

-Many of you know I am a musical guy. I love to sing and perform, but I also love to attend musicals and theater. My favorite musical of all time has to be *Les Miserables*, based on the book by Victor Hugo. *Les Miserables* tells the story of redemption and faith in the midst of the tumultuous times of uprising and revolt. The story, for those of you who aren't familiar, follows the life of Jean Valjean, a commoner who ends up in jail for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family. He is released on parole from jail, but can't find a job at all and once again faces starvation. He decides to break his parole and leave for good. Many years later where the story picks up, Valjean (using a different name), through hard work and honest living becomes the owner of a large factory as well as mayor of a small town in the French countryside. However, the police inspector, Javert, is continually on the hunt down and "bring to justice" this famous criminal named Jean Valjean. The story follows the chase and tension between these two characters. Jean Valjean is forced to face his past and Javert is forced to ask: "what is justice?" It's an incredible story with incredible music written by Claude Michel-Schonberg.

-One of the big turning points in the story is when Jean Valjean decides to break parole, he is invited to stay with a local parish priest at his house. Fighting his own conscience, Valjean sneaks away from the house and steals as much of the priest's silver as he can. He is caught and brought back in the middle of the night by the police, thinking that they caught this thief red handed and that it was a matter of certainty that the priest would file charges. Instead, to the surprise of everyone, the priest makes up a story and says: "Well, of course I gave him the silver." He then turns around and says to Valjean: "But, you left in such a hurry, you forgot to take some of the good stuff" and stuffs more into Valjean's sack. With the police gone and Valjean sitting there dumbfounded, the priest says: "Now remember this my brother. See this as a higher plan. You must use this precious silver to become an honest man. For what can you steal if it is freely given?"

-For what can you steal if it is freely given? Our gospel reading from Mark today focuses on two stories: one, the healing of a wealthy pharisee named Jarius. The other, a sick woman who touched Jesus' cloak.

-I find I am drawn this week to the woman who is hemorrhaging. Actually, the gospel of Mark makes it pretty clear that she is menstruating uncontrollably. This would have been a large problem for her as not only would this have probably been very painful, but it also made her ritually "unclean" and thus would have banned her from much interaction with priests or synagogue at all. She would have been pretty isolated and from the account of this gospel, pretty desperate.

-She hears about Jesus and forces herself through the crowd right up next to Jesus in order to touch his garment. She was immediately healed it reads.

-The response of Jesus is fascinating: It reads: "Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how

can you say, "Who touched me?" He looked all around to see who had done it." You can really side with the disciples here: Jesus is walking through all of these people who pressing in on them and he says this strange thing: who touched me? I would be confused too.

-What is interesting when you look at the Greek is verse 30 which reads in our translation: "Aware that the power had gone forth from him." Another way to translate that sentence actually is: "Aware that the power was stolen from him." Now that thickens the plot a little bit.

-Did this woman "steal" Jesus' power? What is the gospel hinting at here?

-I was talking with Ken Bell, pastor of the Outdoor Ministries Church who uses the Lions Club Barn as their worship space on Sundays. Ken is also really involved with the kids at Bonner School and was one of the drivers in organizing a food truck coming to Bonner every day during the summer last year. This food truck was partly funded by a government grant, so they had to keep track of the number of lunches they had in stock. Ken was explaining to me that they had a really hard time reporting back the amounts of food that this truck would give out because at first they couldn't figure out why they were going through more lunches than they had recorded kids. Upon looking closer at things, they discovered that multiple kids were sneaking out 2-3 bag lunches from the truck. Ken was given the task of watching the kids more closely and confronting when he saw people taking more than they were told. He said it broke his heart because the answers these elementary and middle schoolers gave him were: "I'm bringing this extra lunch to my sister at home." or "I'm not sure if there is going to be dinner tonight so I'm bringing this back."

-What does Jesus say when the now healed woman who supposedly "steals his power" comes forward in fear? "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace." What makes this an even more crazy statement is that this is the ONLY time in the entire gospel of Mark that Jesus calls someone "daughter" (a very personal and intimate term in Greek culture). Here this woman, who is fearful and most likely thinking to herself she will be punished for her act of "stealing" gets something completely different. She gets named. She gets humanized. She gets blessed. For what can you steal if it is freely given?

-Ancient purity law in Jesus' time was very strict. It was very clear that if someone unclean touched you (most of the time as a priest), that uncleanness was transferred to you. Priests were always wary of being made "unclean by someone" because there was so much effort that had to be made in order to become ritually clean again. But here, that gets reversed. It is the woman who "steals" who is made clean! Jesus' (we'll call it) "ritually cleanliness" flows to her, not the other way around. This is a huge statement against the purity laws and customs of the day. Maybe it's also a statement for us in rethinking our norms.

-In our “post-enlightenment” time period, we live in a world plagued by individualism. We especially feel this living in Montana right? Don’t tread on me. No Trespassing. Violators will be prosecuted. We have these crazy public debates with stupid taglines: “those people are stealing our jobs”, or “they are bringing crime”.

-How do we respond when we are approached and touched by the “unclean”? Do we see it as an invitation into relationship or as a theft of our personal space? Are we as a church, just like Jesus, called to redefine “stealing”?

-Our bishop talks about the most common disease affecting our Montana churches right now is: “we-are-a-small-congregation-itis”. What I think she means by this is many Lutheran churches in our synod are so focused on making budget, that they can’t get themselves to do other things beyond that budget. The number one excuse she hears is: “well, we are a small congregation. What impact can we really have on _____ issue?” This, I believe, is that enlightenment individualism reincarnated among our churches: we just got to hold onto what is ours. If we don’t get touched by the unclean, then we’ll be OK. Except, our bishop says, this is a complete lie. Our small congregations can and do make a huge difference in the name of Jesus Christ all over this state.

-You know how much we raised in our special Red Cup offering last Sunday for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services? \$5 shy of \$1,000. This “little congregation” did that.

-For what can you steal (or hold onto) if it is freely given? May we continue to do Christ’s work and work to see everything we do as invitation to relationship and wholeness remembering what we indeed freely given to us in the first place. Amen.