

“The Burden of Taking Jesus Seriously”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Romans 13:8-10

Matthew 25:31-46

“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’”

- Matthew 25:34-36

Prayer

Holy God,

Startle us once again with the Living Word

That nurtures our faith.

May the meditations of our hearts

Unsettle us, empower us, transform us and

Make us more faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Amen.

French writer Victor Hugo wrote a masterpiece of French literature that became one of the greatest historical novels of the nineteenth century and one of the biggest bestsellers in history. Since its publication in 1862, Hugo’s *“Les Misérables”* has been translated into numerous languages, adapted for the stage, repackaged for the screen, and turned into a hit Broadway musical. The endurance and adaptability of Hugo’s epic novel are not only a sign of the writer’s brilliant mind; *“Les Misérables”* persists and still sounds relevant a century and a half later because the story is much grander than a reassuring tale of redemption in which love conquers hate and good triumphs over evil. The novel still connects with people in the 21st century because holding the whole plot together is an inescapable fact about life, which is that it is never easy to show kindness, trust another human being, forgive, do the right thing and be good in a world where the distinction between the good and the bad guys is not always clear-cut. In fact, the roughly 1,500 pages of Hugo’s masterwork begins with a bishop’s bold, audacious, very hard, very intentional, and very Christian choice to take a chance on a stranger.

In the opening chapters of the novel, *Jean Valjean*, the novel’s protagonist, freshly out of prison where he spent 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread, asks for shelter at the bishop’s house. Looking with compassion on the homeless and hungry stranger at his door, the bishop welcomes *Valjean* into his home and offers him a hot dinner plate and a bed for the night. But the ex-convict, who is angry at society and bitter toward God, decides to run away in the middle of the night with the silverware of the kind-hearted bishop.

In what is probably the novel's most famous and memorable scene, the French police arrest *Jean Valjean* and bring him back to the bishop's residence to confirm the theft. But before the gendarmes can say a word about the silverware, the bishop walks as quickly as possible toward *Valjean* and says: ***"Ah, there you are... I am glad to see you. Well, but how it is? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest... Why didn't you take them along with your forks and spoons?"***

Jean Valjean is stunned into silence. He is shocked at the bishop's unexpected act of forgiveness and grace. Later, after the police is already gone, the bishop looks at the ex-convict in the eye and tells him in a low solemn voice: ***"Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!"***¹

This second encounter with the bishop transforms *Valjean's* life. He is haunted by this act of kindness, compassion, trust and faith in his humanity. As the novel unfolds, *Jean Valjean* turns his own life around and seeks to show others the same gracious and life-saving gesture the bishop extended to him. He had walked into the bishop's house looking for nothing more than a morsel of food, a warm place to spend the night and the opportunity to steal, but he left as a new human being!

I can hardly imagine what the church might be like if those of us who come to this time of worship on Sunday mornings, perhaps expecting nothing more than to get our regular fill of religion for the week, experienced God's compassion, love and grace so deeply and so personally that we would leave this gathering as a new human being with our hearts broken open to the real needs of our neighbors and the world around us.

I have always loved that profoundly Christian moment in "*Les Misérables*" because the bishop's act of compassion speaks of an often-overlooked theological truth: there is no other way to experience the power of God's liberating love and saving grace if not through full personal engagement with other people. The more we show kindness to another human being, the more we feel compassion for another person, the harder we strive to break away from the paralyzing chains of indifference that keep us from getting more involved with people in our community, the more we choose to welcome our neighbors into our lives – the closer we get to God and the stronger our ability to love and to be compassionate becomes.

As the teaching ministry of Jesus comes to a climax in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus shares a parable about the "Final Judgment" with his followers. This is neither a description nor a prediction of what will happen at the end-times. Jesus was never in the business of separating people between the chosen and the rejected, the believer and the heathen, the saved and the damned. In Matthew, Jesus began his ministry with the Beatitudes. There, Jesus pronounced blessings upon the poor, the despised, the powerless, upon those who are humble, on those who thirst for justice and on the peacemakers and he announced that he would stand in solidarity with all who are

