

## Forgiving as We've Been Forgiven

By Rev. Eric Moeller, St. Lucas UCC, March 30-31, 2019

### Sermon

There's a rather epic film called *Les Misérables*, and I think they even made a book out of it or something, maybe a musical, but anyway, in the opening scene of the Liam Neeson version of the story, Liam's character, Valjean, is in need of food and shelter. He's just been released from a 19 year prison sentence, and is making his way to the city to where he is to report as a parolee. After attempting to sleep in the street, he is directed by a woman to the local bishop's home. The bishop answers the door, and Valjean is immediately invited in for dinner. In his disbelief, he explains fully that he is a criminal with a passport that likely says he is violent. The bishop says, "I know who you are. Please come in." Valjean, fully expecting to be rejected, cast out in judgment, suddenly finds himself accepted, and cared for. However, Valjean, a thief, sneaks down in the night and begins packing up a bunch of silver so he can steal it. The bishop catches him, Valjean assaults him, and escapes. The next day police bring him to the bishop, silver in hand, saying that Valjean claimed the bishop had given it to him. The bishop then has a choice: tell the truth and return Valjean to prison, or corroborate his story. In an extraordinary show of grace, the bishop validates his story and even insists he'd forgotten the candle sticks and he sends for them. As the bishop hands him all of this silver, Valjean asks why he's doing it. The bishop answers, "With this silver I have ransomed you from fear and hatred, and now I give you back to God." With this single act of grace, perhaps the first in his life, a man known to be a criminal, a sinner, becomes transformed, and his life changes course. Indeed he has been freed from his fear and hatred for other people born of his previously merciless experience. He is forgiven and free to step into a new life. He becomes the pillar of a new community, and a merciful man in a sometimes merciless place, transforming others lives through the grace he offers. Opposite him is Inspector Javert who claims that people are by nature either law breakers or abiders and there is no changing it. Furthermore, he is strictly a letter of the law kind of man, who sees no room for mercy or grace, not for himself or anyone else, even to the point of being unwilling to accept Valjean's conversion. Grace is a mistrial of justice. He fails to see that only grace and acceptance can bring about the sort of transformation he would wish to see in others. When people, maybe for the first time, become accepted and forgiven of their past mistakes, looked upon lovingly rather than judgmentally, they become free to step into a new way of being rooted in love and gratitude. Victor Hugo's masterpiece is a further fleshing out of the Gospel text's message, as Jesus understood this about people. The Good Neighbor, Jesus, shows us that to truly be a good neighbor, to love our neighbors, and one another, is to accept one another, and to offer one another forgiveness and grace.

The truth is, at one time or another, we might see ourselves more heavily reflected in the different characters of *Les Mis* or the gospel story. Each character has a unique experience in the story that we can connect with and learn from. Sometimes we are the sinful woman, or Valjean, sometimes we are Jesus, or the bishop, and, yes, sometimes we may be the Pharisee, Simon, or Javert.

Simon is in a state of uncertainty with Jesus. He isn't quite sure who he is, and perhaps invites him into his home for dinner to try to get a better sense of him. Pharisees, as you may know, were rather well known for being letter of the law type people, so Simon has certain expectations as to how people are to behave, including Jesus and the nameless woman. Now, how the woman gains entry to Simon's home, we do not know, but from what he thinks of her, it's a surprise she's allowed to be present. He knows 'what kind of woman she is,' he knows that she is a sinner. We might read something into that, but ultimately we don't know what her sin is, just that it seems to be well known, and that it draws his judgment. Whatever it is, by Simon's standards, she definitely should not be touching a man who claims to be holy, defiling him. She should know better, and, if this Jesus really is from God, he should know better too, this, according to Jewish purity codes. What Simon seems to forget, though, is that he is not sinless either. Jesus, who seems to know what Simon is thinking, tells Simon a parable and gives him a little reminder. The parable is about a creditor who has two debtors, neither of which can pay. One owes him 500 denarii and the other 50. The creditor cancels both debts, but the one with the most love and gratitude is the one who had the largest debt cancelled. Jesus then reminds him that Simon himself failed to show full

hospitality when he entered, like water to wash with, a kiss of welcome, or the blessing of an anointing. While Simon was busy judging the woman, and making a judgment about Jesus as well, he failed to accept that he himself wasn't acting perfectly. While the woman may owe a larger debt, in the words of the parable, Simon still has a debt himself, as do we all.

We all, from time to time, have a bit of a Pharisaic attitude; an attitude that leads us to judge others' behavior as unacceptable; judge them as too sinful, unwelcome, unworthy, and even untouchable. This happens as we navigate our daily lives and this happens even here in our church. We cast judgment in the interest of exclusion or casting others out as if they have no place here being who they are. Meanwhile, we overlook how our own behavior or thinking may actually be unacceptable and sinful as well. None of us are as righteous as we might like to think, and, I think if we put ourselves in Simon's shoes in this story, we would hear Jesus teaching us that lesson. We aren't fully righteous so who are we to cast judgment on others and cast them out? Who are we to deny anyone grace, mercy, love, and a place to belong? Who are we to do harm in that way? And here's the good news, right. We aren't perfect. We are all sinners, individually and collectively, and yet we are accepted, embraced, and forgiven by our Holy Parent. This is where we occupy the woman's place in the story.

