

“Here Is Grace” // Part 1 - *What Do We Do With What We’ve Done* series
Nov 3, 2019 // Wildwood Mennonite Church // Joe Heikman

This sermon began with a scene from Les Miserables, the 2012 musical movie version. The scene is of the convict Valjean’s encounter with a bishop, who meets Valjean’s act of thievery with kindness and generosity.

Download the video clip here: [Les Miserables \(2012\) - "Saved For Grace"](#)
lyrics/subtitles: ["Saved For Grace" subtitles file](#)

The Word of the Lord. (Thanks Be to God).
Seriously, *Les Miserable* is as clear of a presentation of the Grace of God as anything I’ve seen. If you want to skip the rest of my sermon to go watch the rest of the movie, go for it. I’ll even lend you my copy. :)

I’ll have more to say about *Les Miserables* in a while.



“What do we do with what we’ve done?”

What does that mean, and why are we talking about it for the next three Sundays?

Well, I hope that the title is fairly self-explanatory. We’ve all done stuff that we’re not proud of. Classic Christian language would call this “Sin.” There are lots of ways we name these things in our past: crimes, errors, faults, violations... lying, stealing, cheating, mistakes, regrets... trespasses, debts, missing the mark...complicity, ignorance, failure, weakness... high crimes and misdemeanors...

Nobody’s perfect. We all have our stuff.



Big stuff and small stuff.

Stuff from long ago and stuff from this morning already, maybe.

Stuff that's almost entirely my fault, and stuff that was really more of a group project.

Some stuff that I feel badly about and some stuff that I'm not even aware of.

Some stuff that I did not mean to ever hurt anyone, and some stuff where I was fully aware of the pain I would cause and decided to go ahead anyway.

The stuff of momentary lapses and outbursts, and the stuff of long patterns and addictions.

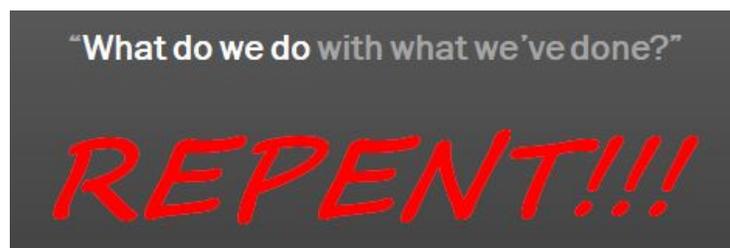
The stuff of childhood and adolescence, testing boundaries and seeing what happens when I try this.

And the stuff of failing to do the good that I might have done.

That's a lot of stuff. You might have your own stuff to add as well.

What do we do with all that stuff?

Some of you know the church answer for that. What are Christians supposed to do about sin?



Repent! That probably would have been the most direct title for the series, but who's going to show up for a series called that??

In my upbringing, repentance meant three movements. 1) To recognize what I did that was wrong. 2) To feel and express remorse for that action. and 3) to turn and move in the other direction, to attempt to make amends or at least to learn from the mistake and try not to do it again.

Now, that seems pretty straightforward, and I can think of a few situations where that might be. But most of the time, reality is more complicated.

Sometimes we don't recognize what we've done, or we don't feel bad about it, or it was an honest



mistake, or we have no idea how to make amends, or we simply cannot fix what we've broken.

It's complicated. That's what we're talking about, living with the complications of our sins.

A couple of notes before we go any further.

First of all, as usual when I'm up here, I'm not talking about you. If you're worried that maybe I know stuff about you, or the examples I'm using sound familiar, please know that I'm not talking about you or directly to you. I'm going to do my best to talk in general terms, because this really is about all of us, not any one of us in particular. I'm not trying to call anyone out, and this series isn't a response to any situation. This series isn't going to have any forced sharing times or emotional appeals for confession. I do hope it's relevant to you as individuals and to us collectively, but my observation is that being made to feel badly about what we've done is rarely a good motivator for doing anything positive about it. So I'm going to try really hard not to add anything to the pile of guilt or shame or fear most of us are carrying around anyway.

