

The Beatitudes of Broadway

Les Misérables: The Sermon

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

Sunday, August 26, 2018

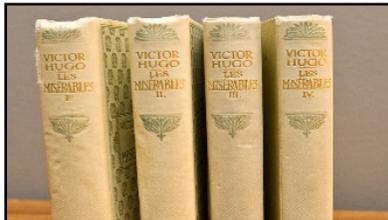
Acts 2:38-47/ Luke 15:1-10

Let's begin with a survey. How many of you have:

- Read Victor Hugo's 1,500-page book entitled "Les Misérables"?
- Seen one of the movies made from the book?
- Seen the musical?



I'm always a bit nervous about doing this Broadway series. I can bluff my way through the Bible, but Broadway is a thing you actually know something about!



This story, written more than 150 years ago, explores enduring issues like the tension between law and grace. It moves me deeply. Apparently, it still moves people everywhere.

When the student uprising took place in Tiananmen Square in 1989, a number of broadcasters compared their stand to the students' efforts at the Parisian barricades. Both movements arose after the death of a political leader who cared for the poor, the *miserable ones*. In both cases, however, the students' efforts failed to usher in a new world order.



“Les Mis” is one of the most popular musicals of all time, so I thought it appropriate to pair it with one of the best-loved stories of all time. The 15th chapter of Luke contains three stories about the lost that was found. In the first story, it is a sheep. While 99 sheep are safe, the reckless, relentless Shepherd leaves the rest and goes off to search for the missing one. It is a great story because the fact that we are sitting here today is proof God does whatever it takes to bring us home.



I know exactly where I was when I first heard the song “Bring Him Home, which Chris sang so beautifully moments ago. It was July 1987. The musical had opened on Broadway only recently, and I was in a room with 1,000 other gay and lesbian people who were confronting the worst of the AIDS crisis. Half of the young men in that room ultimately would die, and the rest of us were left to pray that song.

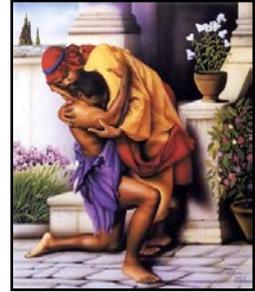


It was a terrible time of watching young men waste away before your eyes and being unable to do anything but pray. Those days were made worse by churches proclaiming that AIDS was God’s punishment on gays, despite the fact that it has killed mostly heterosexuals in Africa. For an institution of grace to add to the pain of dying people is an evil I still struggle to forgive.

Fortunately, Jesus tells a second story that reminds us of God’s feminine nature. God the Woman turns everything upside down looking for one coin that is lost. This is a reminder that the God who *has carved us on the palm of her hand* will do whatever it takes to find us and bring us home.



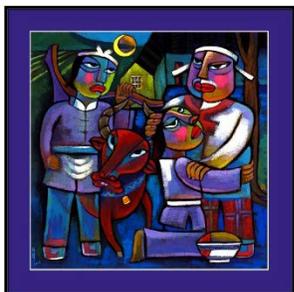
We didn't read the third story in the 15th chapter of Luke today because it is so well known. We call it "The Prodigal Son."



Like "Les Mis," Jesus' story is multi-layered. The major theme, of course, is the relentless and unconditional nature of God's love. Jesus makes it clear that God's good nature is unaffected by our bad nature. We may deprive ourselves of the experience of God's graceful provision, but our choices cannot counteract God's relentless grace.

Jesus' story of God's stubborn love for straying children is, perhaps, the best known and most beloved story of all time. This third story is much longer than the other two. Jesus even describes the reaction of the older brother, who was angered by the father receiving his younger brother back so freely:

"For all these years I've worked for you ... yet you never gave me even a young goat so I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours."



Unfortunately, too many churches and too many Christians seem to take the older brother as their role model. He is incensed that his father persists in forgiving and loving someone else unconditionally. The senior sibling acts as if loving his younger brother takes something away from him.

