

ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Man of Mercy

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, December 18, 2016
The Third Sunday of Advent—Based on Matt 1: 18-25

Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth will proclaim your praise

Ever since I was a teenager, there's been this musical that's pretty much always running on Broadway. Maybe you've heard of it—*Les Misérables*? No?

The best thing it did for me was get me curious enough to read Victor Hugo's novel, which is about 1500 pages long (you might want to skip the 100 pages describing the Paris sewer. You won't miss anything, honest. You're welcome.)

So this 1500 page long baggy monstrosity of a book could just possibly be the best exploration of Christianity in fiction. Because what Victor Hugo does in *Les Misérables* is gives us two heroes, not one. You all know about Jean Valjean, the thief who stole a loaf of bread to feed his sister's starving children and spent nearly 20 years as a galley slave. After he's finally released, he breaks his parole—because no one will give him work, shelter or food if they know he's a convict—and is taken in for a night by a charitable old bishop. After Valjean tries to steal from the bishop and gets caught by the police, the bishop pretends that Valjean's lie that the silverware that he stole was a gift is true. He gives the matching silver candlesticks to Valjean, and sends him on his way, asking him to make a good life for himself.

The other hero is normally thought of as the villain, but watch how you label people. Inspector Javert—we never know his first name; for all we know he doesn't have one or remember it—is a firm believer in two principles: "respect for authority and hatred of rebellion." He is "absolute" in his belief; Hugo calls him a "fanatic." But his fanatical absolutism allows him to find a "straight path through all that is most tortuous in the world."

Not very promising hero material, really.

But he's honest. He doesn't break the rules he enforces, and when he thinks he is wrong in accusing the local mayor of being Jean Valjean (he actually is Jean Valjean, so Javert's not stupid either), he submits himself for punishment after confessing his error to the Mayor. He's brave, too; he infiltrates an uprising led by students, where he runs once more into Valjean. When Valjean asks to execute him for the rebels, Javert is ready to die bravely—and astonished when Valjean uses his knife to cut the ropes that bind him, and lets him go.

Valjean's gone into the brewing rebellion to rescue the man his adopted daughter, now grown up, loves.

In the musical they pretty this bit up. Valjean sings that the young man "is like the son I might have known/if God had granted me a son." In the book, Valjean can't stand the jumped-up little aristo. He's going to steal his daughter! But he goes to rescue the wounded boy, and, after carrying him through the Paris sewer, runs smack into his nemesis: Javert.

But Javert isn't quite himself. He lets Valjean bring the boy home, and when Valjean returns to be arrested, Javert has left.

He's let him go.

He's not proud of it; he's ashamed of this, his finest moment, the moment when he realizes that "the rule might be inadequate in the presence of a fact, that everything could not be framed within the text of the code, that the unforeseen compelled obedience."

He gets it enough to show mercy to Valjean, but can't stretch it enough to show mercy to himself. And so he kills himself, after writing a report of abuses by his fellow officers.

Today's Gospel reading though is about a man who also knows that "the rule might be inadequate in the presence of a fact, that everything could not be framed within the text of the code, that the unforeseen compelled obedience." A man of mercy.

Because for me, the main action of today's Gospel happens before the Angel shows up. Joseph has discovered that Mary is pregnant. Now, as Joseph and Mary were betrothed, any sexual relations between her and another man was adultery.ⁱ And as explained in Leviticus, *if a man has relations within the walls of a city with a maiden who is betrothed, "you shall bring them both out to the gate of the city and there stone them to death."* (Deut. 22:23)

Later, the adult Jesus is asked to approve the stoning to death of the woman taken in adultery, so we know that penalty remained in effect in his lifetime.ⁱⁱ And perhaps we understand something of the root of Jesus' quick-witted mercy shown to that woman: Let he who is without sin cast the first stone saved her life.

Maybe we're too used to the story of Joseph and the Angel to see it in the round as it's read to us. Remember that Joseph was a man of royal lineage, but in the same gospel we're reading, we're told that he is a craftsman, a carpenter (Matt 13:55). Joseph lived in an honor culture, and any indiscretion on Mary's part would bring shame not just on her, but on her betrothed, in whose honor and social status she had become embedded.ⁱⁱⁱ

Joseph could have reduced the injury done to his honor by enforcing the penalty against Mary. He didn't.

"Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly," we are told.

Unwilling to expose *her* to public disgrace.

That didn't let him off the hook, though. He would bear the disgrace, the loss of honor.

Joseph's mercy here is especially powerful and moving because the Angel hasn't shown up yet—he has no reason to believe that Mary is innocent. He has no reason to believe anything of her except that she has betrayed him.

He forgives her anyway.

We don't know why Joseph doesn't assert his rights, other than the brief description of him as a "righteous man." What's surprising about this is that Joseph's righteousness isn't in following the Law. In fact, he flouts the Law—he denies it its prey.

A more typical definition of righteousness from Joseph's time, or Jesus', would be to follow the Law, to enforce it.

Like the scribes and the Pharisees who drag the woman taken in adultery to Jesus, and try to bully him into approving their killing her, as the Law requires.

By the standards of their day and their culture, they are being righteous. It's the righteousness of Inspector Javert, but it's nonetheless a form of righteousness.

They're thwarted by a new kind of righteousness, one they're not able to recognize or see as righteous. So Jesus outfoxes them and saves the woman's life.

Some three decades earlier, Joseph is preparing to do the same thing. He'll divorce Mary quietly, avoid the scandal to the extent he can, and take the rest on himself.

But Joseph is living this new kind of righteousness that Jesus lives later. Joseph's righteousness is not that of the Pharisees. Like Jean Valjean, he sacrifices his own good for the sake of someone he has no selfish reason to protect. Why? Maybe it's because he knows that "the rule might be inadequate in the presence of a fact, that everything could not be framed within the text of the code, that the unforeseen compelled obedience."

According to novelist Roberston Davies, Joseph is unofficially the patron saint of the betrayed. I like that, because

of what his example tells us about how to respond to the people whom we love, and may even love us, but who let us down, even break our hearts.

Respond with love. With forgiveness. Put aside the anger and ego, and try to minimize the harm. In a very different context, writer Steven Moffatt summarizes Joseph's response to what he understandably sees as betrayal: "Do you think I care so little for you," he asks, "that betraying me would make a difference?"

We can't always perfectly live up to that high a standard of love. But God can, and does. And Joseph does his very best to return God's love with his own loving merciful response to what he thinks is Mary's crime. He doesn't plan to remain married to her. But he does try to protect her safety and even her good name as much as he can. He shows us how it's done, and maybe passed that lesson on to that baby Mary brought into his life.

And all this before the Angel says a word.

In the Name of God, Amen.

ⁱ "Mary in the Gospel of Matthew," in Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999) at 40.

ⁱⁱ See also WF Albright & CS Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Matthew* (Garden City, Doubleday & Co. 1971) at 7-8.

ⁱⁱⁱ David A. de Silva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic 2000), at 33.