That said, if you think that I'm talking about somebody *other than* you, that's not true either. Looking at others is one of the least helpful things we can do with what we've done. Comparing ourselves to others, comparing what we've done to what *they've* done and thinking that somehow takes the stink off of us, that just doesn't work.

There's a place for accountability and working against injustice, for sure. And as usual I've cast a really grand vision for this series in the hopes of talking about every possible angle... but realistically, for today anyway, what *they* have done to *me or to us* is not the focus today. It's probably a lot more comfortable to talk about their sins, but not very helpful in dealing with our own stuff.

Does that sound okay?

One more caveat -- it's going to be a long time until I get anywhere close to answering that question about what to do with what we've done. There are a whole lot of other questions that need to be dealt with before we get to that one.

"What does GOD do with what we've done?"

This is a big one for us as people of faith. No softball questions today, folks!

[This](#) is the Scapegoat, (the OG as the kids say). In the Hebrew Bible, Leviticus chapter 16 describes the rituals for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is still the most holy day of the Jewish calendar, when the Jews practice their answers for the "sin question."



"The Scapegoat," by William Holman Hunt, 1854

And in ancient Israel, a central role went to a goat. Two goats, actually. The high priest would bring two goats to the temple on Yom Kippur, and they would “cast lots,” a random way to choose between the goats. One goat would become a blood sacrifice, along with a bull, killed on the altar as a payment for the sins of the nation.

And the other goat, *“Then Aaron [the High Priest] shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.”*

“Azazel,” the goat is called, a name meaning “Total Removal.” All of the sins of the whole nation, put onto this one goat and sent off into the wilderness. Which sounds like punishment, perhaps, but on second thought, goats *live* in the wilderness. God is sending the sins away, out where they belong, where they can’t hurt anyone anymore.

The scapegoat. That’s where the word comes from.

Bizarre, eh? (Perhaps I’ll try that next time I get a speeding ticket from one of those photo radar cameras. I’ll send back a copy of this picture--don’t worry about it, this one’s on the goat.)

I suspect that’s the origin of the image from Psalm 103, *as far as the east is from the west, that’s how far YHWH has removed our sins from us.* The goat has carried our sins off into the wilderness.

Is that what God does with what we’ve done? Send it off into the void? Forgets about it?

A lot of us have been given the impression that the image of God as Judge means that God is angry about what we’ve done, always giving strict rules and handing out harsh penalties. And that image is there some of the time, for sure; an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. There are stonings and shunnings a plenty, not much grace in those, not from our modern perspective anyway.



But there’s also this other side, where God is constantly finding creative ways to get people out of having to pay for what they’ve done.

That’s what a sacrifice is, after all, making a way for a person to pay less than full price for their sin. If blood is demanded, this animal’s blood is acceptable--not so good for the animal, but quite the discount in

repayment for the humans involved. And even that was on a sliding scale--rich people sacrificed bulls, poor people sacrificed doves. There's grace built into the system--empathy, restraint, mercy, compassion. Again, not so much for the animals, but still.

When I was a toddler, my parents put up a picket fence in our yard, to keep me in so that I wouldn't roam about the farm. But that plan was consistently thwarted by my older brother, who would regularly take pity on me and open the door so I could come out and play with him.

That's the feeling I get of God's storyline in the biblical narrative: opening the gate for the people, letting them off the hook, finding creative ways to minimize the punishment and maximize the opportunity to try again.



That's the whole point of the Torah Law, and the commands of the New Testament as well. Not to bind us to what we've done and make sure we get what we deserve, but rather to set us free, to help us to stay free.

That's what I see God doing with what we've done, working to limit the consequences and minimize the harm, to move towards healing and wholeness. Shalom, right relationship, wholeness in the community, that's the objective.