Perhaps because we, too, are infected with the older brother's nature, we have heard this story a thousand times but missed the most beautiful truth. After the

older brother's tirade, the father looks at him and says, "My son, you are with me always, and all that I have is yours."

The boy was so busy being self-righteous that he missed the gift that was always his. Letting bitterness, envy, or resentment infect our hearts is like drinking poison and expecting our enemy to die.

Yes, the younger brother cut himself off from experiencing the love of his father by low living, but the older brother also cut himself off by his narrow view of his father's unconditional love called grace. In both lives, the loss was exactly the same.

That is the great tragedy of the legalist, the person who takes a judgmental view of life: In the end, that road leads away from God's grace as surely as a life of sin and immorality.

The Bible doesn't tell us the older brother's name, so I'll call him "Inspector Javert." He was, of course, the



lawman who pursued Jean Valjean so relentlessly. Valjean spent 19 years in prison for stealing bread for

his hungry sister and her children. Prison made him a hard and bitter man. Upon his release, he encountered a bishop who, with uncommon grace, offered Valjean food and shelter in his home.



As they retire for the night, Valjean declares that the food and a good night's sleep will make him a new man, but, in the middle of the night, Valjean repaid the bishop's kindness by stealing his silver and striking the old priest in his escape. Valjean is quickly

captured and returned. The bishop supports Valjean's alibi that he gave the parolee the silver and even gives him the finest candlesticks in his home.

Because of this gift of amazing grace Jean Valjean does become a new man. He cares for the poor; he adopts the child of a prostitute who died; and he spend his entire life living out the grace he's been shown.



Still, none of that mattered to Inspector Javert. All he cared about was that Jean Valjean, prisoner 24601, violated his probation and now must be recaptured and made to pay.

When we are unable to tolerate the idea that we might be mistaken, we can be pretty sure we have chosen the path of Inspector Javert or the older brother. In Victor Hugo's story, Inspector Javert is captured by the students at the barricades. Valjean is given the task of executing his life-long adversary, but, instead, prisoner 24601 sets his tormentor free.

It is an act of great of mercy from one who has been transformed by grace, but in Javert's black-and-white world, there is no room for uncertainty. He is so disturbed by this encounter with grace that contradicts his world view that he commits suicide rather than change his mind or admit he was wrong.



That seems a strong reaction, except to those of us who have been the older brother, shutting ourselves off from grace rather than extend it to those with whom we disagree or of whom we disapprove.

Grace—unconditional forgiveness and love—is oxygen for our souls. Like the air we breathe, if we try to limit it, or contain it in our small heart, we are the ones to suffocate. Perhaps that is what Jesus meant when he said, “If you seek to save your life, you will lose it, but if you lose it, you will surely find it.”

In all three stories in Luke 15 it is God who takes the risk, makes the effort, does the saving, not us. Grace is a gift for which someone else has paid.

Valjean sings “Bring Him Home” as a prayer in which he offers his life in exchange for another. There’s nothing of the older brother left in him. Perhaps, Jean Valjean is the person the younger brother eventually became. He stole the silverware, but the bishop gave him his candlesticks. The old priest knew silver candlesticks were a cheap price to pay for a soul.

So, what is your price?

What will it cost God to bring you into a full experience of grace? A robe? A ring? A fatted calf?

Hear what the father has been trying to say to you since the moment you were born: My son, my daughter, all that I have is thine!

At the end of “Les Misérables,” Jean Valjean is dying.

He is escorted from this life by the students from the barricades who gave their lives hoping for a new world of justice.



Fantine is there. She gave her life for her daughter Cosette.

Eponine is there, too. She gave up her love and her life so Marius and Cosette could be together.

And, in the film version of the musical, the bishop is there. He gave his silver to a thief to ransom his very soul.

There are many layers to Victor Hugo's story and to Jesus'. In the end, what brings it all together is that both of them dreamed of a new world born out of people being willing to give their very lives to know grace and to show grace.



In the story Jesus told, there were two brothers. Jesus calls us to resist being like either of them. Instead, choose the way of the Father. If we can do that then, when Jesus comes to sing us home, that song of grace will make the lights of Broadway dim.