

A Proper 19 2026
Saint Barnabas Church, Falmouth MA
The Rev. David Rider
September 13, 2026

Matthew 18:21-35

Looking back to the formative days of your youth, can you name one Broadway musical that helped to shape your view of the world?

I believe I could make the easy case that the arts bring together both head and heart as they probe the dark and lofty sides of the human condition

I'll skip the tired distinction between the sacred and profane to say that both high-brow and low-brow portrayals of life touch the deep parts of our souls

I have two candidates for most impactful musicals from back in the day that tell you everything you need to know about who I am

First, as a very active boy in elementary school, I lived through *Man of La Mancha*, which beyond measure was the heartthrob favorite musical of Mrs Ewald, my music teacher

At least in my view, Mrs Ewald had a misinformed notion that preadolescent boys should stand tall and embarrass themselves by singing solo renditions of *To Dream the Impossible Dream*

She got goosebumps as she played the tune on her piano while I got the willies at the notion belting out her song in front of my friends

Mrs Ewald and I quickly got into a test of wills when I refused her request—I'll spare you the details beyond her marching me next door to Mr Sarbanes, the science teacher, to be paddled for insubordination—I never sang her song

As a young adult, the more impactful musical was *Les Miserables*, which took our culture by storm and had one of the longest runs in Broadway history

First published by Victor Hugo in 1862, it's considered one of the 19th century's greatest novels as it explores the nature of law and grace, guilt and redemption, and today what we would call income inequality, all amid the texture of post-revolutionary France

Hugo begins the entire book with the description of Bishop Myriel, a seventy-five-year-old man who has served his diocese as bishop for nine years. He is a man of kindness and charity, widely admired by all the people for his saintly conduct and modest way of life beyond reproach

As theologian and Assisting Bishop Mary Glasspool reminds us, one of the tenets of Bishop Muriel's life is that prejudice and vice are the real sources of evil and that "the great dangers are within us". He warns people that "we should fear ourselves" – channeling Sigmund Freud a generation later

The play's main character, however, is Jean Valjean, who is freed after nineteen years as a galley slave for stealing a loaf of bread.

Valjean comes to the town in which Bishop Myriel resides, and no one will put him up for the night or give him any food out of fear. He finally comes to the bishop's house for help - and Bishop Myriel receives him warmly, has dinner served to the former convict, and personally shows Jean Valjean a comfortable bedroom.

However, Valjean is tempted by the sight of the bishop's silverware and escapes with it during the night. He is swiftly apprehended and brought before the bishop, who states that the silverware was a gift to Valjean and that he should also take the two candlesticks.

The police leave, and alone with Valjean, Bishop Myriel tells him that he wants Jean to use the silver to become an honest man.

In words that will haunt Jean the rest of his life, the saintly old man says this: "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."

Jean Valjean leaves the bishop's home completely forgiven, free to begin a new life—it doesn't get any better than that

Shortly thereafter, however, Valjean encounters a boy with a coin, and he puts his foot upon the money when it rolls near him.

Rejecting the youngster's pleading, Jean keeps the coin. It is only then - when the child has gone away - that remorse overcomes him. Jean seeks out the child and cannot find him.

So he goes back to the bishop's house, kneels in the street outside the front door, and weeps bitterly that he cannot return the money. Now, finally, he begins his life anew.

Now, let's connect Jean Valjean to the slave in today's gospel passage from Matthew, a continuation of the text we heard last Sunday

Both Jean Valjean and the slave in our gospel lesson are freed from their offenses by the sheer mercy of others, yet they do not yet experience transformation to a better life

For some mysterious reason, in spite of extraordinary grace, *they are not able to experience themselves as truly forgiven*, they are unable to "go and do likewise"

Hugo's play has deep roots in the Christian tradition of grace and forgiveness, even when we are not able to tap fully into such good news

You and I are sprung from out of our mother's womb with total grace and forgiveness

We did not deserve to be born or land in a privileged zip code, we won a genetic lottery regarding any good looks or predisposition to science or the arts

You can take or leave Augustine's rumination on original sin—yes, we have human limitations, but we also possess the gifts of imagination and compassion to connect meaningfully with our larger worlds

As Christians, our entire faith story revolves around the actions of Jesus Christ, who "redeems" us—a word very close to Victor Hugo's heart because it's a forensic word meaning that we are sprung or cut loose from prison by the sheer gift of another—Jesus Christ

So now, our only issues is how we navigate this beautiful yet broken world in a way that shows that we get it, that we believe in forgiveness and its resulting transformation, that we are not serving a life sentence in the prison of self hatred

For all his impact on Western Christianity, I believe that St Augustine overplayed his hand with his deep reliance on original sin to explain our human predicament

An equally compelling theological argument embraces a vision of original forgiveness, our very lives springing from a God who rejected solitude for creation itself and human companionship, even if each of us combines titrations of beauty and disaster

In this spirit, we can avoid the temptation to throw in the towel by saying, “I am not good enough” when we might better say, “I know my limitations, but I want to make each day count as a child of God’s grace and love.

This gets us to the main punchline of today’s Gospel, in which Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive others

Jesus reminds Peter that forgiveness is not something you measure

Jesus invokes the hyperbole of 77 in a way that we might today say “a million times”

The point is not to keep score of our beneficence

Instead, the goal of life is to metabolize the grace that is given to us at birth while finding a way to get back on our feet when life lands us with a sucker punch

Whether in daily acts of charity or palpable vision of justice, we work to call our injustice and make a better world not to make ourselves feel better but because we can do no less when we experience the love and mercy by which God has made us and redeemed us in JC

God's grace and forgiveness flows us into us like oxygen itself,
24/7/365

As we absorb and metabolize this love, we are able to look beyond our own noses to the joys and challenges of this world without self-pity, victimization or score-keeping

In *Les Miserables*, humble Bishop Myriel forgives John Valjean and gives Valjean the gift of self-acceptance and transformation

You and I may not have such drama in our daily lives as we encounter in a well-produced Broadway play, but we capture its spirit and pass it on with each step of our earthly journey as followers of Jesus

As we enter autumn and reconnect to parish rhythms, I hope we will practice these virtues within our personal lives, with one another in our parish ministry, and beyond this campus to a coarsened culture in need of healing

Happy autumn upcoming, and Godspeed as we support each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.