That beautiful poem of grace:

Psalm 103

*Bless YHWH, my soul!
All that is in me, bless God's holy Name!
Bless YHWH, my soul,
and remember all God's kindnesses!*

*The One who forgives all your sins
is the One who heals all your diseases;
the One who ransoms your life from the Pit
is the One who crowns you with love and tenderness.
The One who fills your years with prosperity
also gives you an eagle's youthful energy.*

*How you love justice, YHWH!
You are always on the side of the oppressed.
You revealed your intentions to Moses,
your deeds to Israel.
You are tender and compassionate, YHWH—
slow to anger, and always loving;
your indignation doesn't endure forever,
and your anger lasts only for a short time.
You never treat us as our sins deserve;
you don't repay us in kind for the injustices we do.*

*For as high as heaven is above the earth,
so great is the love for those who revere you.
As far away as the east is from the west,
that's how far you remove our sins from us!
As tenderly as parents treat their children,
that's how tenderly you treat your worshipers, YHWH!*

*For you know what we are made of—
you remember that we're nothing but dust.
We last no longer than grass,
live no longer than a wildflower;
one gust of wind and we're gone,
never to be seen again.*

*Yet your love lasts from age to age
for those who revere you, YHWH,
as does your goodness to our children's children,
and to those who keep your covenant
and remember to obey your precepts.
You have established your throne in the heavens,
and your reign extends over everything.*

*Bless YHWH, you angels,
you powers who do God's bidding,
attentive to every word of command!
Bless YHWH, you heavenly host,
you faithful ones who enforce God's will!
Bless YHWH, all creation,
to the far reaches of God's reign!
bless YHWH, my soul!*

This isn't an aberration, this isn't an exception or in tension with Torah, this is the center of it all. From scapegoats to sacrifices to prophets to divine forgetfulness, This is who God is.

So, if that's who God is, then who am I?

That question rings throughout the score of *Les Mis*.

The scene that we saw is only the beginning of the story for Valjean. For those who aren't familiar with the story, after his encounter with the grace of the priest, Valjean skipped out on his parole and took on a new identity in a different region of France.

And there he uses the silver from the priest to become a successful businessman, a factory owner, even the mayor of his town. But although he is successful, an honest man, he can't escape his past. He tries to treat his workers fairly and generously, but without really meaning to, he has one of his workers fired for something that wasn't her fault. This young woman, Fantine, was trying to provide for her daughter, but because Valjean had fired her, she was now outcast and doomed.

Just like what had happened to Valjean. He is horrified about what he had done, and tries to make it right. But then his nemesis from the prison shows up. Inspector Javert, who has been chasing Valjean for 8 years since he skipped out on his parole.

Javert doesn't recognize Valjean, but then Valjean finds out that another man had just been arrested under the name Valjean, and the judge is about to send that man to prison for life, for Valjean's parole violation.

So there it is, Valjean has the chance to be permanently free by allowing someone else to pay the price for his crimes. But then, knowing that someone else was suffering for his sins, would he ever really be free?



“Who Am I?” he sings. Is he the criminal, prisoner #24601, the sum of all the bad things that he’s done? Is he Monsieur Le Mayor, earning the grace he’d received from the priest by doing honest work and being generous? Has he earned a new identity by doing good things?

What do you think? How does what you’ve done impact who you are?

The Christian tradition has multiple answers for that question. Unfortunately, some of them are quite harmful.

“...but what about the doctrine of Original Sin?”

Some of us have been told that our sin *is* our identity, that to be human is to be fallen, broken, separated from God. The Doctrine of Original Sin, it’s usually called, the idea that the sin of Genesis changed human nature from good to evil, separating us from God, fallen from Grace.

