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# LAKESIDE CHURCH OF CHICAGO

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The

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IN CHRIST AND FOR CHRIST - TO KNOW CHRIST AND TO MAKE HIM KNOWN

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June 18, 2007

## HAS THE STRUGGLE BEEN LOST?

“Conscience is the labyrinth of illusion, desire, and pursuit, the furnace of dreams, the repository of thoughts of which we are ashamed; it is the pandemonium of sophistry, the battlefield of passions. To peer at certain moments into the withdrawn face of a human being in the act of reflection, to see something of what lies beyond their outward silence, is to discern struggle on a Homeric scale, conflicts of dragons and hydras, aerial hosts as in Milton, towering vistas as in Dante. The infinite space that each man carries within himself, wherein despairingly he contrasts the movements of his spirit with the acts of his life, is an overpowering thing.” (Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*)

Jean Valjean had been leading a transformed life for eight years now. Changing his name was symbolic of the changed course of his life, inaugurated by the divine work of grace through the merciful and generous act of a humble bishop. Coming to Montreuil-sur-mer, this ex-convict who had spent nineteen wretched years in a barbarous French prison developed a new process for the manufacture of beads in the local industry, resulting in a dramatic reduction in the cost of production. Not only did this increase profits, but it boosted wages. Valjean became wealthy and soon became mayor of the town.

Madeleine (Valjean) was a paragon of virtue and integrity. And his cover was nearly foolproof, except for a local police detective, Javert, who suspected that the distinguished mayor was really a discreditable criminal. Javert’s obsession to verify his misgiving was deterred only after another man was positively identified as Jean Valjean in a nearby town. The new Valjean had been arrested for stealing apples, and guilty of parole violation would certainly end up in prison for the rest of his life. Not only had three former cellmates testified to his identity, but even Javert was convinced the thief was the former prisoner.

When Javert humbly confessed the whole affair to Madeleine, the mayor was confronted with a perplexing moral predicament. To do nothing, the most natural and easiest thing to do, would mean the final demise of Jean Valjean. Madeleine would no longer need to worry that someday his mask would be shaken loose to expose Valjean. Surely his substitute was already guilty of enough crime to warrant whatever punishment he received in Madeleine’s place. Had not destiny brought him to this threshold of freedom as a reward for the genuine reformation of his life?

On the other hand, integrity had become so firmly rooted in his soul that it made vehement protest to a strategy of silence, camouflaging deceit and injustice. Could he wittingly permit an innocent man to suffer penalties he did not deserve, especially when some of those penalties bore his name alone? (Valjean had committed several other crimes prior to his arrival in Montreuil-sur-mer.)

And yet, to correct the situation would mean revealing his true identity, ensuring a return to prison. Of greater consequence than his own well-being was the future of the critically ill Fantine and her young daughter who had fallen into the guardianship of a contemptible couple. He had assumed a noble responsibility for this woman and her child, and there was no other person who would replace him.

The trial for the mistaken Valjean was to take place the following day. It would be an arduous trip for a horse pulling a carriage, but it could be done. Madeleine secured the horse and carriage, and after a sleepless night left in the morning darkness. The trip was fraught with obstacles, including a detour and a broken wheel. With each setback the mayor’s conscience engaged in new conflicts. It appeared as if God Himself was opposing his efforts. At one point it seemed that the journey had actually become impossible, and to abandon it was the only reasonable recourse. But his conscience drove him to pursue another means.

He finally pulled in to the town in late evening. Surely the trial was concluded, and the final transfer of name was complete. Light still danced from the courthouse windows. The Jean Valjean case was currently being heard. He asked for permission to enter the crowded courtroom, and when the judge learned of the eminent mayor’s presence he gave orders for him to be given a seat behind the judge’s bench to witness the proceedings. In the dark passage to the courtroom Madeleine struggle with his conscience once again surfaced. “Whichever way he turned, he faced the same alternatives - to cling to his paradise and become a devil, or become a saint by going back to hell. In God’s name, what was he to do?”

Hugo devoted over fifty pages of his epic tale to this monumental conflict of the soul. In a generation past the immaterial aspects of humanness occupied much analysis. Dostoevsky wrote an entire novel examining a man whose buried conscience is unearthed after he commits a murder to test a theory (*Crime and Punishment*). But this was in a day when morality still had immovable foundations. Today the individual constructs his own moral residence on pontoons in order to follow the currents of truth.

“To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled” (Titus 1:15). It is in this “infinite space” that humans “contrast the movements of their spirits with the acts of their lives.” The more the contrast, the greater the defilement. Our generation desperately needs more Valjeans, who courageously engage the moral and ethical enigmas of life, who honor character over convenience, virtue over personal values, and the good over the self.

*Pastor Stan*