

What is your Candlestick?
The Gospel Goes to Broadway: Les Misérables
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Romans 12: 1-3, 9-21

I'm curious to know how many of you have seen *Les Misérables*, either on Broadway or perhaps a touring company, or community production, can you please raise your hand? I believe the show itself is one of the most influential ones of our generation, its story and music affect us in profound ways.

Set in early 19th-century France, *Les Misérables* is the story of Jean Valjean, a French peasant, and his desire for redemption after serving nineteen years in jail for having stolen a loaf of bread for his sister's starving child. Valjean decides to break his parole and start his life anew after a bishop inspires him by a tremendous act of mercy, but he is relentlessly tracked down by a police inspector named Javert. Along the way, Valjean and a slew of other characters are swept into a revolutionary period in France, where a group of young idealists attempt to overthrow the government at a street barricade in Paris.

It is interesting to note that critical reviews for *Les Misérables* were initially negative, even though the public loved it: the box office received record orders. The original London production ran from 1985 to 2019, playing over 13,000 performances. The Broadway production opened in 1987 and ran until 2003, closing as the second-longest running musical in Broadway history. The show was nominated for 12 Tony Awards and won eight, including Best Musical and Best Original Score.

And if you like the show, you will like it even more if you read the book it was based on, which was written in 1862 by Victor Hugo. The book gives the characters of the musical even more depth and meaning. Of course, it runs about 1,500 pages so it's not really a quick one... but oh, is it worth it!

During my undergrad studies I had to do a paper on the book, and I learned a little bit about the author. Victor Hugo had great compassion for the poor, the down and out, the miserable. He became involved with the politics and social justice issues of his time. And he was frustrated with the church. He saw clergy buying into the partisanship nature of politics, he saw them seeking power for themselves, and not serving the church's main mission of helping those in need.

With his entirely understandable critique of the clergy, it is kind of ironic that Hugo gave us an ideal image of a Christian through his character Bishop Myriel, the priest who shelters Jean Valjean after his release from prison.

In the novel, the first 113 pages are centered on the Bishop's back story. We learn that he came to the priesthood from a very wealthy family. And kind of like Francis of Assisi, he decides to leave his life of wealth and comfort to become a minister to anyone in need.

He has made a vow of poverty, except for one thing. He has kept one thing from his past, to help remind him of where he came from, to help remind him of his family, and do you recall what that one thing was?

The silver! The silver place settings, and the silver candlesticks – the same ones he gave away to Jean Valjean.

Catholic writer Teresa Malcom says: "*(After this), Bishop Myriel never again appears in the story and yet he is the soul of the novel, He who served love where there was hatred, light where there was darkness.*"

As the story develops, 2 main characters evolve... Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert. Jean Valjean is the ex-con, whose life is transformed by the kindness of the Bishop and Inspector Javert is a man obsessed with the law and his pursuit and punishment of Jean Valjean.

Now, if you were looking for a character from the Bible who exemplifies much of what Valjean and Javert are about, you need look no further than the Apostle Paul.

Paul had been a Pharisee, a student of the religious laws of his people. And like Javert, he was on a mission, going from village to village, rooting out Christians in an effort to eradicate them. Breathing murderous thoughts against them. Like Javert, Paul seems to have a personal vendetta against them, a deep seated hatred against those early Christians who were not following the law.

But then, like for Jean Valjean, all of it changes in a moment. When Paul was on his way to round up more Christians, he had this dramatic interaction with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Instead of being obsessed with the law, he becomes obsessed with love. Instead of preaching the law, Paul begins preaching about grace. This man who was the biggest Christian persecutor becomes the world's biggest promoter of Jesus Christ.

It's an unbelievable transformation, brought about by something we call grace.

Mercy is not the same thing as grace. They are words that are often spoken of together, but they are not synonyms. The difference between them is subtle, but significant.

Mercy is not getting what we deserve. Grace is getting something good that we don't deserve.

If I was a college student, and my professor granted me more time on a paper that was long overdue, I would have experienced mercy - I didn't get the incomplete or failing grade I deserved.

If, in that same scenario, my professor decided to not only let me off the hook for my late paper, but paid me \$100 when I turned it in, that would be grace. An unexpected gift. Something I truly did not deserve.

Mercy is fine and can be transforming in and of itself, but grace is what puts it over the top, making life more meaningful and fulfilling.

The Bishop offers Jean Valjean mercy when he doesn't turn him in to the police for stealing the silverware, but better yet, the Bishop offers Valjean grace by giving him the candlesticks.

So the big, hairy, theological question of the day is: Do you live a grace-filled life? And I mean that in two ways. First, do you recognize that everything is gift, that God has blessed you?

This week, thanks to the magic of social media, I've been reminded of the many mission trips I've taken to places like Oaxaca Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, Chicago, Kentucky, Jerusalem, and all the rest. Around the world, I've encountered people living in desperately impoverished situations. Sometimes we meet someone with a special glow about them, and we ask ourselves, "*how can this person be so happy, when their life is so difficult?*" Despite all that they have been through, they are still living a grace-filled existence.

Jean Valjean travels a lot through the story, he's always on the run, on the move, and if you saw the show he always takes his candlesticks with him (this is even more pronounced in the book).

I think if I were him, I would have sold them by the second act, let's get some money to feed those starving widows and orphans! But the candlesticks, for him, are powerful reminders of God's grace.

Do you have something that reminds you that everything in life is a gift? That everything is grace? What is your candlestick?

I would suggest that one thing that can be as candlesticks for you is this church community. Engaging with this community, especially during times of disruption and anxiety, is one way to remind ourselves that we are living grace filled lives, that everything is a gift, and everything is grace.

We live in a time where there is much anger, bitterness and division. We don't trust (or even value) those who don't look like us, or speak like us, or behave like us, or (dare I say it?) vote like us. We can't seem to agree on how to bring about the healing of long-standing racial divides. We grieve the loss of over 138K precious souls from a virus that has changed the way we work, worship, learn and so much more.

Aren't you exhausted, living in the midst of all of that?

This morning, I'd like to encourage you to find your candlesticks. Carry something, some symbol with you to remind you that everything is grace, and everything is gift. Something that reminds you of who you are and who God is, and what God has done, and continues to do for you and for me.

I said there were two ways I wanted to encourage you to love a grace-filled life, the second way is to be a little more like Bishop Myriel and offer grace to others. Be the hands and feet of Christ. Give some candlesticks away, offer undeserved gifts to those who come into your life. Are you doing that?

That's what Jean Valjean did. When Javier is caught by the revolutionaries, Valjean volunteers to guard the prisoner. And what does he do? He lets the his nemesis go free. He offers him grace.

Those of you who know the story know that unfortunately Javier cannot accept that gift, and ends his own life. I think that's a powerful reminder for us, that if we don't accept grace and embrace it, then we too may be bound to a life of chaos and heartache, destruction and negativity.

In the original story, when Jean Valjean meets Bishop Myriel, he says "*listen here! My name is Jean Valjean, I was a convict. I spent 19 years in prison*" and he goes on to tell how he's been trying to survive, transitioning back into the world, and that things are not going well. No one will help him. So the Bishop invites him into his house. Valjean asks if he's sure, did he not understand who he was?

The Bishop replies "*Why would I need to know your name? Besides, before you told me I already knew it... Your name is My Brother.*"

Let us recognize and embrace the grace that's been given to us. And let us extend grace to others, our sisters, our brothers. Amen.