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Les Miserables and the Lepers, Tragedy and Fairy Tale: The Paradox of Salvation¹

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Text: Luke 17:11-19

I have hung from the pulpit a poster from the play, *Les Miserables*. This musical is based on the novel *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo. The novel is centred on Jean Valjean who lived in France in the early nineteenth century. Valjean has been imprisoned for 19 years because he stole a loaf of bread to feed his sister's children. After serving the sentence, he is released, but no one will hire him or feed him because he is an ex-convict. He is treated worse than the pigs. A bishop, in a small town, takes him in, befriends him and treats him like a king, feeding him and giving him a soft bed. Jean Valjean can't believe this treatment. He never got this in prison or out of prison. He becomes panicky, however, and decides to steal some of the silver cutlery and a chalice. With these he leaves in the middle of the night.

There is a policeman named Javert who is Valjean's guard and he believes that "once a criminal, always a criminal". He is convinced that Jean Valjean should still be in jail for stealing that loaf of bread. Javert is *obsessed* with catching Valjean and putting him back in prison. Well, Javert has followed Valjean and is waiting in the shadows when Valjean leaves the bishop's house. He catches Valjean with the bishop's cutlery and chalice. Javert immediately hauls Jean Valjean back to the bishop where he expects the bishop will lay a charge. Much to Javert's surprise, and much to Jean Valjean's surprise, the bishop tells everyone that he *gave* the cutlery and chalice to Valjean! Had he not said, "Everything I have is yours"? Moreover, the bishop then proceeds to tell everyone that Valjean

forgot the candlesticks he had given him, too. As the bishop hands the candlesticks to Valjean, he whispers to him, "I have saved your life today. I want you to be an honest man from now on."

Javert is completely frustrated. He thought he had caught his prize and now it slipped through his fingers. His victory had turned to tragedy.

But for Jean Valjean the reverse is true. Can you imagine the feeling he had at that moment? He thought that he would be in prison for another 19 years, and that his life would be one continuous tragedy. He is so taken by the bishop's mercy that his heart is changed. He becomes a man of honesty and mercy. The candlesticks now take on new meaning. They become the symbol of honesty and mercy. Throughout the novel, Valjean carries these candlesticks wherever he goes. *A tragedy has turned into a fairy tale.*

The gospel [lesson] too is a tragedy turned fairy tale. Ten lepers are suffering from a terrible disease—a disease that rots the skin and disfigures the body. Fingers and toes are lost. In ancient Israel, leprosy was considered a terrible curse, a hopeless sickness. It alienated the leper from everyone. Lepers were not allowed to associate with anyone; they lived in quarantine. Whenever they approached anyone, they were required to yell: "Unclean, unclean!" Their lives were a tragedy!

Jesus appears and they shout from a distance for his help. He gives them a simple direction much like Elisha gave Naaman in the first reading (2 Kings 5:14–17). Miraculously, magically, magnificently, they are healed. The alienation, separation, hopelessness have ended. They are physically and socially healed. They can return to their families, their friends, their business. They can live as humans again. Their tragedy has turned to fairy tale.

Isn't that the message of the gospel stories? The sinner repents and is saved; the blind see; the deaf hear; suffering is turned to joy; Thomas the doubter becomes Thomas the believer; the dishonest tax collector named Matthew becomes honest and generous; Mary Magdalene the prostitute becomes a saint. The frog is kissed and turned into a princess: tragedy becomes fairy tale!

There is more, however, to *Les Miserables* than a tragedy turned fairy tale. Jean Valjean indeed becomes an honest man

but his honesty nearly destroys him. First he goes into hiding and changes his identity because he realizes people will not associate with an ex-convict and Javert is still after him. Then he works hard and buys a factory in a small town. He hires Les Miserables, the poor, and treats them fairly. He gains a reputation for honesty and mercy and becomes mayor of the town. Then Javert shows up. But he doesn't recognize Valjean. He tells Valjean that he has captured the man for whom he has been searching for many years—Jean Valjean. This man apparently broke some small rules of his parole. Valjean realizes that Javert has the wrong man and is now faced with a dilemma. If he tells Javert that he is the man whom Javert seeks, he will be put in jail. Then the factory will be closed and the poor, Les Miserables, will be poor once again, without jobs. If he does not tell, an innocent man goes to jail. Valjean stares hard and long at the candlesticks... and turns himself in. He is convicted and put in prison, and the factory is closed. The fairy tale has now turned to a tragedy. The honest man is paying for some small transgression in a big way.

As I read the book, I got angry at Victor Hugo for the story line. I didn't like it. As I watched the play, I felt sad. How could a fairy tale be turned into a tragedy? It is not fair.

The gospel story has that element in it too. It does not end with the lepers being healed. The story goes on and we hear that only *one* of the ten comes back to thank Jesus. That is sad. It is sad for me to see this lack of gratefulness. It is sad for me to see the lack of gratefulness in some families, amongst some friends at work. It is sad to see a fairy tale turned tragedy.

Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever had good moments turn sour? Have you ever had the bottom fall out? Has your fairy tale ever turned tragic?

This is the other side of the gospel that is seldom mentioned, that the fairy tale sometimes turns tragic. The death of Jesus on the cross was the fairy tale turned tragic. The denial by Peter was the fairy tale turned tragic. Jean Valjean, in *Les Miserables*, has his fairy tale turned into tragedy. And yet... this is not the full story. The tragedy of Jesus' death becomes a fairy tale in his resurrection. Peter's denial becomes Peter's faith and love. Tragedy and fairy tale interwoven in the paradox of salvation!

The eucharistic liturgy carries these themes. We arrive here hungry, searching for meaning. Some are transformed; others leave empty. I don't understand this experience. I don't understand how it works. For some their tragedy is turned into fairy tale; for others their fairy tale turns into tragedy. The Christian life that we live has both tragedy and fairy tale. That is the paradox of salvation.

Jean Valjean is alone at the end of the novel. The orphan Cossette, for whom he has cared all his life, is married. The man she marries discovers that Jean Valjean was in jail, and believes that Valjean has carried on criminal activity. Broken by this perception, Jean Valjean withdraws and goes off to die—alone. The only thing that he takes along is the pair of candlesticks. As he lies dying, he wonders about his honesty and mercy, and wonders whether this has been worth it.

Then, suddenly, Cossette and her husband arrive. They have discovered that Valjean had at one time saved her husband's life. They have also discovered that Valjean had Javert in his power and could have killed him but he let him go; Javert had been so shocked by Jean Valjean's mercy that he committed suicide. Jean Valjean who had appeared to be dishonest and unkind had proven himself to be the most honest and kindest of all men! Now, reunited with Cossette and her husband, Valjean affirms that *honesty* and *mercy* have proven true. The candles burn brightly and tragedy is once again turned into a fairy tale.

Jesus said to the man: "Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you!"

Notes

- ¹ The terms "tragedy" and "fairy tale" are meant to carry the meanings articulated by Frederick Buechner in his book *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), namely, "tragedy" is the inevitable reality of life; "comedy" is the unforeseen reality that breaks in upon the tragedy; and "fairy tale" is the overwhelming of the "tragedy" by the "comedy".