I don’t have time to thoroughly debunk that doctrine this morning, but I will point out that this idea was put together by the theologian Augustine, around 400 years after Jesus. Which doesn’t necessarily mean that Augustine got it wrong, just that he was addressing a very particular time and situation, and that context is often lost in modern interpretations of the Original Sin theology.

Incidentally, I heard Richard Rohr say on a podcast recently ([“From the Beginning”](#) // *Another Name for Everything* podcast; see also “Original Goodness” chapter 4 of Rohr’s latest book, [Universal Christ](#)) that Augustine was actually trying to relieve the guilt of individuals, not add to it. He was seeing that Christians felt all this personal responsibility for their sins, and his emphasis on Original Sin was intended to highlight that sin isn’t just my problem as an individual, this is all of us together.

I don’t have to carry my guilt alone, that was Augustine’s point, *because all of us are together as fallen humanity*. But in the centuries since Augustine, that’s gotten flipped back around, to say that because I’m part of this fallen humanity, I should feel horrible about who I am as an individual as well. Interesting.

Even more important to me, is realizing that because Augustine didn’t do his writing until the 400s, there is an entire half of the Christian tradition that has never taught the doctrine of Original Sin. The Orthodox Church doesn’t believe in a fallen humanity, they never have. Neither do the Jews, by the way. Not that sin doesn’t matter in those traditions, but it is not the core of who we are. In those traditions, we are made in the image of God and sin can never tarnish that or separate us from God’s love. Not Original Sin, but Original Blessing. (For more, check out [Danielle Shroyer](#) or [Brad Jersak](#) on the *Nomad Podcast*.)

Sorry if none of that means very much to you; it’s extremely important the folks to whom it is extremely important.

Whether you cared to follow that or not, hear this:



You are God's Beloved Child, one in whom God is well-pleased, created in the very image of the Divine. You are the Body of Christ, holy and whole. You are the Temple of God's Spirit, in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell. You are Christ's fiance, chosen and spoken for. You are loved, you are loved, you are loved.

There are many, many things that I don't know. But this one thing I know: You are God's Beloved.

And that will not change, no matter what you have done, no matter what you will do.

That is your identity, and that exists beyond whatever you've done.



There's this hidden nugget inside *Les Miserables* that I never knew until this week. In the novel, Victor Hugo explains Valjean's name like this: "His mother was named Jeanne Mathieu; his father was called Jean Valjean or Vlajean, and a contraction of "Voila Jean," "here's Jean."

Now that's a lot of Jeans, perhaps some of you whose family trees include ultra-Menno names like Peter Peters or Heinrich Heinrichs will appreciate the repetition.

But this isn't just an anecdote. The name Jean, like the English "John," ultimately goes back to the Biblical Hebrew name, *Yoch-ha-nan*. Which means, what?

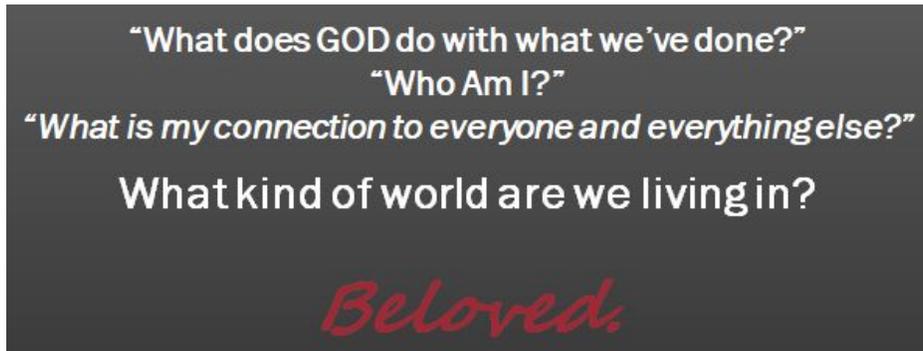
Grace. *Yoch-ha-nan*, YHWH is Gracious.

