

## ***Release and Freedom***

Luke 4:16-30

Epiphany 3; Series C

In the opening scene of the recent film-musical adaptation of *Les Miserables*, the French peasant Jean Valjean is released on parole after spending nineteen years in prison. The audience soon learns that five of those years were because Valjean stole bread for his starving sister's family, and the remaining years were served because he tried to escape. Valjean is released from prison on parole. Yet, a completely different kind of *release* and *freedom* becomes the focus of the film.

After Valjean is set on parole, the film depicts a difficult life for him. Required by law to show his yellow parole papers that identify him as an ex-convict, he cannot shake his past. As the chorus of the film's opening song declares prophetically, "Look down, look down, you'll always be a slave, look down, look down, you're standing in your grave." Finally, Valjean catches a break when a Bishop sees his helpless state and takes him in, offering him food and shelter. Seeing an opportunity to better his situation, Valjean steals silver from the Bishop during the night and tries to flee. When the police catch him and bring him back to face the Bishop, he lies to save Valjean and also gives him two expensive candlesticks in addition to the items that the criminal stole. The Bishop then tells Valjean that he must use the silver "to become an honest man." The Bishop tells him that he "bought Valjean's soul for God." This is a different kind of *release* and *freedom*—the *release* and *freedom* accomplished by the mercy of God. In many ways this kind of *release* and *freedom* becomes the focus of the film.

The mercy that the Bishop showed in pardoning and cancelling Valjean's criminal act allowed him to better his situation. The mercy of God that was once at work within a Bishop to *release* and *free* him through the pardon and cancellation of his great debt of sin and disobedience toward God, had now spread through the Bishop into the life of Jean Valjean. And with the help of the Bishop's silver, throughout the film Valjean continued the *release* and *freedom* work of showing God's mercy to others.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we were privileged to listen in on the description of another opening scene. We heard about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry for the salvation of the world. According to St. Luke the evangelist, after Jesus received the Holy Spirit upon his Baptism, he returned to his hometown of Nazareth in the region of Galilee, with the Holy Spirit resting upon him. There, in his hometown, Jesus begins his ministry. As was the custom of the day in Jewish Synagogue worship, Jesus read a portion of the Old Testament and then sat down to teach on the passage. The portion of the Old Testament that Jesus read from was Isaiah 61:1-2 and part of Isaiah 58:6.

Jesus reads portions of Isaiah that speak of the Spirit of the Lord resting upon one man so that he can do the *release* and *freedom* work of showing God's mercy to an impoverished, captive, blind, and oppressed world in need of it. The world has impoverished, captured, blinded, and oppressed itself by resisting and rejecting their God, their Creator. When Jesus sat down to teach on the passage, St. Luke

tells us that he said just one sentence: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). He is God who has broken into the world in the flesh to do the *release* and *freedom* work of showing mercy. The Spirit of the Lord rests upon him. He travels from town to town to spread that *release* and *freedom* work of showing mercy. Jesus even shows great mercy and compassion by starting his work in his own hometown, among those who knew him best.

At first his own people received him well. They spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming out of his mouth (Lk 4:22). They could not grasp how this man could be Joseph’s son, but they were willing to come to terms with it. And then Jesus kept speaking. And when Jesus speaks he speaks the truth and typically does not “pull any punches.” When the truth of God’s Word is spoken plainly it often offends.

Jesus continues teaching on this passage from Isaiah. He assumes that the hearers of the Synagogue will want to know then why Jesus is not doing any works of mercy in Nazareth if he is the one that Isaiah speaks about. And so Jesus reminds them that the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha performed works of mercy and healing for non-Jewish people, citizens of other nations, because they were rejected by their own people. And so Jesus’ own hometown crowd began to develop contempt for him. He was suggesting that they had impoverished, captured, blinded, and oppressed themselves to the point that God decided to do his work of mercy and healing elsewhere.

Jesus spoke the truth of God’s Word and his own people were on the sour end of it. And so a different spirit, a spirit set against God, rested upon the people and filled them with wrath (Lk 4:28). They accused Jesus of blasphemy and sought to give him a blasphemer’s death. They drove him out Nazareth and brought him to the edge of a fifty foot cliff hanging over the town. Even at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, we see evidence of the two different reactions that all people of all times and places will have towards this “Messiah of mercy” and his *release* and *freedom* work of showing mercy to world in need of it. People will either *receive* or *reject* him and his work.

As I mentioned toward the beginning of the sermon, throughout *Les Miserables*, Valjean continues the *release* and *freedom* work of giving the mercy of God that he himself had once received. It is interesting, actually, that the mercy of God was the only thing in the movie that was powerful enough to rise above status and social class. The story takes place during a revolutionary period in nineteenth century France. In the backdrop of *Les Miserables* a battle for status rages on among the social classes. A group of idealists try to bring about change through violence and force. Throughout the story, different characters work very hard to change their status and fit into a different social class.

But all of these forced attempts fail—except for one. Valjean is able, even if only for a short while, to rise above his “grave as a slave” and live as a very wealthy factory owner and eventual mayor of a town. God’s mercy made this seemingly rare feat possible. We see here the truth that the mercy and grace of God does not know social class and worldly status. Valjean was then able to make a promise to a dying mother to show mercy to a soon-to-be orphaned peasant girl. As a result of this merciful act the peasant

girl grows up in a very wealthy home, experiences privileges and opportunities she would not have otherwise had, and then marries a man of equal status and wealth who can care for her upon Valjean's death. In the end only God's mercy was able to accomplish what so many discontent people fought so hard to achieve. Yet, God's mercy is either *received* or *rejected*.

There was one character in *Les Miserables* by the name of Javert that could not come to terms with the concept of mercy. He was the police inspector that let Valjean off on parole. He was a man of the law, unable to comprehend mercy. Toward the end of the film when Valjean shows Javert an incredible act of mercy, the police inspector is confused. In another scene, after receiving Valjean's mercy, Javert, this "man of the law" skirts the law to show mercy. And he cannot come to terms with what he had done. He cannot comprehend mercy. And so he ends up rejecting it in the end.

You and I have received a great act of mercy from our God. The Spirit of the Lord rested upon Jesus so that he could come into this world to carry out the *release* and *freedom* work of showing God's mercy. The great irony is that the only way for this "Messiah of mercy" to *release* and *free* you and me and entire world from captivity to sin, death, and the power of the devil, is by being captured.

On the cross of Calvary on that very first Good Friday, God, the Father would see to it that his Spirit-filled-Son would not escape the clutches of death. In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus was able to slip through the hands of those who rejected him and sought to put him to death because it was not yet time for him to finish his work. Calvary was the appropriate place. The time of the Passover was the appropriate time. On that day, at that time, a criminal named Barabbas, rather than the sinless Son of God, would be released (Lk 23:18). The mercy shown to a criminal sealed the "captivity" and eventual death of the innocent, sinless Son of God. But this death would make possible God's mercy-ministry of *release* and *freedom* from every enemy that separates us from him. Now forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life are possible for all who believe and are baptized into this "Messiah of mercy." This one bought your soul for God. Now, once again, you can be reconciliation with God, your Creator.

Now God puts his Spirit upon you. You have received his Spirit when you received God's mercy in your baptism and were claimed as God's very own beloved child. You participate in the *release* and *freedom* work of God in this world so that you can bring it to others in need. For, God continues his work of mercy through you. As a baptized believer you are the mask of God in this world to bring the only thing that truly rises above and transcends race, class, and status. What a privilege to be bought back by your God! Amen.