

Sermon: Something There

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Scripture: Romans 2:1-7, Luke 6:27-38

After a brief intermission, we are back to our series “August at the Movies: *Disney Edition*.” Last time we gathered, we discussed the intersection of the film *Moana* and the Bible, with a particular focus on how the theme of “healing for the natural world” in the film resonated with our call, as Christians, to be good stewards of the world God has created so graciously and lovingly. Today, we are shifting our focus from our moral treatment of the created world to our moral treatment of others as we talk about how the words of Jesus are retold through the much-loved movie *Beauty and the Beast*.

For those who have somehow missed the tale of Belle and the prince who becomes “the Beast,” I will begin this morning with a brief synopsis. *Beauty and the Beast* is the story of a young woman called Belle who moves with her father to a town in a quiet French village. Belle is a bookish, but bold adventurer who most in the town believe to be rather peculiar. Because she is quite pretty, she attracts all kinds of attention that she is uninterested in returning, instead turning to her fantastical stories of far off places, of princes and princesses, as she moves throughout the town, graciously interacting with the townspeople and happily returning home to tend to dear old dad, an inventor. Belle’s stories are the way she escapes her rather boring life in the town to appease her adventurer’s heart, which has, as yet, not traveled to the far off places she reads about.

One day, Belle’s father gets lost in the woods and is taken prisoner in the castle of a prince whose life (and that of his entire kingdom) has been cursed by an enchantress after he, in arrogant self-aggrandisement, refuses to help her while she is in the guise of a poor beggar-woman. The prince becomes “the Beast” and his servants become animated objects, doomed to remain in this state unless and until the prince learns to love and is loved in return. The catch, of course, is that all of this must transpire before all the petals fall from an enchanted rose.

Upon hearing that her father has been kidnapped, Belle goes to the castle to rescue him. Unfortunately, the Beast is only willing to release him *if* Belle decides to take his place. She will not be kept in the dungeon, but in a room of her own, tended to by the animated objects, with the hopes that she might be the one who can break this curse once and for all.

Over time, Belle and the Beast get acquainted with one another and Belle begins to see something there that she didn't see before and they become friends. In the course of time, Belle will, in fact, learn to love the Beast—but this love is not without complications and challenges and will confront evil in the face of Gaston, an even more arrogant self-aggrandiser who gins up the townspeople to storm the castle and kill the beast. In an epic battle, Gaston will slay the beast, but lose his life in the process. As the Beast is dying, the last petal falls from the rose, but as this happens Belle confesses her love for him. Taking pity on them, the enchantress restores the Beast and his kingdom and all is right with the world.

Whereas last week's story was one of a young woman finding her way and place in the world, a coming-of-age story of sorts, we might think of Beauty and the Beast as being more of a love story. If that's the case, we could ask what on earth a love story has to do with scripture. In a lot of ways, the Bible is a love story: the story of the love of God for God's creation and the love of creation for its God. But it also tells a love story between the members of that creation, one that is instructive. Scriptures that talk about the law and commandments aren't just outlining how we should love God, but also how we are to love one another and the world around us.

One of Jesus's greatest recitations of these instructions occurs in his famous sermon on the mount, told in Luke's gospel account as the Sermon on the Plain. In it, Jesus goes down to a level place and offers a series of blessings and curses for those who will or will not inherit the Kingdom of God. This is followed by our gospel lesson today, which builds on this list by directly addressing the way we treat one another as members of that kingdom.

In verses 27-36 of Luke chapter 6, Jesus presents to us an idea of how far our love of others should extend. Does it end with our family? Friends? Pleasant acquaintances? No. Jesus says it goes as far as our enemies. He tells those listening not just to love those who love them, but to love those who hate them. Not just to bless those who bless them, but to bless those who curse them! Not just to pray for those who pray for them, but to pray for those who would go so far as to abuse them. This is not the way of the world, of course, but the way of the kingdom to which God calls us, the one we are to be living into not just someday in heaven, but one we must follow in the here and now. In other words, these aren't just notes on a better afterlife, these are mandates for a better life in the present.

The Golden Rule, as it's called, "Do unto others as you would have them do to you," is also presented here, just as it is in some form in every single world religion that exists—and if you've been reading Holy Envy, our church-wide read, you will know this quite well. You know, I often think about what the world would be like if we all lived by the golden rule as best we can every day. Imagine the possibilities for all of us in a world full of individuals and groups who relate to one another as they wish to be related to? Who didn't do to others as they don't want done to them? Who cared for one another as they wish to be cared for? What a world that would be! Then I look at those in positions of power throughout the world, at the vitriol spewed on social media, at the horrible news stories in my news app, and, well, I remember that we're simply not there yet.

But Jesus offers us this moral code, as do the other religions out there, because those who adhere to them *hope* for better, for more than we currently have. That's what the animated objects and the Beast learn in the film, isn't it? That without hope, all is lost. And so when Belle enters stage left, the animated teapot, candelabra, clock, and others grab onto that hope for all it's worth because even they know that if we don't have hope, we have nothing.

Jesus presents us with a vision of what the world *can* be, to reminds us of who we can be, even if we're not there yet. The way of Jesus is a most excellent way of living and engaging with others around us, but it is not the easy way. Easy would be loving those

who love us and hating those who hate us. But Jesus says, no. Love everyone. Do good. Lend without expecting repayment. Be merciful, just as God is merciful.