Jean Valjean, "Voila, Grace!" Grace, here comes Grace. Grace is everywhere around this man. He's singing "Who Am I?" the criminal outcast or the good mayor, but this whole time, his whole life is Grace.

Whatever he's done, the good and the bad, the whole thing is wrapped up in Grace. His journey isn't changing who he is; his journey is learning and accepting and living out of the Grace that underlies the whole thing.



You are God's Beloved, You are Grace.
And here's the thing. So are the rest of us.



I'm not the only one who bears the Image of the Divine, the Image of God is in every other person as well. I'm not the only part of the Body of Christ, the Body of Christ is all of us, together. I'm not the sole Temple of God's Spirit, the Whole Thing is God's Temple.

That's the weight of what I've done, that's why it matters.

That person I lied to, he was God's Beloved.
That other person I disrespected, she was made in the image of God.
That forest that we cut down, God loved that place.
Those people that suffer because of our greed, those are God's people!

What I've done has brought harm to God's other Beloveds. It puts me out of sync with the rest of God's Image in all of Creation.

When I was in Grade One, I was part of the children's choir at my church. This was a big deal in this church, we practiced twice a week for three or four months producing these fairly involved biblical musicals. I loved being old enough to be part of the choir with the big kids, I practiced hard on my own to make sure I knew all the words and had the right notes for every song.

So it bothered me when other kids goofed off or skipped practices. In my Grade One year, there was another kid that barely showed up for choir practices at all, but then the weekend of the big show he was there singing loudly trying to steal the spotlight. He didn't know any of the words or tunes, so he'd just kind of bumble along... "Hark the herald angels sing...garbled is the newborn KING" And he'd hold out that last note in every line longer than everyone else, just belting it out and beaming because everyone was looking at him.

Well that was just wrong. He was ruining this thing that we'd worked so hard at. And so I decided to fix it. At the end of each line, I'd just cover up his loud and long wrong notes by singing the right notes, louder and longer.

It didn't work out as well as I'd hoped, though people definitely didn't notice that Colby was messing up the choir. Because *I* was messing up the choir.

I put myself at the center of the story, and that put me at odds with everyone else and brought harm to the whole thing. The dissonance didn't start with me, it was there all along, but I was now contributing to the problem in a very loud way.

The problem wasn't that I offended the honor of the music writers. It wasn't that I missed the mark of what a musical *could be*; this was a children's musical and I was seven years old--, nobody expected perfection. The problem was that I was out of sync, out of tune with the rest of the choir.

And so there were consequences to my actions. Not because I was being punished, but because what I did had an impact on everyone else.

I received a lot of grace from the adults in the room. They let me be a silly Grade One kid. What I did didn't change who I was to them, it didn't make me less valuable. But there were still consequences. The whole choir was less than it could have been, less than harmonious, not in the proper relationship with one another. And that actually mattered. On a small-ish kids church choir level, anyway.

Relatively inconsequential example, but I think it scales up.

That's the trouble with what I've done. It doesn't change my identity, it doesn't change who I am to God, it doesn't make me unlovable or unforgivable or unclean.

But it does matter. And there are consequences. What I've done has brought harm to the other Beloveds. It has strained and broken my relationships with the rest of God's People. It puts me out of sync with Creation. And it puts me out of sync with who I am.

That's the story of what we've done. Individually and collectively, out of ignorance, out of self-centeredness, out of greed, out of immaturity, we're out of tune with the rest of the choir.

We are less than *shalom*.

And so to repent, then, is to work at getting back in sync. To learn to understand our context of interconnection with the rest of God's creation. To live out of a place that respects and adds value to all of those relationships,

Next week, Heather is going to lead us into considering what it means to own that path, to take responsibility for what we've done.

That's a big journey. I'd say it starts with recognition. If we don't see ourselves clearly, we won't be able to move towards right relationship with others.

So let that be your mantra for a while: Grace is everywhere. May God give us eyes to see.

“Voila! Grace!”