

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

How many have seen Les Miserables, one of the nominees for Best Picture in the Academy Awards? There are so many stories to chase, so many sermons to preach. I think of the young boy Gavroche, who stares his own death in the face as he proclaims the power of children before the soldiers in the French army.

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I see Javert, the major general tormented, taking his own life, because he believes that people can not change, do not have the capacity to change. Once a thief, always a thief.

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I see the young men on the barricade, using the power of tribal energy to bolster their frightened egos as they prepare for battle, protesting the economic disparity between France’s rich and poor. Only Marius survives. I wept and felt his grief as he sings of the futility of the battle: “Oh my friends, my friends, don't ask me what your sacrifice was for. Empty chairs at empty tables where my friends will meet no more.”

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After the factory women turn on her, Fantine sings “I had a dream my life would be, so different from this hell I’m living, so different now than what it seems, now life has killed the dream I dreamed.” And we witness the innocence of a beautiful young woman stripped away as she sells her body to the highest bidder to pay for her daughter’s medical expenses.

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Beggars at the feast. The young Cosette living so differently than her adopted sister Eponine. The poorest of the poor in France screaming out to the wealthy above them “Look down, look down, Look down, look down, and see the beggars at your feet Look down and show some mercy if you can Look down and see The sweepings of the streets Look down, look down, Upon your fellow man!”

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So many themes to chase, so many sermons to preach. Where do we go?

We're in the season of Discipleship. We have been following the book Power Surge by the American Presbyterian Michael Foss and we have been exploring what it means to be followers of Jesus in the 21st century. When someone asks today, what does being a Christian look like, what does following Jesus look like, Foss is a bit like the writer of Matthew's gospel. It's not about right belief, it's about right behavior. Following Jesus is not a bunch of dogmatic beliefs that determine who is in or out. Following Jesus is a practice that has a particular look. Foss calls them the marks of discipleship.

And we've been exploring those marks over the past few weeks in this season of discipleship. Following Jesus has this look, these marks. Followers worship weekly, they pray daily, they regularly engage the scriptures, they make friendships with others in which God is a key player and they serve the world. The sixth mark of discipleship is about giving, giving generously from our own treasure. Our treasure is what we give value to, monetary particularly, and those things – those ideas, those values, those relationships, those ethics that have worth.

And in this text, Matthew quotes Jesus "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. Rather, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Friends, as followers of Jesus, we are merely faithful stewards of all that has been given. Nothing is ours. We are simply caretakers of that which is not ours. We don't like to hear that in the United Church. We don't like to hear that our investment portfolios, our condos in Florida, our claim on inexpensive food, our designer labels, our Diesel pusher RV's all of which we have worked hard for, do not really belong to us. The line from the old old hymn goes like this "All that we have is yours alone, a trust oh God, from you." So while I believe this text is about the faithful use of financial resources, I believe this text is also about getting right with all of what we have; everything that has been entrusted to us. And I believe it begins with coming to terms with the idea that none of what we have is ours, we hold it in a sacred trust for the benefit of life, all life.

As I said, we don't like to hear these things. We like to think that everything we have we deserve because we have worked so hard to get it. But what if we actually played with this idea for awhile; what if we actually lived our lives as if nothing was really ours; that everything that we had was merely entrusted to all of us.

In Mexico, foreigners are not allowed to own land within a 50 km perimeter of the ocean. They can own land inland, but for those who want to buy close to the water, they may not. They purchase the right to use the land from the Bank, who holds it in trust. It's called a Bank Trust and those who have them are required to pay an annual fee to have the right to use the land. What if we applied this thought to all that we treasure. Our homes, our cars, our schools, our savings plans and pension funds. What if we had to pay a fee for the right to use these things so that these things are held in trust for the common good?

Or another idea: what if our treasures weren't really ours individually but they were ours collectively. That's what the Christian communities of the first century were like. Wouldn't that be an interesting idea? Wouldn't it be interesting to think that everything there is, is held collectively for the common good. If someone is caught stealing, they're only stealing from themselves because nothing is anyone's, it's ours together.

I know lots of us are likely sitting here and saying, 'that is so impractical and hard to administer, Blair, it doesn't even make any sense,' and perhaps you're right. But the problem with the alternative is that we delude ourselves into believing we are self made. We come by our blessings because we have worked hard and we deserve them. We actually believe that we have borne the cost of these blessings alone, and that no one or no thing has been lost or damaged in the acquisition. Do you see? This sets up the Christian work ethic, which leads to power and economic imbalances which lead to all sorts of social challenges.

The sixth mark of those who follow Jesus is one of generosity. It's about what we do with our gifts and what we value. The movie *Les Misérables* is all about differing values. I loved the movie, I loved the stage production, I loved Victor Hugo's book. Musically, I think it's the best of all the mega musicals. Set against a back drop of massive economic disparity, we discover that hoarding leads to death, generosity leads to life – whether it's material wealth, an idea, or a relationship.

Jean Valjean, the hero of the story stole a loaf of bread to feed his dying sister. He came to believe the messages beaten into him during a 19 year sentence of slavery – once a thief always a thief - until the generosity of a parish priest presented a new paradigm. Valjean spent the rest of the story trying to disprove that grace could actually be his. His nemesis, Javert hoarded grace; believing the same things, perpetuating the same messages. And when Valjean spared Javert's life at the barricade, Javert would not believe the paradigm shift. He condemned himself with his own suicide.

The people of Paris hoarded both sacrificial support and shelter. So when the rebellion is crushed by the canons of the French Army and the young idealists seek retreat, the Parisian women locked their doors and they died, all of them.

On the flip side, the lovely Fantine lives and dies in service to her daughter. (Anne Hathaway has got to be the runaway winner for best supporting actress) After her death, the spirit of Fantine learns that she in fact was not condemned, there is nothing but grace. She comes to Valjean in his dying to bring him the message, the paradigm shift – grace exists in the generosity of values. She sings “to love another person is to see the face of God.”

When I hoard and protect my own investment, the question “What’s in it for me?” leads to death. When I generously give what I value for the common good, because in fact it’s not really mine to begin with, the question “What’s in it for us?” leads to life. Where your treasure is, there your heart will also be.”

Being generous with what we value, giving of our treasure – our income, our possessions, our savings, in service to the common good, the kingdom of heaven - is perhaps the most difficult mark to see because it flies in the face of everything our culture tells us. We can’t see it through the paradigm of scarcity, the lens of “I don’t have enough.” It is almost impossible to give away what our culture tells us to save and conversely to save what our culture tells us has little value. And yet that is what followers of Jesus do. It leads to a revolution. It leads to life for all.

Amen.