

## Sermon Pentecost 16 B: 9/12/2021

About 30 years ago I offered to get tickets for us to see “Les Misérables.” Mike was very agreeable. I tried reading it but 1000 pages – it took me a long time, but I did get through it eventually. What about you, did you read the book or see the show or the movie “Les Misérables”? There is a scene in it where the hero Jean Val Jean is in a court room. He had formerly served many years doing brutal work in a penal colony and had been released but shortly after his release he had stolen a little boy’s coin. Because of this Javert, the police officer who knew his history, wanted to throw him back into the penal colony. Jean Val Jean had been free for many years but realized that Javert was on his trail. He was told that a man had been arrested who was “Jean Val Jean.” Jean Val Jean had gone to his trial. He had a dilemma. Should he let this innocent man be wrongfully convicted? If he did then Jean Val Jean would forever be free of the suspicions of Javert, or should he announce his own identity? Could he live with himself forever knowing another man had been wrongfully convicted? In the end his tortured conscience made him confess that it was he who was the real Jean Val Jean. From that moment he was a fugitive escaping from the harsh and incessant pursuit of Javert. But he was himself and not living a lie. He had confessed. That is the usual meaning of the word “confession” is it not? Someone admits their wrong doing, or maybe their good deed. “Yes, I did it, it was me.” You may have memories of time when you confessed a wrong doing, or maybe guilt when you should have confessed but failed to do so.

But confession can be understood in other ways too. When someone shares what is on his or her heart, that is also a confession. St Augustine, the renowned Christian scholar from the late 4th/early 5<sup>th</sup> century wrote a book called “The Confessions.” He shared the struggles of his life before his conversion to Christianity and how that made a huge change for him. He is reputed to have said, “Give me chastity, but not yet” He even shared that as a teen he and friends had stolen pears from an orchard, but to his guilty conscience, they did not taste good. Turning his life to Jesus Christ gave him a new life and his writings have influenced millions of people throughout the centuries.

“Confession” can also mean a proclamation of feeling. You can confess your love or admiration for another. If you ever proposed marriage to someone maybe you felt that was a confession of love, or maybe the word confession was not on your heart and mind. But it can mean an outpouring of what is inside you. How you use words, determine what to say is and has always been important to you, I am sure. You communicate mostly with words. I say that because today and especially in this time of covid, you have probably not been near many people, so communicating with hugs, using body language has not been a very big part of your life. I have friends who said they existed for over a year without hugging anyone. Even before covid many of the younger generations spent far more time communicating remotely than in-person. So, I am sure using words are of HUGE importance to you. Did you listen to what writer James said about this in our Epistle today? James likens the tongue to a fire which can set a forest ablaze. Have you ever thought of what you say as being that effective and catastrophic? One theologian calls gossip, “loveless speech.” It is definitely something you might reflect upon today. When you confess something, proclaim something, make a comment about someone, do you say it with love? Maybe that should be your confession mantra for the future. “Say everything with love.” I invite you to think about the times when that has not been true, confess to yourself. How did it feel when you said something that was not said with love? What can you do to help improve the situation now? Again, that is something for you to reflect upon.

In our Gospel today Peter made a bold statement, what has been called his “confession.” Jesus asked a soul-searching question and Peter responded. Initially Jesus had asked, “who do people say that I am?” It is always easy to talk about other people, isn’t it? But Jesus used that as a lead into the question he really wanted them to respond to, “Who do you say that I am?” “Who do YOU say that I am?” An answer to this question was a confession of belief, and Peter gave it. But what about you? If you are asked to answer that question – the one asking, who do you say Jesus is to you and for you – how would you answer? As you reflect on the question reflect on this confession by the theologian C.S. Lewis, who wrote in “Mere Christianity”

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

So, you, like the disciples need to ponder the question, who do you say Jesus is. Peter impulsively responded in what we call a confession of his belief. A belief I am sure which would have been confirmed by each disciple if any of them had been brave enough to respond. You may have noticed that as soon as Peter made his confession, Jesus instructed them all to keep silent about this. I suggest Jesus demanded they did that because he knew he was not the sort of Messiah all the Jews were hoping for. They wanted a king figure, a military leader who would enable them to be rid of Roman rule and life of subservience. Jesus knew his Messiahship was very different. He was a servant leader, leading with compassionate, unconditional love and not by military force. Thus, Jesus rebuked Peter sharply when Peter tried to challenge him about his description of how his life was going to end, Then Jesus addressed everyone near him, disciples, and the crowd with very carefully chosen words. He told them that any of them who wished to be his follower needed to take up their cross and follow him.

How does that sound to you? What is following Jesus like to you? When you read and reread what he said about what it means to follow him you may feel very challenged. He demands that you give up trying to gain success as others see it. It means not always looking to achieve social status, power, wealth, everything that the world counts as gain. It means very simply ignoring all that and living the way he described. It means living for him and no longer for yourself. That is what is so challenging and is a way of saying that you are taking up your cross.

You might have been taught by various clergy or Sunday school teachers about original sin. The simplest way to think of it is to understand it is your selfishness. Your wish to put your own desires first. You developed these desires when you were very young; you did not need to be taught to always want the best for yourself and want your own needs satisfied. Taking up your cross means thinking about others and putting them first in all situations. This is the demand Jesus makes on you when you confess your faith in him. It is Jesus who gave his life so that you can live in him and live a life that can be full of love. A life full of his love will enable you to share that love in such a way that your life is the richest it can possibly be.

When I was serving as a seminarian at St John's Boonton, I attended the evening meetings. The treasurer was Leah. She had served on the vestry and several times as warden, but the previous treasurer had resigned and there was no treasurer, so she took on that role. She attended all the meetings too. Leah needed oxygen support and carried her oxygen supply to every meeting. We called it her cross; she had decided her health challenges did not need to prevent her from serving others and so she carried her oxygen, her cross, for each meeting. She was a wonderful and faithful disciple of Jesus.

I invite you today to challenge yourself to confess your faith in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Remember he offered you a life worth living if you choose to follow him. Confess your faith in him, acclaim him now and forever as your Lord and Savior, today tomorrow and forever. Amen.