

**The Message for March 25, 2012**  
**John 12:20-33**  
***Restoring Relationships Through Forgiveness***  
**The Rev. Dr. R. K Miller**

Victor Hugo's novel, "Les Miserables" is a powerful story of restoration through forgiveness. A man named, Jean Valjean, spends 19 years in prison for stealing bread for his starving sister, and for trying to escape.

When Valjean is released from prison, his ex-con status alienates him from society. He cannot find work. He cannot even find a place to sleep. He lives on the streets, nurturing his bitterness. One night, Valjean knocks on the door of a local priest, Bishop Myriel, looking for a place to sleep. The Bishop graciously welcomes him in, feeds him, and gives him a bed for the night.

But after years of sleeping on nothing but wooden planks and cobblestones, Valjean finds that he cannot sleep in a comfortable bed. So he gets up and steals most of the Bishop's silver. The Bishop catches him. Valjean punches the Bishop in the face and runs away, only to be caught by the local police and brought back to the Bishop's home.

What happens in that encounter changes Valjean's life forever. Let's watch:

(Video clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9GtPqdctcc&feature=related>)

The Bishop said to him, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil. With this silver I've bought your soul. I've ransomed you from fear and hatred. And now I give you back to God." From that moment on, Valjean's life is changed. Grace and forgiveness have that kind of power. Would you have been able to do what the Bishop Myriel did – offering grace and forgiveness?

It's safe to say that we live in a broken world. We are broken people in a broken society with broken relationships – all longing to be restored. Is there a broken relationship in your life right now that needs to be restored?

The Bible begins with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden and describes how that brokenness came to be. The rest of the Bible is filled with stories about restoring what was broken in the Garden. The last book of the Bible, Revelation (especially chapters 21-22), describes what that Garden will look like when God's work of restoration is finally complete.

God tried to restore our relationship with a covenant, a promise. God gave humanity 10 laws carved in stone, and said that if the people would obey these 10 laws, God would be their God and they would be God's people. Disobedience describes what happened in the Garden, obedience was seen as the way for restoration.

But, it didn't work. It didn't work because we have an obedience problem. We're human. The law does nothing to help us be obedient. The more the law says, "Don't do this!" the more something inside of us screams, "Do it anyway!"

Do you remember the show "Candid Camera"? I remember the reruns. One time they put a sign on a fence that read, "Wet Paint. Do not touch!" It was amazing to see how many people would walk by and touch the fence. It was funny and sad all at the same time because we all have an obedience problem.

That first covenant didn't work because it was based on the law. The law cannot change our hearts. God is looking for love, not the fulfillment of a list of does and don'ts.

God loves us and wants to be in a relationship with us. A relationship based on fear – driven by the law – will not last. A relationship based on faith – guided by love – can stand the test of time – forever! Jesus makes that relationship possible. He is the new covenant. He fulfills the law for us. He is obedient.

In our reading for today some Greeks, non-church people, wish to see Jesus. In John's gospel seeing is believing. It suggests they have come to see and believe in Jesus. So Jesus talks about his death, his crucifixion, when he is lifted up on the cross for all the world to see and believe in him. Jesus is for everyone.

Through the cross all people are drawn to Jesus. Through the cross God's restoration is becoming a reality. Like Jean Valjean, we've been ransomed from fear and hatred, set free, made new, bought with a price and brought back to God. We are empowered to live not by fear, but by faith. Because of Jesus and his cross our broken relationships can be restored through forgiveness.

How would you complete this sentence? Forgiveness is... Here are 7 ways to finish that sentence.

1. **Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting.** We've been hurt and we carry those scars with us wherever we go. We remember so we don't forget to forgive.
2. **Forgiveness is not about liking the offender.** We do not need to feel warm and fuzzy toward the person who hurt us just because we forgive them. We might but we don't have to.
3. **Forgiveness is not an instant restoration.** Trust needs to be reestablished. The relationship starts over. It's now different. It's not the same. It can't be.
4. **Forgiveness is a process.** There are people we may need to forgive every day over and over again and again in order to keep our heart free and clean.

5. **Forgiveness is about mercy, not justice.** God's forgiveness does not depend on our worthiness but on God's mercy. We are to forgive even when the other person isn't worthy, or even sorry for what they've done.
6. **Forgiveness is about letting go.** It means letting go of our grudges, our bitterness, our anger, our hurt, and our desire for revenge. Holding a grudge becomes the baggage that we carry around with us.
7. **Forgiveness is a gift we give to ourselves.** We benefit the most when we forgive, because it sets us free from the baggage of bitterness.

I don't know about you but I find it's a lot easier to be angry than it is to forgive. I want to hold on to the grudge and when I do it becomes – baggage. If I don't forgive, I start carrying that baggage around with me and it gets in the way of life.

We get this baggage from what others say to us or do to us. It often starts when we are young. Someone in school or on the playground says something like – you're dumb or you're ugly or fat or you can't be in our group. We get offended. It's a little thing – a little grudge – a little baggage. We pick it and carry it with us wherever we go.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” That's the biggest lie we teach our children. Words can hurt. They can cut deep. And if we carry around the hurtful words of other people, we are collecting baggage. (pick up 1<sup>st</sup> suitcase)

We try to find our self-worth from what other people say and think about us. But self-worth is based on our relationship with Jesus and not what others say about us.

Sometimes our friends betray us. They take advantage of us and they do things that hurt us. They're just trying to get through life like we are. And sometimes they make poor choices. We need to learn to forgive them or we pick up more baggage. (pick up 2<sup>nd</sup> suitcase).

The truth about baggage is this – we don't need others to load it on. We do a good job of loading it on ourselves when we compare ourselves to others. If I could be successful like he is or she is. If I was gifted or talented like he or she is. But I'm not. I'm a loser. I'm no good. We tell ourselves. When we think that way we pick up more baggage. (pick up 3<sup>rd</sup> suitcase)

Sometimes our loved ones load baggage onto us. They don't mean to but they do. And we take it on. Maybe it's something our parents said or did – a harsh word of criticism when we needed a word of comfort. Parents don't mean to hurt us. They have their own baggage. We can forgive our parents or we can carry that baggage with us too. (pick up 4<sup>th</sup> suitcase)

Then something else happens and you pick that up too. This happens over and over again and again. And we fail to deal with it. You hang on to it carrying it with you

wherever you go. And you become a tired, bitter, angry, revengeful... We try to dump our baggage onto others but that never goes well. We say hurtful, mean and nasty, sarcastic things. We have a tough time admitting when we are wrong. We take out our frustrations on those around us. Baggage...

And then there is that one. My sins... My secret sins... (pick up 5<sup>th</sup> suitcase)

I tell myself I'm okay. I've got it under control. Who am I kidding truth is the baggage has control of me.

Then I hear the words of Jesus who says, "I've come that you may have life and have it abundantly." I don't know about you but this doesn't feel much like abundant life to me.

I look at the cross. I remember that I am a story of restoration through forgiveness. Jesus died for me. I don't have to be stuck with the baggage. I remember Jesus who says, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest."

So I turn to God and say, "God would you take this baggage from me? I'm miserable and I can't live this way anymore. Please... take it!" (drop all the suitcases) You know what? He takes it... Amen.