

On Charity and Justice
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This week I've been thinking about charity and justice. Last Sunday, after watching the Patriots, of course, I watched *Les Miserables* win big at the Golden Globes. Hugh Jackman won Best Actor in a Musical or Comedy, Anne Hathaway won Best Supporting Actress in a Musical or Comedy, and *Les Miserables* won one of the Best Picture awards. I found *Les Mis* to be incredibly moving. After seeing it on stage, I didn't expect to be that impressed, but I was. The raw emotion of the actors is something to behold, singing the music live while they filmed was an experiment that paid off—I lost count of how many times I cried.

And one of the scenes that really got to me was when Jean Valjean goes to the Bishop's home in utter desperation, steals the silver table settings, and is saved from returning to prison. I've spoken of this story before; it's one of the most famous scenes in *Les Mis*. Valjean converts to Christianity after the Bishop's act of compassion, but seeing Hugh Jackman as Jean Valjean wrestle with how this charitable act changed his life is remarkable. Jackman goes from almost shouting to crying as he's singing his soliloquy. He wonders, "Yet why did I allow this man to touch my soul and teach me love. He treated me like any other. He gave me his trust, he called me brother. My life he claims for God above, can such things be? For I had come to hate this world, this world that always hated me."^[1]

In the story, Valjean makes off with the silver in the night, but when he is taken back to the Bishop's home and thrown down on the floor by police officers, the Bishop places two silver candlesticks in Valjean's hands. The Bishop says, "But my friend you left so early, surely something slipped your mind, you forgot I gave these also. Would you leave the best behind?"^[2] So it's not just that the Bishop saves him from returning to prison, he gives him the most valuable silver pieces. The act of charity is taken one step further. In the movie Valjean doesn't sell these candlesticks, he reverently places them on an altar in his home. These candlesticks stand as sentinels, as a constant reminder of the Bishop's saving act and his acceptance of a second chance.

This story is reminiscent of Jesus turning water into wine at that wedding in Cana in the Gospel of John. In Jesus' day, weddings often lasted a week and family and friends gathered at the groom's home and were hosted by his family. Guests would sometimes contribute provisions here and there, but the host was expected to be generous. If you didn't have much, weddings could be an economic hardship, and hospitality was huge in the ancient world. If you didn't adequately provide for the needs of your guests, it was shameful for the host.^[3] So in some ways, by Jesus contributing wine to this week-long wedding celebration, he acts as a good guest. Jesus also protects the reputation of the groom who ran out of wine. No one would leave that wedding saying that the groom wasn't a good host and that his lack of hospitality was shameful for himself or his family. Jesus saves the day in many ways.

The interesting thing is that Jesus doesn't turn water into bad wine or even mediocre wine, Jesus turns water into the good stuff. That's why the steward says to the groom, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."^[4] I'm asking you to not get hung up on this miracle and whether it actually happened because the metaphorical meaning is that Jesus gives the best gift he can, he gives the best of himself. He doesn't give a C effort, average, mediocre—Jesus gives an A performance, he gives his friends all that he's got. In his actions, he shows that they deserve the best wine possible as a sign of God's extravagant grace and love for them.

It's reminiscent of a story once told about Alexander the Great. Supposedly there was once a beggar by the side of the road Alexander encountered on his travels. The man was poor and suffering and Alexander felt compassion and threw out several gold coins as he rode by. Some of Alexander's companions were surprised that the Emperor would give this man so much money. They asked why he didn't give the man copper coins as opposed to gold coins worth a small fortune. Alexander the Great responded by saying, "Copper coins would suit the beggar's need, but gold coins suit Alexander's giving."^[5]

All of these stories bring to light a conflict we face in Christianity as we wrestle with the difference between charity and justice. They bring up economic questions and how wealth is distributed. The great Christian pastor and theologian William Sloane Coffin once said, "Had I but one wish for the churches of America I think it would be that they come to see the difference between charity and justice. Charity is a matter of personal attributes; justice, a matter of public policy. Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice, justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it. Charity in no way affects the status quo, while justice leads inevitably to political confrontation."^[6] So were the actions of the bishop, Jesus, and Alexander the Great acts of charity or justice? Or were they both?

The truth is, Jean Valjean would not have stolen bread and been sentenced to prison in the first place if he and his family had enough to eat. He wouldn't have stolen the bishop's silver if he had been able to find work upon getting released from prison. Did it make these instances of stealing okay? No, of course not. But Valjean was up against some systemic injustice throughout his life. He uses his second chance to help people, not just by giving them food and alms, but by opening up a factory and providing folks with jobs. Valjean spends the rest of his days acting justly and charitably partly because the bishop's actions had elements of both charity and justice.

The Bishop could have easily told the police that Jean Valjean stole his silver, but he chose mercy over sending this man back to prison. Perhaps the Bishop had some issues with the system and the forced labor prisoners had to perform to repay their debt to society. Perhaps the Bishop questioned a society where starving people were sent to prison for stealing a loaf of bread in the first place. Perhaps this was a quiet way to practice some civil disobedience in an unjust society.

In Jesus' case, we don't exactly know why the groom ran out of wine. Maybe it was poor planning, maybe his family and guests were big drinkers, or maybe he didn't have enough money to provide for the needs of his guests. Jesus' act of generosity is an act of charity, but by giving in abundance and giving the best stuff around, Jesus lifts up the worth of all those gathered for this wedding. Turning water into the best wine and affirming the groom and the guests seems to be a bit about justice. Jesus always spoke of the last being first and the first being last, maybe this act of charity is a sign of the justice Jesus upholds in his upside-down Kingdom.

Finally, we all know that Alexander the Great was a great military leader; he was brilliant and did have moments where he showed compassion. But this man Alexander encounters by the side of the road is apparently homeless and begging somewhere in Alexander's Empire. By giving gold to this man, he is certainly being extremely charitable. Yet this isn't exactly an act of justice because Alexander does nothing to address the system, the system he rules, that causes this man to be begging in the first place. All of these stories hopefully bring to light the difference between charity and justice—we need both in the Church and in this world.

I'd like to end by looking at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s helpful speeches about justice. We may forget that one of his last causes before he was killed was the fight against poverty. In 1967 Dr.

King said, "It's much easier to integrate a bus than it is to eradicate slums. It is much easier to guarantee the right to vote than it is to guarantee an annual income. It is much easier to integrate a public park than it is to create jobs . . . If a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty, and the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists. We're coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we're coming to engage in dramatic, nonviolent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment, to make the invisible visible." [7]

I would imagine these words were inspiring and yet difficult to hear in 1967, and they aren't any easier today. Like William Sloane Coffin, Dr. King knew the difference between charity and justice, and he knew that in order for justice to be a priority for our nation we would need to change the way we operate, and maybe our priorities would need to change too. In some of the stories I shared with you today we can see that it's nearly impossible for someone to have full dignity as a child of God and yet not have access to certain resources. In the Church and in this nation we do have the power to meet people in those places of injustice and respond with generous hearts. We have the power to not just give a few gold coins or good wine or silver candlesticks, but to take our charity to the next level by seeking justice for all God's children. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] "Valjean's Soliloquy" in *Les Miserables*.

[2] "The Bishop" in *Les Miserables*.

[3] Kate Huey, "Extravagant Sign," *UCC Weekly Seeds*, January 13, 2013

[4] John 2:10.

[5] Alexander the Great, <http://bible.org/illustration/alexander-great>

[6] William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, 62.

[7] "Poverty, Martin Luther King's Last Cause" as featured on National Public Radio, October 16, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/10/16/141395743/poverty-martin-luther-kings-last-cause>