

Turning Around – Lent 3 Sermon
March 11, 2012

I don't get to the Civic Center all that often but there is one musical that I have seen twice, *Les Miserables*. It is deeply moving. The music is powerful and the emotions are intense. The title means literally, "the miserable ones," and the story follows the lives of several French characters for a period of seventeen years during the early 1800's. The main character is a man named, Jean Valjean, and the play opens with his release from prison. He spent nineteen years in prison (five for stealing bread for his starving sister and her family, and fourteen more for numerous escape attempts). Upon being released, he is required to carry a yellow passport that identifies him as a prisoner, despite having already paid his debt to society. Rejected by innkeepers, who refuse to take in a convict, Valjean sleeps on the street. This makes him even angrier and more bitter. Finally, the benevolent Bishop Myriel takes him in and gives him shelter.

In the middle of the night, Valjean steals Bishop Myriel's silverware and runs away. He is caught and brought back to the Bishop by the police. Bishop Myriel holds the keys to Valjean's future. To the surprise of everyone he tells the police that the silverware is a gift and at that point he gives Valjean two silver candlesticks, chastising him to the police for leaving in such a rush that he forgot these most valuable pieces. After the police leave, Bishop Myriel "reminds" him of the promise, which Valjean had no memory of making, to use the silver candlesticks to make an honest man of himself.

That single act of grace by the Bishop changed Valjean. He turns his life around and the rest of the story is about how he passes it forward. In the end, he dies an honest man.

I know it's just a story – but it changed me too. I grew to believe that radical grace has the power to change lives. I still believe it.

In March of 2008, Michael Garofalo told the story on NPR's "Morning Edition" about a 31-year-old New York City social worker named Julio Diaz. Garofalo noted that Diaz's customarily followed the same routine each evening, ending his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, just so he could eat at his favorite diner. But one night, as Diaz stepped off the No. 6 train and onto a nearly empty platform, his evening took an unexpected turn.

He was walking toward the stairs when a teenage boy approached and pulled out a knife and asked for his money. So Diaz gave the boy his wallet. As his assailant began to walk away, Diaz said, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people all night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The young man looked at his victim like he was crazy, and asked, "Why are you doing this?" Diaz replied, "Well, if you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner... and if you want to join me... hey, you're more than welcome." "I just felt maybe he really [needed] help," Diaz said. Remarkably, the boy agreed, and the unlikely pair walked into the diner and sat in a booth.

Shortly the manager came by, the dishwasher came by, the waiters came by to greet him. Diaz remembered, "The kid was like, 'You know everybody here. Do you own this place?'"

"No," Diaz replied, "I just eat here a lot."

The boy responded, "But you're even nice to the dishwasher."

"Well, haven't you been taught that you should be nice to everybody?" Diaz asked him.

"Yeah, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way," the boy said.

The social worker saw an opening. He asked the boy what he wanted out of life. "He just had almost a sad face," Diaz said. He couldn't answer--or he didn't want to.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for it. But if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you."

The teen "didn't even think about it" and handed over the wallet, Diaz said. "So, I gave him \$20... I figured maybe it would help him...." But Diaz asked for something in return, and the boy gave it to him. It was his knife. (<http://www.npr.org/2008/03/28/89164759/a-victim-treats-his-mugger-right>) & (Rev. Dr. Robert Dunham)

Jesus tells this story about a young man who demanded his inheritance and then went out and squandered it. His problems were confounded by a famine and the only job he could get was feeding pigs. No one gave him anything and he was hungry. He was so hungry he just about ate the food he was feeding the pigs. "Then," Jesus says, "He came to his senses." He started thinking about home. His employer fed him nothing, but his father fed his employees very well. And then all he could think about was going home.

This young man had discovered that freedom is not all it's cracked up to be. The world is not so kind when you are broke. But we don't know for sure if he really understands the pain he has caused. He is hungry and has no place else to go. It is still all about him. He wants (he needs) food and better living conditions. He knows he will have to grovel to get what he wants so he comes up with a nice little speech, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men."

I guess I have always thought that "coming to his senses" meant that he repented right there in that pig pen. The truth is we don't really know if this son is sincere or if this is a manipulation. It's amazing how apologetic and articulate people can become when they need something. This son hasn't exactly demonstrated any one of the six pillars of character.

The truth is, we don't know if this son has truly repented or not. That is what makes this story so beautiful – and so offensive at the same time. Sometimes it is desperation that sends us home.

Sometimes it is desperation that drives people to church. When lives have fallen apart and there is nowhere else to turn, sometimes people go to church. On any given Sunday we may have in our midst that one person who is simply hungry and desperate. On any given day we may encounter someone who thinks we are an easy mark – someone willing to take advantage of us. How are we to respond?

The father shows us with an act of radical grace. The father doesn't seem to care if the son has repented or not. The father doesn't even listen to the son's speech because he is too busy welcoming him home – too busy wrapping his arms around him – loving him – and celebrating his return.

We don't really know if the son has changed, or will change. We don't know if he will grow restless again and scam his father out of more money. He hasn't proven himself. All we know is that the father surprises him with grace – no conditions – no strings – just pure grace.

That's what Jesus did. He invited himself to Zaccheaus' house before Zacchaeus could say a word. He was willing to eat with an unrepentant tax collector – and that single act of grace changed Zaccaheus. Before he got home with Jesus he was ready to repay those from whom he had extorted money.

Jesus didn't wait for people to be clean before he touched them – his touch made them clean. Jesus didn't wait for people to straighten up before he accepted them – his acceptance straightened them up. Jesus didn't demand repentance before he extended his healing hand or offered forgiveness. He didn't seem to worry if he was being scammed or used – he simply offered grace.