

The Chosen, a sermon in response to James 2:1-10, 14-17 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, September 9, 2018. (Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.)

In his famous novel, *Les Miserable*, Victor Hugo takes us on a journey through the life of Jean Valjean – a life that had turned down a dark path when he served 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister’s starving children. Now, most of you are familiar with the story, if not from the book then from the musical, so I won’t go into many details about it. But I would like to draw your attention to an early scene, when Valjean has just left prison. +++ Hungry, dirty, and exhausted, he wanders to the back door of a church to beg for food and a place to sleep – and there he meets Bishop **MY-re-ell**. Surprisingly instead of turning him back out into the darkness, the bishop feeds him and gives him a bed for the night... And, as they talk about the challenges he has faced, Valjean tells Bishop MY-re-ell that he is ready to start a new life for himself – to become a new man – a righteous man.

But during the night, the reader is disappointed when Valjean is overcome by desire for the church’s silver – and steals it – striking the good bishop to the floor to make his escape. +++ And, of course, no sooner does he get away from the church, but Valjean is caught with the silver, just as the morning dawns. The police return him to the church in chains, and scoff as they tell Bishop MY-re-ell that their prisoner claims that the bishop actually **gave** him the silver... (Of all the ridiculous stories they’ve heard from people caught red-handed, this must be the best one yet... “Oh sure – the bishop just **gave** you all this silver!!”)... +++ +++ We know it is a pivotal moment... After serving **19 years** just for stealing a loaf of bread – how might he be punished for **assaulting a bishop and stealing silver from the church?** +++ +++ **Truly – only the grace of God can help him now.**

Then Bishop **My-re-ell** speaks... “Yes, of course I gave it to him” then, looking at Valjean he continues, “But why didn’t you take the silver candlestick as well, that was very foolish of you. They are worth at least 2,000 francs why did you leave them?” And, he sends for the candlesticks to be added to Valjean’s bag of silver. +++ +++ **Truly – only the grace of God COULD have helped him – and fortunately for Jean Valjean – God’s grace can arrive through a servant of Christ whose faith is ALIVE with Christian love – with agape love – expressed in generous – sacrificial – works.**

So, the stunned police can do nothing but release their prisoner and leave. +++ When Valjean asks why he did such an unexpected – extraordinary – *maybe foolish* – thing – the bishop just reminds him... “Don’t forget, **don’t EVER forget, you’ve promised to become a new man.** ... Jean Valjean,... my brother,... you no longer belong to evil. With this silver, I have bought your soul. I’ve ransomed you from fear and hatred and now I give you back to God.” +++ +++ As time goes on we learn that the bishop’s gospel of love **does indeed** return Valjean to the ways of God, +++ **and he shows mercy and generosity to the poor for the rest of his life.** +++ +++ Faced with a nameless, homeless, hungry *convict* at the door,... the bishop had done more than give him food and shelter. He risked his own life **and** handed over a fortune in silver that the church could not afford to lose,... just because this stranger needed a chance to turn his life around. +++ +++ And the reader is left stunned. +++ And shamed... knowing we would **never** have reacted that way, even though it was a wonderful and loving thing to do... **The kind of thing Christ would do.** +++ In fact, it was the bishop’s sacrificial love that gave Jean Valjean the final motivation – the strength – to truly become a new man – more so than *any* promise or good intention he ever could have mustered up on his own. +++

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And so, we see that it is in our **acts** of Christian love – reflecting the *extravagant* goodness of Christ himself – that we have a path to truly change the world – and to prepare it for the perfect Kingdom of God:: +++ Extravagant,... Sacrificial,... Unexpected,... even **Foolish**,... **acts of Love.** +++ +++ +++

But... this is the part of the conversation where we start looking for ways *to hedge our bet*. I mean – it sounds good in a *book* – *looks* good in a *movie* – but **this is real life.** +++ +++ There’s got to be a line, somewhere, that WE shouldn’t have to cross? I mean, really, we *do* have to make responsible decisions, after all, not just throw caution to the wind. We *do* have to be good stewards of our resources. +++ So... *maybe* the trick is to see if we can decide

just **where** should we draw that line – how much do we have to give – how much do we have to risk – before we can say, “That’s enough”?? +++ Well,... OK... let’s think back through the story of Jean Valjean and Bishop **MY**-re-ell and see if we can decide what would have been a more *reasonable* way to react... ..

- To start with, he was dirty and hungry. Well, we can deal with that because we’ve got food stashed away in a closet somewhere – it’s easy enough to give him some of *that*. So that’s good – that’s OK. No need to draw a line **there**. And his *exhaustion* – ok – well, actually, maybe there was a shelter on the other side of town that we could send him to. That would be a lot safer than giving him a bed for the night. +++ But, the just-released-from-prison-with-nowhere-else-to-go thing might cross a line. I mean – it’s late at night. What do we really *know* about him except the fact he was recently in jail? We shouldn’t be *irresponsible* about who we let in – especially at this time of night. +++ Oh – and –just to be clear – the whole “letting him assault us and take our silver” thing is **definitely** out of the question. **Gotta** draw a line there.
- All in all, you know what, instead of a convicted felon, it would be more comfortable if the person at the door could just be *hungry and tired* – maybe because... let’s see... because his **car** had broken down and he left his wallet at home. That’s it... his **car** had broken down. *Then* we could definitely let him come in long enough to use the phone and share a meal while he waits for a ride. Yes, that’s a more comfortable scenario, could we draw the line there? Let’s go with that... Of course – that’s not what really happened, though, is it??? That’s not the situation the bishop was faced with.