falsely accused and persecuted. And in today's reading, which is the end-piece of Jesus' ministry before he was arrested, handed over to Pilate, tortured by Roman soldiers, condemned to death, and nailed to the cross for preaching about God's compassionate love and grace, Jesus gives his friends an overview of the Christian Way. He tells the disciples what really matters about everything he said, did, and taught. In the end, Jesus says to his friends, what counts is not self-righteousness, it is not whether you believe that you are the sheep, it is not your theological beliefs, it is not your church membership, it is not your religious background, whether you are gay or straight, male or female, immigrant or citizen, rich or poor, White or Brown; in the end what really counts is how you show solidarity, friendship, compassion, and love to the least and the last in the world. If the disciples could not remember anything else he had taught them, Jesus wanted them to remember this one final lesson: the Jesus Way is a way of life in which the love of God demands that we look at another human being, especially at the person who needs us, and see in that person the face of Christ. And, friends, let me tell you this, it is a real tragedy when the Church chooses very willingly to turn its back on those at the margins, on the poor, on the homeless, and on the stranger that shows up unexpectedly at the church's door. I often wonder whether Jesus chose this disturbing story about the sheep and the goats as the last parable he would share with his friends to make sure that Christians would remember that, in the parable, it is not the Son of Man who condemns the goats to their tragic ending. The goats place themselves outside the Kingdom, outside God's dreams for humankind, because they make a choice to stop caring, to close their eyes to the needs of other human beings, to walk away from the excluded, the suspicious looking stranger, the easily forgotten. The goats show no compassion, instead they hold on tightly to their silver and save their time and their love for those they think are more trustworthy and deserving.

"What you do to the least of these brothers and sisters of my family," Jesus said, ***"to the thirsty, the hungry, the sick, the poor, the imprisoned, you do it to me."*** I am certain that all of us in worship this morning believe that following Christ requires some degree of involvement with the world and people beyond the walls of the church. None of us would dispute that we have a mandate from Christ to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, work for justice and practice hospitality and kindness. However, the 64,000-dollar question that most churches and individual Christians struggle with is how much social involvement, how much community engagement and how much of our own personal time and resources should go into this Christian imperative to have compassion for the neighbor and show kindness to the stranger. This has always been the great debate within the church.

But whether we are ready for it or not, at some point, we all must face and answer this question at the heart of our faith: how much are we willing to do as Christians? Do we simply come together on Sundays to offer one another comforting words, sing hymns, and pray for the world or do we go above and beyond our comfort level, as the kind bishop did, to show compassion for even one single stranger at our door? Do we volunteer at the soup kitchen, the thrift store, the food bank or do we put all our time and energy into the kind of social activism that confronts the systemic

injustices and inequalities of our society? Do we write a check and give it to people who are on the verge of becoming homeless today or do we advocate for social changes that can bring an end to homelessness? Do we only get involved locally and put all our mission dollars into local organizations or do we engage with the problems and challenges facing the world?

What would Christ have us do?

I believe that rather than squabbling over how the church should be involved in the world, Christ would tell us to get involved!

There is no doubt that Jesus would want us to create and sustain a community of faith that welcomes all God's children and cares for the sick and offers a cup of water to the thirsty and feels compassion for the stranger and reminds those who are living through heart-breaking and even hopeless circumstances that God has not forgotten or abandoned any of them. We are here to mirror the love of Christ to our neighbors because as Paul said to the church in Rome "***You can't go wrong when you love others.***"²

And there is no question that Christ would also want us to be engaged in advocacy beyond the church, out in the public arena, which is to say that Christ would have us be socially and politically engaged, questioning the unjust structures of the world and demonstrating through our actions and our living that our faith in Christ makes us see and care for the wellbeing of every single person in our society, for the wellbeing of humankind and the wellbeing of our planet.

In his last parable, Jesus made the unambiguous connection between discipleship and acts of compassion, between love and engagement with the real world. He told his followers that we achieve redemption through intentional involvement with other people, not through indifference or isolation. Christ would never ask us to choose between offering someone something to drink or mobilizing the church around efforts to slow down climate change, resettling a refugee family in Acton or writing a check for the Refugee and Migration Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Jesus would tell us to be engaged. Jesus would implore us to do all the good we can, as often as we can, for as long as we can to bring as many people as we can from darkness into light, from despair into hope, from disbelief to faith, from brokenness to wholeness, from sickness to health, from prison to freedom, from destitution to a fuller life. Jesus would plead with us to show the kind of compassion that transforms hearts and turns people's lives toward the goodness of our forgiving and compassionate God.