And then Jesus takes it a step further. How else are we supposed to love outsiders? Well, don't *just* love those "terrible" people while telling them they're terrible; do not judge them as less worthy of love, either. Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give because what you give will be given to you, so if you dole out hate, anger, greed, and injustice—guess what comes back to you?

As I read this passage again and again over the years, I feel more and more that part of what Jesus is calling us to is a softening of our hearts. If we look throughout the world today, we see so much brutality and Jesus would have seen plenty of this in the first century Roman Empire. We see, despite the heat waves, a cold edge hardening our hearts as if they're being iced over. Instead of storing up what is good, and just, and loving, and merciful, we store up what is corrupt, unwarranted, unloving, and even cruel. This is what happens to the Beast in the film over time. His heart, devoid of hope, hardens so that when someone is in desperate need of shelter to save his life, the Beast condemns him as a prisoner rather than reaching out in mercy and love.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul reminds us that God is the one who will judge; that is not our call. He tells the Romans that when they pass judgement on others, they are really only condemning themselves. There's some hypocrisy out there, he says, because those who judge are really doing the same things as those they judge perhaps to greater degrees. Recall what Jesus said about this very thing just a few verses later in this famous sermon: "Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, while you yourself fail to see the beam in your own?" (6:41). Judgement is not ours; it is God's.

Oh, but how easy it is to judge. And how much fun we seem to have while we do it, don't we? Entire TV shows, magazines, and websites have been created around this very idea. Relationships are built. You know that line from *Steel Magnolias*? "If you don't have anything nice to say, come sit by me?" We get a kick out of that because it's true. We love to judge and gossip—it's mean, but it's oddly comforting. When we judge

others, we shift the focus away from our own missteps and failures and onto someone else. We get to be superior. Reassured as we remember that, while maybe not perfect, at least we're not as bad as *that* guy over there. It's a form of schadenfreude, isn't it? We get some kind of perverse pleasure when we judge others and elevate ourselves above them. And Christians are masters of this particular phenomenon, despite a holy book replete with reminders *not* to do this. When we sit back in judgement that others are unworthy of love and mercy, seeing only what they do wrong or where they fail, we miss all that is good and beautiful and right and successful about them. How many people do we count out because we make a snap judgement about who they are based on where they come from or what they do or what they do or don't have? So many. **Too many.**

The world of *Beauty and the Beast* gives us untold examples of judgement gone wrong and teaches us some valuable lessons about what can come of putting that judgement aside and looking a bit deeper into the soul of the individual. We are reminded throughout the film of the dangers of judging a book by its cover, aren't we? And we can do this in both directions just as happens in the film. Gaston, a handsome, well-groomed, strong, popular, seemingly heroic man looks good on the outside, but inside, his heart is cold. He is arrogant and self-serving, selfish and unmerciful. By contrast, the Beast is scary looking, unkempt, violent, reclusive, and seemingly... well, beastly. But over time, Belle and the audience discover that this beastly being has a soft, even loving heart.

Just before the climax of the film, we see Belle's heart open to the Beast's as she sees that there is, indeed, "Something there" beneath all the bluster and fur. Underneath it all, there is humanity in this cursed prince, something redeemable and endearing. By the end of the film, Belle and the Beast have discovered his capacity for selflessness, generosity, and goodness. It would have been easy to write him off and condemn him (and the inhabitants of his castle), as the townspeople do seem to have done, but in giving him a glimmer of a chance, we see that beneath the gruff exterior is a heart that can learn to love and be loved in return. This is not just a love story, it is one of redemption. The story of the Beast is the story of all of us who have done wrong in our

lives (and we all have at one point or another, no one is perfect), but can learn to do better. It is the story of what it means to be born again. Only in the Christian sense, this happens when we clothe ourselves in Christ and strive to walk in his most excellent way.

Among so many other teachings, Jesus shows us that when we condemn others—judging them as less worthy because they don't look like or act like us, because they don't come from the same places we do, because they're unkempt or less prosperous than those in our circles, because they love differently or identify as other than we understand—we miss out on entire subsections of humanity that can add great richness and vibrance to our lives. It's a little like throwing out a fantastic book because the cover is unappealing or because someone has told us it contains something that may make us uncomfortable. Or dismissing a prince because he casts a beastly visage. Jesus was a man who travelled light and did not have a home to speak of—a person who was constantly traveling as Jesus did would have probably looked a bit scruffy and perhaps a little rough around the edges. He would not have looked like a man who bathed often and went to the barber a lot. If Jesus walked into our churches today as he appeared then, we would not roll out the red carpet; most of us would wholly dismiss him. If we judged Jesus by his appearance on the outside, we'd miss out on God among us. As Hebrews 13:2 reads, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

So let us look at others with eyes that understand the complex nature of how the world and all its experiences can shape us. Let us look with eyes that refuse to judge and condemn. Let us look with eyes that recognize that behind a rough exterior, there is a human being there, one who was created in the image of God just as we were and is as deserving of love and mercy as any one of us who sit in the pews on Sunday morning. Let us, as Belle does, notice that in the stranger there's "something there" that we simply cannot see yet, something human, something good, *someone* we're called to love as we love ourselves. Amen.