

The Gift of the Candlesticks

Isaiah 11:1-9

(Judging with righteousness; bringing peace.)

Romans 5:15-17

(Jesus Christ is the free gift of the grace of God.)

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Redlands First United Methodist Church

December 14, 2008

Preface: (at altar)

When our Worship Committee saw my title for this upcoming sermon, they asked whether I knew about our church's candlesticks. "Knew about them?" I asked. They told me, and I want briefly to share the specialness of our candlesticks with you, or remind you, if you already know. These candlesticks were made from chimes in the sanctuary that stood here and was burned in 1967. This base is made from actual slices from the chimes. The sticks themselves are formed from the melted brass of the chimes. Beautiful, for sure, they are symbolic, connecting the old with the new, that which was lost with the future sanctuary that stands here today.

I'm going to tell you a story. It's a story about a gift of candlesticks. Some of you know this story from reading *Les Miserables* (if you're an ambitious reader). Others of us have seen the movie or a stage production of *Les Mis*. The story is a complete sermon in itself; however, I will not resist the temptation to add my comments.

Jean Valjean was poor when he was a child. Very hungry one day, he stood looking at the bakery window, and he realized that only a pane of glass separated him from food. He stole bread, was quickly arrested, and served 19 years doing hard labor in a rock quarry. When he was finally released, he was given a "yellow" letter as identification. Although Jean Valjean had not learned to read, he knew that the yellow "I.D." letter communicated that he had been a convict.

Very hungry again in his life, he knocked on the door of a convent. The Bishop's housekeeper answered and was about to turn him away, when the Bishop welcomed Jean Valjean and gave him dinner and a room for the night. Before going to his room that night, Jean Valjean told the Bishop he would "be a new man in the morning."

Quite early the next morning, Valjean awoke and went to where he had noticed that the Bishop's silverware was stored **[hold up cloth bag and put in some silver spoons]**. He filled a cloth bag with the spoons, forks, and other silverware he had used the night before. **[Demonstrate.]** The Bishop awoke while all this occurred, so he actually *saw* Valjean taking these items. When the Bishop encountered Valjean, Valjean, desperate, struck the Bishop, knocking him down, and then he fled.

It was not long before police returned to the convent with the handcuffed Valjean. The police informed the Bishop that Valjean told them the Bishop had *given* him the silver! The Bishop walked toward Valjean and said, "I'm very angry with you. **[Go get the candlesticks from the altar.]** I told you to take the candlesticks, too, and you went off with out them." The police were amazed; they let Valjean go.

Standing eye to eye with each other, the Bishop says with compassion to Valjean, “You had said you would be a new man.” The Bishop explains how much the candlesticks will sell for and tells Valjean, “You *are* now a new man, God’s man.”

My husband John showed portions of this film over the years, with each new group of youth Sunday School students, so our family watched the film several times. For years I thought this particular scene—**the gift of the candlesticks**--conveyed grace, mercy, forgiveness, new life, unconditional love, and extreme compassion. It is a gift of love, of wanting the very best for the other. It’s a humongous gift that outweighs any past bondage to pain, hurt, bad behavior, or even over-attachment to legalistic rules. In other words, this gift of the candlesticks IS the message of today’s Romans passage—the gift of Jesus Christ’s grace.

This week it dawned on me that there were two gifts in the present of the candlesticks. One was indeed grace, new life, and freedom from any bondage. But, another was the physical candlesticks! By golly, the Bishop gave Valjean the candlesticks so that he could sell them and then have a *real chance* of making a fresh start. Valjean could not start from nothing; that put him right back into his childhood poverty. ***The Bishop gave him tangible help as well as grace/love.***

When our family was in Ohio, at least twice a year we Sunday School teachers took our classes to visit those in nursing homes, where our children gave the people hand-made little gifts. Quite frankly, our children did not like that tradition. They didn’t like to have to go to the old-people’s homes. You all certainly realize that we Sunday School teachers orchestrated those visits in order to offer compassion more than the little hand-made tangible objects. I sometimes wondered whether we were right to “require” the classes to go, when our own children were reluctant. I was surprised, though, years later, when our children spoke about how those visits had affected them. *Our children* said they themselves were changed for better. Evidently I was mixed up about *who was giving a gift to whom*. The gifts really went both ways.

I guess it’s possible to give a tangible gift without compassion. We could give a “hand-out” without feeling compassionate. I guess it’s even possible to put gifts under our own Christmas trees that are “perfunctory presents.” However, I imagine that the *vast majority* of the presents we give and receive this Christmas are really two gifts—the tangible item and the love that is intended to go along.

