

We're in the 5th week of our 7-week series looking at some spiritual and theological themes in Broadway musicals. Today I want to look at 2 plays that deal with redemption and grace. Redemption and grace are two church words we use a lot, but we don't always think about what they really mean.

In theological terms, redemption is about being saved, being rescued.

But originally redemption was an economic word. The Latin root of redemption is to buy something, or more specifically to buy something back. If you've left something at a pawn shop, you pay money to redeem it from the pawnbrokers. If you have a coupon, you redeem it by turning it in in exchange for some money back, some money off of the price of the product.

So Christians would say that on the cross Jesus redeems us, Jesus pays the price, Jesus buys us back, Jesus saves us through his death and resurrection.

Grace is a little different. Grace a gift. Grace is something offered freely without strings attached. Grace is not given in some sort of transaction to get something in return. It is simply a gift.

So on the cross when Jesus redeems us, we would also say that his offering is pure grace. Jesus doesn't sacrifice himself in order to gain something from us. The redemption Jesus offers is grace, it is a gift, with no strings attached, a gift of love from a loving God.

Two of the most popular musicals of the 1980's deal with grace and redemption. With one, they happen only at the end. In the other, they are a consistent theme throughout. The two musicals are *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Miserables*.

Phantom is a rather straightforward gothic horror romance, without a lot of explicit theology in it. But there is some.

There is a wonderful theme in *Phantom* of hiding behind various masks we wear in life. There is also the theme of how we treat the least amongst us. But mainly the musical is about a monstrous yet brilliant creature of darkness, the eponymous Phantom of the Opera himself.

Okay, he was treated horribly as a child because of his disfigurement. But this hardly excuses his villainy. The Phantom extorts and threatens and murders to get his way. And he thinks he can win over his love interest, Christine, with this kind of behavior. But while she is attracted to his prodigious musical talent, she is also repulsed by him. Not repulsed by his physical disfigurement. But rather repulsed by the ugliness and darkness in his personality.

But in the closing minutes of the play, Christine does respond to the Phantom with grace. Okay, there's a tinge of pity mixed in. And, okay, you might make an argument that she's just doing to save Raoul, the third party in the love triangle.

But I believe she does offer him genuine words of love in the end.

She sings,
Pitiful creature of darkness
What kind of life have you known?
God give me courage to show you
You are not alone.

And as the music swells she kisses him passionately, showing him love for the first time in his life. It is grace. It is a gift.

And in turn, the Phantom acts graciously himself. He will no longer try to compel Christine to love him. He sets her and Raoul free. Grace begets grace. And grace leads to redemption for them all.

Grace and redemption are also themes of the other 1980's mega-hit, *Les Miserables*. Except in the case of *Les Mis*, grace suffuses the play all the way through—beginning, middle, and end.

Les Mis is an incredibly rich story, with deep theological meaning. So much so that it could probably be the source of a sermon series all by itself.

But the great overarching theme of the whole story is the theme of grace and redemption. Jean Valjean is a lowly ex-con who can't find a way forward in life.

Even when a saintly Bishop welcomes Valjean to eat and spend the night, Valjean steals the man's silver and runs away. And Valjean is caught red-handed and dragged back before the bishop.

But the bishop not only refuses to press charges. He gives the dumbfounded Valjean more silver, two additional silver candlesticks. And after the police leave he says,

But remember this, my brother
See in this some higher plan
You must use this precious silver
To become an honest man
By the witness of the martyrs
By the Passion and the Blood
God has raised you out of darkness
I have bought your soul for God!

That's pure grace. It is a gift freely given by the bishop.

And it is textbook redemption—the bishop has paid the price of giving up his silver in order to seek to save Valjean's soul.

And the rest of *Les Mis* is about Valjean having a second chance, responding to the grace offered him by acting graciously towards others. Valjean lives a new life, trying to become not just an honest man, but a loving man.

And the rest of *Les Mis* is also about how his great nemesis, Inspector Javert refuses to see any chance of a change, any possibility of a second chance. I'll get back to that theme in a second.

Valjean gets a second chance. And he uses it graciously to give others a second chance. If you know the play you might recognize their names: Fantine, Cosette, Marius, even the Thenardiers in a way. If you don't know the play, just trust me—there are a bunch of other folks that get a second chance, because of the grace offered them through Valjean.