Imagine yourself as this woman. You've made some mistakes in your life. You maybe look a little different from other folks, you maybe stand-offish out of fear of the ridicule of others. You know if you knock on a door they will open and say, "I know who you are." You know that when you walk into a room their whispers are about you, and their eyes are on you, and their judgment is upon you, because they know those mistakes you've made and they are shameful. But not this one man; this man, Jesus, and you know where to find him. So you go to Simon's home, sneak into the room, and there Jesus is reclined, laying on his side in typical fashion, and dining. You know who he really is, the gift that he is, and in him you've witnessed the unconditional and gracious love of God. Out of gratitude for what you've received, you've brought the best thing you can: an alabaster jar of ointment. You walk over to him, and, by his presence and gaze are moved to tears for what you know in your heart to be true: you are accepted, embraced, loved, and forgiven by the Divine. In response, you anoint his feet with the ointment you've brought, you kiss his feet, and bathe them in your grateful, joyful tears. And then you hear him speak what you already knew: "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven, so she has shown great love." And, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace." After all of the judgment and the shame, both from yourself and others, you've heard those words from God-with-us; "You are forgiven; go in peace." You're thinking, "but do you know who I am, what kind of person I am?" And he says, "I know who you are. You are forgiven. You are free from fear and hatred. Be transformed and be at peace." This is the unconditional, extravagant love of God for all of us. It's so incredibly radical, that it can be hard for us to grasp it or really take it in, and therein lies its beauty. Divine eyes see us for who we truly are, and, no matter what our past or present contains, we are lovingly and graciously accepted, embraced, and forgiven that we might move into the future in new, grateful, loving, forgiving, and peaceful ways; in the way of Jesus.

The last perspective of the gospel story is that of Jesus. Our highest calling may be to occupy this place in the story as much as possible. So what does Jesus do? First, he accepts an invitation to be present. We're all here so we're good so far. Next, he accepts an invitation to dine. Well, I know [a bunch of y'all are gonna go to dinner after this][I'll be seeing most of you for coffee and doughnuts after worship], so I think we're pretty good here as well.

Well, while he's eating, this sinful woman comes and bathes his feet in her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses his feet, and anoints them with ointment. Here he has two choices: reject her, as his tradition dictated that she shouldn't be touching him or consorting with him, which also seems to be what Simon would have him do, or accept this beautiful gift pouring from this woman's heart. He goes beyond the bounds of tradition to do the loving thing, accepting this woman, receiving her gift of gratitude, and giving her peace, while revealing the depth of God's love for God's children. One of my old professors, Dr. Tran says, "As proclaimed in the Gospel of Luke, the rule of God is about boundary-transgressing, inside-out reversals. It is a rule that subverts religiously sanctioned categories of 'sinner' and 'saved,' challenges

culturally demarcated us vs them binaries, and declares dignity and worth in those whom society considers lowly.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus, modeling these reversals and values, leads us toward a couple of actions. First we set aside our judgments of those who would enter this space, our community of faith, or our lives in general. When we start judging others based on their appearance, what we’ve heard about them, what we believe they’ve done, what we think they think, or what we think God thinks of them, we push them away. Jesus, the Good Neighbor, calls us to pull people closer, to live out this radical, extravagant inclusion.

Furthermore, Jesus speaks to Simon to help him understand Jesus’ inclusive, loving actions. He also speaks to him to hold Simon accountable for his own thoughts and actions, which were less than loving, but Jesus does so in such a way that still acknowledges Simon’s own status as forgiven and loved. This serves as a further call for us to speak to one another when we have disagreement, there is a violation of our communal values, or harm has been done and try to move toward mutual understanding grounded in love that we may further live out the radical, loving inclusion our Savior teaches us. We draw closer to one another in conversation, rather than pushing people away in silence. Otherwise there is never opportunity for repentance, forgiveness, and new life on a new path.

Being in community with other human beings can get messy and we may get hurt somehow. There is always a level of risk involved with being in community, because none of us are perfect or righteous. We have and will make mistakes with one another. We can, on one hand, hang on to those mistakes and the pain they bring, which can be quite destructive on many levels, or we can find ways to forgive each other as we have been forgiven.

This is not easy, though. Ronald Cram writes, “Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. Forgiveness is not pardon, nor is it a form of denial that yearns for a quick fix. Forgiveness is not something earned. Forgiveness is a conscious and thoughtful decision. Forgiveness, in the words of Jon Sobrino, is to decide to act in a Christian way against sin. To decide to act in a Christian way against sin is to risk, to be courageous, to be vulnerable.”<sup>2</sup> Forgiveness allows us to release our hurt, and live out our true identities in freedom.

To forgive as we have been forgiven is, in part, what we pray for every week in worship, and at the conclusion of many of our meetings, when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, or the Our Father as a few of you still call it.

We pray what Jesus taught us to pray: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and make things on earth as they are in heaven. Thomas Weise writes, “Jesus’ message in Luke heralds a new community, a new humanity...a radically new type of community that was the principle effect and even primary intention of Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God.” This prayer we pray framed the worldview and way of life for this new community initiated by Jesus, as it continues to do for us, the modern church, for as we forgive as we are forgiven, we will, with God, be partners in creating new life in the world. We will experience radical acceptance, grace, and love that brings about the deepest of joy and gratitude, the likes of which can move us to tears. And we become blessed to give that experience of radical acceptance, non-judgment, grace, and love to others, finding ourselves, our church, our community, and our world transformed.

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<sup>1</sup> Mai-Anh Le Tran, *Reset the Heart: Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Hecker. Cram, *Bullying: A Spiritual Crisis* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003).