swindle a coin from a beggar child. JVJ, having enough to buy what he needed, realized he was stealing ‘out of habit’. In that moment Jean ‘became new’, born again. (Think Prodigal Child story). This is what Jesus was referring to when he spoke with Nicodemus about being ‘born again’.

Becoming a child of God – being worthy – knowing you are loved- and so much more... is conversion... is a process. It is when we change on the inside! Think Paul on the Damascus Road (Acts 9). It took days for him to process his sudden ‘blinded by the light’ experience...and his new sight after Ananias (an enemy) prayed over him. Further, imagine the conviction and conversion it took for Ananias to meet Paul and do what he had been instructed to do for Paul, who was an enemy of Jesus’ followers!

If you recall, Paul described himself as a ‘Pharisee of the Pharisees’... he was a legalist of all legalists. ‘Letter of the Law Saul’ could have been his nickname. In the story of Les Miserables, Javert (Jv) is the character that is like Saul...and is the antagonist to Jean Valjean (JVJ). Through the story, JVJ & Jv are foils to one another.

In literature, a foil is a character that has characteristics that oppose another character, usually the protagonist. The foil character may be completely opposite to the protagonist, or very similar with one key difference. The foil character is used to highlight some particular quality or qualities of the main character. Authors may use foil characters to show either the inner strengths or weaknesses of their protagonists.

For Javert, the law is the law... there is no compromise or variation. Much like a computer program... there is only law or chaos. In the story, we know that Javert is cold and calculating because he does not refer to JVJ by name... only by his prison number, 24601.

In the story, Javert is a foil for JVJ’s sense of morality, compassion, kindness, and generosity. For example, in prison, JVJ shifts a rock to save a prisoner caught underneath. Later, Jean would risk his life over the cliff, again, to save a prisoner, from falling to death in the sea below. As Chief of the Prison, Javert showed no urgency to act in either circumstance. However, JVJ’s moral compass would not prevent him from saving a man trapped under his cart as the new Chief of Police in the town looked on. This moment became revelatory of the hidden identity... the new name that JVJ lived under. Once Javert suspected the Mayor & businessman, M.

Madeleine to be his nemesis, Javert is consumed once again with finding JVJ and bringing him ‘to justice’.

For Javert, ‘law and order’ is the only way to live. Javert’s lens is very much a dual notion of right or wrong. There is no grey area. Javert is very much like Saul...with a laser focus on finding and punishing JVJ for his failure to uphold the law. In fact, Jv is quite obsessed with the apprehension JVJ.

Let’s be clear, Order is not bad; order is a foundation on which the rest is built. Just look at Genesis 1...order comes out of the swirl of chaos. Indeed, God gave the Decalogue (10 commandments) so that God’s people would know how important order in relationships was to God.

Order has a deep connection with human body, mind, and spirit. All need to be in balance or things get off focus.

Too much order is extremely difficult when the unexpected happens – there is a need to adapt. Conversely not enough order is problematic, too, there is risk of confusion, things get ‘messy’.

For example... on Ash Wednesday, the opportunity to move freely from place to place was given. Nothing was numbered...the instruction was to move as the Spirit nudged you...to the prayer stations, to receive ashes, to receive Holy Communion. This instruction was given with intention...to move freely. Yet, most persons lined up to receive ashes & communion before visiting the prayer stations.

My guess is that for some, it was uncomfortable to participate in a very familiar ritual (Communion) in a different way, in a different sequence.

Free range movement in a highly structured Sanctuary setting (like SJ) could be hard to handle. Yet, for some persons, it was a very freeing experience... to move about freely in any order, to stay as long as needed to pray or meditate or gaze at an image.

BTW, each Wednesday in Lent there is the opportunity to experience such things... 12-2p & 6-8p, in the McKendree Chapel.

In Lent, we expect the collision of grace and justice...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.

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, 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?

Javert and JVJ have a face off, and JVJ spares Javert's life. Later, as Javert searches for JVJ in the sewer, it is Javert who chooses to spare JVJ life & let JVJ go free.

For Javert, it is too much to receive such grace. He cannot adapt to a different order that includes compassion, kindness, mercy and grace. There is no other way.

Friends, transformation takes time... remember the stages of the larva, chrysalis, to butterfly; the stages of the firefly, even now transforming unseen underground. Grace is offered...but we must receive it, believe it, live it. The person with the restored hand knew forgiveness that seemed foolish, yet it made all the difference to have new life in community.

Jesus chose to heal because God's way is of love and restoration. Let us focus on walking a path that restores and heals, that brings new life, and may seem to be as foolish and incomprehensible as the cross.

May it be so. Amen.