Now, this faith of social engagement, intentional involvement in the world and in the lives of our neighbors can sound like a lot more work than any one of us ever imagined we would be called to do as faithful followers of Christ and members of the Acton Congregational Church. I resonate with the words of poet Wendell Berry who said, "[My] ***reading of the Gospels, comforting and clarifying and instructive as***

they frequently are, deeply moving or exhilarating as they frequently are, has caused me to understand them also as a burden, sometimes raising the hardest personal questions, sometimes bewildering, sometimes contradictory, sometimes apparently outrageous in their demands.³ Berry understands that if we take seriously the call to follow Christ we may find that the Gospel is a burden. The teachings of Jesus demand more than just belief and church attendance, they require courage, moral fiber, the backbone to get involved with the suffering and pain of our neighbors, anger at the injustices in our world, and a heart shaped by God's love that can show kindness and compassion to the stranger.

Sometime ago, one of our church members and I were chatting via email about our hopes and dreams for our congregation and this very active church member sent me an excerpt of a poem written by Pablo Neruda, which she hopes will be the very opposite of what we will do as a church. The poem is entitled "*You Start Dying Slowly*" and these are the lines she shared with me –

***"You start dying slowly
If you become a slave of your habits,
Walking everyday on the same paths...
If you do not change your routine,
If you do not wear different colours
Or you do not speak to those you don't know."***

Neruda's words made me think of the story the Oscar winning actor Sidney Poitier, who died last month at the beautiful age of 94, shared in an interview about the elderly Jewish man who taught him to read better. As a young immigrant from the Bahamas who had arrived in New York City with the ambition to become an actor, Poitier knew that it would be virtually impossible to fulfill his dreams if he could not read. At the time, he was washing dishes at a restaurant to get by. To practice reading, Poitier would bring newspapers to his shift. One day, the Jewish waiter stood next to him and asked, "***What's new in the paper?***" Poitier replied a bit embarrassed, "***I can't tell you what's new in the papers because I don't read very well. I didn't have very much of an education.***" The waiter asked him, "***Would you like me to read with you?***" Poitier said that from that day on, every night after his shift was over, the elderly Jewish man sat with him and taught him grammar, how to read and how to pronounce words properly. Clearly overcome by emotions and gratitude, Sidney Poitier acknowledged that the kindness and compassion of that man who had absolutely nothing to gain from spending so many hours and nights teaching him to read changed the trajectory of his life.⁴

In Victor Hugo's novel a bishop takes a chance on a stranger at his door. At the restaurant in New York City, an older Jewish man goes out of his way to speak with a stranger. In fiction and in real life, lives are transformed when people dare to change their routines, take a different path, speak to a stranger, and show compassion.

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

Is it too much to expect that the Church of Jesus Christ would also engage in daring ministries of kindness and compassion that can change human lives? Can we leave our old habits behind in a very intentional effort to re-imagine how we can participate in our community in ways that are life-transforming? Are we able to change our routine so we can start to pay attention to the people around us that need a bit of our time, our solidarity and even some of our very well-invested money? Can we be brave enough to speak with those we do not yet know so we are not shielded from their complicated stories, their long journey to our doorsteps, their dreams and their hopes? Can we be the kind of Christians who, even without knowing it, are doing something life-saving every time we act compassionately and we satisfy someone's hunger, slake someone's thirst, give someone a winter coat, and welcome the stranger? Can we be do hands-on ministry right here in Acton and also be engaged with the social and political issues that are important to humankind and to the future of our planet?

As we begin to gather in-person again and start dreaming about the opportunities this New Year will offer our church to love our neighbors and engage in ministries that can mend and heal our world, my prayer is that we will take the outrageous demands the Gospel places on us seriously. Jesus told his friends that we start living when we go out of our way to act with kindness and compassion toward others. I pray that Acton Congregational Church will not be hesitant to live fully and be transformed by audacious gestures of kindness and bold acts of compassion.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Victor Hugo. *"Les Misérables,"* pp. 63-66.

² Romans 10:10 [the Message].

³ Wendell Berry. *"The Burden of the Gospels,"* pp. 127-128.

⁴ Sidney Poitier interview with Lesley Stahl broadcast on "Sunday Morning" on 12 May 2013 [https://youtu.be/jPI5zev4Too]