Now, I know we do not really get to decide what we’ll be faced with. And, the situation in the novel was a *very* hard one. Hugó invented it **because** it is so hard – **because** it is such a stunning gesture. +++ And, in reality, we really **do** have to think about the best – the smartest – ways to serve the community, while ensuring the safety of our congregations. And we really **do** have to be good stewards of our resources. +++ But, I **still** think that it’s worth thinking about **what lines we might tend to draw** – without even *realizing* it – when we feel Christ tugging at us to leave our comfort zones, or to give – to risk – more than what seems reasonable:: – **not just when someone knocks on the back door of the church**, but when we are faced with **large-scale hunger** +++ **homelessness**, +++ **social justice concerns** +++ **Racism** +++ **Immigrants** +++ **Refugees fleeing unspeakable violence**. +++ **Those who are persecuted because they are “different” from other people, and have to fight for basic human rights and dignity that the rest of us take for granted**.

And as we confront each of these opportunities – I think we tend to draw lines all the time. +++ That’s what *James* challenges us on in today’s Epistle reading, asking if we’d respond the same way – here at church – on Sunday mornings... – If we’d respond the same way to “”“a person with gold rings and in *fine* clothes”””” as we would to “””“a poor person in *dirty* clothes.”””” +++ I wonder... +++ and I hope I know the answer... If someone who is dirty, appears to be homeless, and smells bad appears in our narthex 15 minutes before a service – is he greeted the exact **same way** as a well-groomed visitor with a wool suit, a silk tie and a new pair of shoes? Do we introduce ourselves the... **same way**,... walk them to the **same** pew, ... or give them the **same** warm invitation to return next week? +++ +++ Are we willing to risk **everything** – our comfort zones,... even our own safety,... for the sake of such a person – like Bishop **MY**-ree-el did when Valjean knocked on the door? +++ +++ Or, like Jesus Christ did **FOR US**,... +++ when he walked to the cross?

This is the burning question *James* hits us with today – and the author is not pulling any punches. The whole letter demonstrates how **the values of this world** – its selfishness and corruption – are completely incompatible with Christ’s perfect generosity and righteousness. +++ **AND**, *James* challenges us to decide on which side of that divide **WE** will stand:: the values of the world – or the values of Christ??. +++ +++ +++ So, – he opens with a blunt rhetorical question... that’s actually more of an **accusation**:: “My brothers and sisters, do you **with your acts of favoritism really** [even] **believe** in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” +++ So – they are guilty of favoritism and, because of that, the writer questions if they really even believe in Christ **at all**. +++ Is that too **harsh**?? +++ Is it **reasonable** to link favoritism with faithlessness?? +++ +++ +++ Well, let’s look at it more closely for just a moment to see... +++ The Greek noun used for “favoritism” in James:: is “pro-sopo-limps-E-i-as” [proswpolhmyiaiβ]. It is used only **four** times in the entire New Testament. And in **each** of the other three cases, it is used to say that God does **NOT** do it. ... For example, Romans 2:11: “God shows **NO partiality**...(no

favoritism)” or Ephesians 6:9, “you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is **NO partiality.**” +++ So, for James to say that the people of the church **ARE** showing “favoritism” for the wealthy – he names them as **ungodly** – they are turning their backs on God’s nature – and on the example of Christ. +++

James goes on to ask another rhetorical question:., “Has not God **CHOSEN** the **poor** in the world to be rich in faith, and to be heirs of the kingdom-that-he-has-promised to those who love him?” +++ Is James right about that? ... Does the Lord really, anywhere in our scriptures, actually go so far as to declare that the poor are “heirs of the kingdom?” +++ Well, yes, actually...+++ Remember the Sermon on the Mount when **Jesus** declares,,: “Blessed are the **poor** in spirit,... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.+++ Blessed are those who **mourn**,... for they will be comforted. +++ Blessed are the **meek**,... for they will inherit the earth.” +++ *Throughout* his ministry, Jesus **CHOOSE** to side with sinners, ... the sick and hungry,... and outcasts. +++ And he **blessed** them. +++ Now,... James asks *us* whom *we* choose – and don’t even bother answering with words – because for James, *the proof is in our actions.* **Our works really define who we are as Christians.**

There is a famous quote often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.”... Our actions **do** speak the language of faith more than our *words* ever could... Faith is **action**... Faith is **love**... +++ James calls it the Royal Law that “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**” +++ God commands this in Leviticus, and Jesus repeats it in Matthew as the second important commandment: **Love** God and **Love** your Neighbor, Jesus tells us, “On these two commandments hang **ALL** the law and the prophets.” +++ +++ **We are not being called to talk about love – but to ACT in love.** +++ We can confess faith,... fall on our knees in worship,... and sing hymns... But if we do not **ACT** in love, +++ in faithful response to Christ’s love for us, +++ then we have failed to embrace *anything* about who God really is.

I think this is where James is coming from when he concludes that **“faith by itself,... if it has no works,... is dead.”** Our loving works are a measure of our faith in God because God IS love. +++ As followers of Christ, **WE are the ones who are CHOSEN** – +++ *chosen* to bring the Good News to the nations – *chosen* to be his hands and feet for a broken world... *chosen* to bless the poor in spirit,... comfort those who mourn,... uplift the meek,... feed those who hunger and thirst,... and reveal God’s mercy for the outcast. +++ When we do **that**... +++ when God’s grace comes to this world through *our* righteous acts +++ **THEN**, ... our faith is **alive**... and Jesus Christ surely dwells within us.

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In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen