

The Gospel According to Disney sermon series
Beauty and the Beast – 2 Cor. 5:16-21
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Who's your favorite Disney princess? Is it Snow White, the fairest of them all? How about Cinderella, the blonde bombshell with the tiny feet? Or maybe the narcoleptic Aurora, better known as Sleeping Beauty? I bet if you asked 10 little girls and boys their favorite princess, at least half of them would name Belle, the female protagonist of the iconic "Beauty and the Beast." And yet, did you realize that Belle is about the most un-princessy of all the Disney princesses?

The original story comes to us as "La Belle et Le Bete," written by a female French novelist and published in 1740. While I didn't read it, I'm pretty sure it didn't contain singing candelabras and clocks. Only the magic of Disney can add that kind of special touch. As we continue our "Gospel According to Disney" sermon series today, we'll look at what God may have to say to us through this "tale as old as time."

Let's put the movie in its context before we open the castle doors to peek inside. "Beauty and the Beast" was released in 1991 and made over \$400 million worldwide. It was the second movie in the Disney resurgence, which was kicked off by 1989's "The Little Mermaid." That movie was immensely popular – I've already confessed my crush on Ariel – but also faced some criticism for a common Disney blindspot: a female lead character who needs to be rescued by a prince to find love. Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty...all of them find fulfillment in the arms of a handsome prince. And even though Ariel is a more strong-willed and rebellious teenager, she's still willing to give up her voice in order to meet the man of her dreams. That's not necessarily the message parents wanted to give either their daughters or their sons. A woman should not have to compromise her voice in order to be loved.

I don't know how much that backlash informed Disney's choice for their next film, but interestingly, "Beauty and the Beast" lacks several staple characteristics of past Disney films. Belle is not a traditional princess (at least at the beginning), the hero is not a handsome prince (at least at the beginning), and the villain isn't female (that's true for the entirety of the film). Up to this point, most of Disney's bad guys have been girls – Snow White and Cinderella's stepmothers, the witch Malevolent in "Sleeping Beauty," Cruella de Ville, Ursula in "The Little Mermaid." But in "Beauty and the Beast," we get Gaston, a character who looks like a prince but acts like a jester, exuding toxic masculinity and laughable bravado and a lot of antlers in his decorating.

As the movie opens, we learn the story of a spoiled prince who, because of his lack of hospitality to an old peddler, gets a curse put on him and his entire castle, turning his servants into household objects and him into a hideous beast. The only way the curse can be broken is if the Beast learns to love and is loved in return before he turns 21. Interestingly, the story is told to us through a series of stained-glass windows.

Next, we meet Belle, who is reading a book and singing wistfully about how there must be more to life than the confines of her tiny village. She is pursued by Gaston, who wants to make her his latest conquest, but who embodies the whole town's lack of understanding of who Belle really is. Gaston says, "It's not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas...thinking..."

Belle's inventor father goes on a trip and ends up stumbling into the Beast's castle, where the Beast holds him hostage. Belle goes looking for her father and finds him imprisoned in the castle. The Beast confronts her and says he'll release her father only if she is willing to take his place. She reluctantly agrees and becomes his captive. This sets up the primary tension of the movie: Can Belle see past the appearance of the Beast and see him for who he really is? Can she love him for what's on the inside, despite what she sees on the outside? And can the Beast truly change, transforming from a selfish tyrant to someone who is willing to sacrifice in order to give and receive love?

Can people really change? The Bible gives us plenty of examples of people transformed by the gospel of love: Zacchaeus goes from collecting taxes to giving money away, Paul goes from persecuting followers of Jesus to the top Christian marketing executive in history. But we also get stories of people who aren't changed. Pharaoh's heart continually hardens when he's confronted by Moses, and the rich young ruler, when offered the opportunity to follow Jesus, refuses to let go of his love of money. One description I heard about the curse in "Beauty and the Beast" is that it didn't change anyone, it just revealed their true self. The curse didn't turn the Prince into the Beast. Instead, it simply showed the ugliness that was already present within him.

If someone cast a spell on us and our true nature came to the front, who would we be? If you strip away all the mechanisms through which we can craft and curate a persona – our clothes, our possessions, our social media profiles – who would we be? Who are we at our core? We all like to think we're princes and princesses, but Paul has a different, more pessimistic view of humanity. He writes in Romans, "For if I know God's law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me?" In other words, Paul would say there's a Beast inside all of us, one that gives into our propensities toward, greed and selfishness, and anger.

In the movie, while the Beast overtly embodies that, I think another character represents the brokenness of humans. When Gaston learns that Belle is in love with the Beast and not with him, he stirs up the villagers with fear that the Beast, clearly painted as the Other, is a threat to their very existence. In one scene, Gaston leads the villagers, who carry pitchforks and torches, to the castle, telling them, "If you're not for us, you're against us!" The villagers sing, "We don't like what we don't understand, in fact it scares us, and this monster is mysterious at least, grab your sword, grab your bow, praise the Lord and here we go..." The worst part of ourselves often comes out when we're told we should fear what we don't understand.

Thankfully, Belle slowly comes around to a different approach. As she gets to know Beast, she realizes there is beauty beneath his hideousness. At one point, the Beast takes on a pack of wolves to rescue Belle, and she nurses him back to health after the attack. As she softens to who the Beast really is, she sings, "He's no Prince Charming," and yet she admits she sees something that wasn't there before. In Belle's eyes, there's more to the Beast than what he appears to be.

Does that mean there's hope for us, too? If there's a beast in us, our sinful nature, is there any hope that someone can look past that to see who we really are? In Romans, Paul answers the question, "Is there no one who can do anything for me?" by saying, "The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does." That's the gift God offered us when he sent Jesus to be with us.

Through Jesus, we are loved by God for who we are, sinful nature and all, and it's Christ's love and sacrifice that frees us from being captives to our sin.

Just as Belle truly sees the Beast, God truly sees us. God knows us. God knows who we are. God knows what we've done. God knows the ugly parts we try to hide, God knows the dark corners of our hearts. God sees the ugliness of our sin and rather than condemn us, God offers us forgiveness through Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" Through Christ's love, we are freed from the prison of our sin to be God's new creation.

The same thing happens for the Beast. After he is seemingly killed by Gaston in an epic battle, Belle confesses her love for him, and the Beast is transformed back into a prince. In the end, the movie's subversion of the traditional aesthetic only goes so far. Disney can't escape their own formula of having a beautiful princess fall for a prince. I wonder if the man-spurning, book-reading Belle was really OK with that?

"Tale as old as time. Tune as old as song. Bittersweet and strange. Finding you can change. Learning you were wrong." Followers of Christ know that melody. It's called repentance, the acknowledgement of our sin and the turning toward the love of Christ. Following Christ doesn't mean we'll never sin again, but it does give us the saving power of Christ at our disposal, which can empower us to say "No" when the Beast in us wants to make an appearance.

It also calls us to look past the beastly quality in others to see the person God created. We all have stories, and sometimes aspects of those stories bring out the worst in us. I sure hope people don't define me by my worst moments. I can be pretty beastly. I constantly have to remind myself that others deserve the same grace.

"I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me?" Thank God for the gift of Jesus Christ in our lives, who sees us and knows us and loves us still, calling us to leave behind our beastly ways and embrace the transforming light and love of a life lived in Christ. Or, as the Message translates our passage from 2 Corinthians, "We don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life emerges!" There is beauty in all of us that God can see, even when others can't. And because of that, we are still invited to the table each week, where God offers us the grace and forgiveness we need to continue our transformation.