Our daughter Alex has a wonderful explanation that accompanies most of her gifts. I think she inherited that trait from her mom. She might explain: “I stood at the counter, and I wasn’t sure. Then I went to such and such a store. I decided on this, and I hope you like it; you can take it back if you prefer something else.” What is she really saying? **“These are candlesticks.”** That is, **“I’ve tried to figure out what tangible thing to give you that also communicates my love.”**

I noticed lyrics to a Country song as I flipped through a magazine in a waiting room recently. You will not hear me refer to Country songs very often as I preach, and I have no idea how this song sounds, but I was attracted to the words—in relation to the gift of the candlesticks. The song is, *You Got Gold*¹: “you got gold; Gold inside of you; you got gold, Gold inside of you; Well I got some Gold inside me too.”

The Bishop in effect sang this song to Jean Valjean. The gift of the candlesticks communicated: “I see gold inside of you, Valjean.”

Les Miserables continues. Jean Valjean does find gold inside himself. He becomes an excellent businessman and runs a factory, but not just any factory. People there are treated humanely, lovingly. For example, when Valjean discovers that a young woman is pregnant and not married, he helps her. Eventually, she dies, but he raises her daughter for the next sixteen years or so. Over and over, Valjean demonstrates that the **gift of the candlesticks, the gift of grace** has stuck—Valjean *is* a new man. He has compassion for all others—even those who would seek to hurt him.

How are we Bishops or Jean Valjeans for one another? How are we bearers of the grace of Jesus Christ to one another? I bet that many of the words, gestures, prayers, kindnesses, perspectives that some of you have shared in this very room, or that one, or the next one, have altered the lives of others who are also in this very room.

Consider the beautiful poem from the Prophet Isaiah that we heard today. It would seem that lambs and lions not killing each other, snakes and children staying out of each other's way would be "good enough." That's not what Isaiah imagined. He envisioned Lambs and lions together; snakes and children playing—how absurd. How beautiful. How absurdly beautiful. God's breakthroughs for humanity come through things we least expect—through candlesticks, through crazy big expectations, through a child born poor, in a stable.

The image proposed in the Book of Isaiah and the faith-statement of Romans as well as the theme of *Les Mis* point to HUGE REVERSALS: from convict to free man, from antagonism to peaceable living, from feeling filled with "sin" or "brokenness" or "estrangement" to feeling accepted, loved, even blessed.

A couple of you have shared with me a kind of reversal. During our Nominating Committee season, you have decided to say, "No" to a request to a particular responsibility, and that "no" was a major reversal for you—you usually tend to say "yes." But that's not the end of the story. You were shocked at how gracefully "your" "no" was heard. When we face limitations, say "no," and are fully accepted, we feel relief. When this happens, we have received the gift of grace. Others have been able to say "yes" to requests and are a little surprised at themselves. Earlier, they would have said, "No." What grace, to be asked, to say yes, and to be accepted. Reversals. Grace. The Gift of the Candlesticks.

What exactly was promised in Isaiah? 12 maids a milking? 9 ladies dancing? No! Isaiah promised gifts, all of which began "the spirit of": *The spirit of wisdom and understanding; the spirit of counsel and might; the spirit of knowledge and awe of God.*

Wisdom, understanding, counsel, wise might, knowledge, awe of God—quite a set of candlesticks, gifts for us, in this absurdly beautiful prophecy.

It doesn't help, does it, if gifts are sitting in the post office, undelivered? A gift isn't given if it still sits under the Christmas tree. **A gift is a process that is only completed when it is accepted.** The Bishop gave Valjean the candlesticks, and Valjean accepted them, sold them, and became a "new man," that is Valjean accepted the complete gift—the grace and fresh start that came along with the tangible objects.

I am declaring for you, here, today: Here are the candlesticks [**lift them toward congregation**] you need. What do you need in order to feel deeply loved? Here it is; it's a gift for you today. This gift is not just what you want, it's even more, much more than you ever wanted, or even ever considered. The same God of the Bishop who knew what to give Valjean is the God today who knows what to give you!

May our mouths drop open and our hearts fill up as we accept this gift that Christ so freely gives. May we remember this gift whenever we feel needy.

Jean Valjean was not expecting unbelievable love—he was ready for punishment. But he got the candlesticks—*the gift of grace and tangible help*. He accepted the gifts, accepted them so thoroughly that he gave this gift to others. May you and I, however surprised we are with whatever “candlesticks” we are given re-gift them forward!

[At the time of the Benediction, ask congregation to notice the tiny candles that are in the pews and to give them to each other until everyone holds a candle, to remind them of the gift of candlesticks.]

¹ by Prine and Keith Sykes