And where does that gracious second chance come from? What did the bishop say?
By the witness of the martyrs
By the Passion and the Blood
God has raised you out of darkness
I have bought your soul for God!

That's actually straight out of scripture. Passion... Blood... Raised out of darkness... It's actually from the first chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians. Paul says:

"Through (Jesus) God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."¹

And Paul also says there, "(God) has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son."²

Oh my. Peace through the blood of the cross. Rescue from the power of darkness. Transfer into Christ's kingdom. This is all about grace and redemption and a second chance. A new way of life in a new kingdom. Made possible by the passion and the blood.

So let's return to Javert. I don't know if this was intentional on Victor Hugo's part. But there are the letters "J" and "V" very prominently in the names of both Valjean and Javert. But the letters are reversed. And Javert in many ways is the reversed mirror image of Valjean.

Javert fanatically subscribes to a worldview that is rigid and has little room for grace. Everything is black or white with no shades of gray. People are either righteous or unrighteous. There is no middle ground. Sadly Javert's legalistic view of Christianity is still around in our world.

And Javert's worldview allows him absolutely no space to see that a convict like Jean Valjean might be able to make a change. Valjean has used the bishop's silver to become respectable and to buy a factory and even become a local mayor.

¹ Col 1:20

² Col 1:13

But in doing so, Valjean had to also ditch his previous identity and jump parole, which at the time was a permanent, not a temporary condition. Thus Valjean is still a criminal in Javert's eyes. And through the years Javert pursues Valjean doggedly.

Javert has one opportunity to arrest Valjean. But Valjean is trying to save the life of a young girl. Javert has no room for any idea that Valjean might be trying to do anything good, and thus Javert demands that he surrender. Valjean overpowers Javert and escapes. And Valjean makes good on his promise to rescue the young girl. In fact Valjean takes her under his wing and becomes her surrogate father.

Years later during an uprising, an undercover Javert is arrested by the revolutionaries he was spying on. And Valjean asks permission to "take care" of Javert and execute him. But out of sight of the others, Valjean cuts Javert's ropes and lets him go.

Javert is incredulous. He suspects that Valjean is trying to cut a deal by cutting the ropes and releasing him. But Valjean responds with words of pure grace:

You are wrong, and always have been wrong.

I'm a man, no worse than any man.

You are free, and there are no conditions,

No bargains or petitions.

There's nothing that I blame you for

You've done your duty, nothing more.

The next day, Javert encounters Valjean one last time. Again Javert wants to arrest him. But Valjean is carrying a gravely wounded young man. And Javert realizes that Valjean is indeed a good man. The correct thing to do legally would be to arrest him. The correct thing to do morally would be to let him go, at least temporarily until the wounded young man can be taken care of.

And Javert lets Valjean go. But in this case it's not out of any sense of grace. It's out of the fact that Javert is stuck in what to him is an impossible conundrum. He's in moral vapor lock and sees no way out.

On the one hand Valjean is a criminal and must always be wicked.
On the other hand Valjean is a man who over and over again has sought to help others.

And because Javert cannot reconcile these two facts, he commits suicide by drowning himself.

Javert claims to be following God's ways. But Javert cannot recognize or accept anything gracious regarding Valjean. Thus he is one of the most tragic characters in any musical.

But the ultimate ending of *Les Mis* is an ending of ultimate grace. Valjean dies peacefully in the presence of his adopted daughter and her husband. And he is escorted to

heaven by those who preceded him in death. And he joins the company of the others who have died. In Christian terms, he joins in the communion of the saints triumphant.

Today on All Saints Sunday, we remember those who have preceded us in death. We give thanks for those seemingly ordinary Christians we have known who have been recipients of God's grace. We give thanks for those seemingly ordinary Christians who have been vessels sharing God's grace with others.

Les Misérables in French means the wretched or the miserable ones. But the ending of *Les Mis* is a message of God's loving grace for all people, including those who have suffered in this world:

*They will live again in freedom
In the garden of the Lord.
They will walk behind the plough-share,
They will put away the sword.
The chain will be broken
And all men will have their reward.*

Words of true redemption. Words of God's gracious love for all.

May we have grace to follow the good examples of those who have gone before us.

And may we have grace to join them in that place of life and light and joy that God has prepared for all his people.