The Transforming Power of Love

*(Beauty and the Beast)*

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Leviticus 19:33-34; Matthew 22:37-40;
John 3:16, 15:12-17; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8;
Colossians 3:12-14; Hebrews 13:1-2

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Children’s Message: I love movies, and since my boys were old enough, I have enjoyed watching a lot of Disney films because they are great stories for both children and adults. That’s why, for the rest of the summer, we are going to be looking at films to discover faith lessons for our lives whether we are children, students, or adults.

Today, we will be looking at *Beauty and the Beast*. Every story has three parts: a setup, conflict, and resolution. At the beginning, the setup introduces us to the main characters and their situation. Then a conflict arises which is the problem that has to be addressed. The rest of the story is about the resolution or how the problem gets fixed. As you watch a scene from the movie on the screen, listen carefully as I read the story.

*Once upon a time, a handsome young prince lived in a beautiful castle. Although he had everything his heart desired, the prince was spoiled, selfish, and unkind. Then one night an unexpected intruder arrived at the castle offering the prince a single rose in return for shelter. Repulsed by her haggard appearance, the prince turned the woman away. But she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for beauty is found within. The old woman's outward appearance melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress. She transformed him into a hideous beast and placed a powerful spell on the castle and all who lived there. For she had seen that there was no love in his heart. But the rose she had offered was truly an enchanted rose. If he could learn to love another and be loved in return by the time the last petal fell, the spell would be broken. If not, he would be doomed to remain a beast for all time. As the years passed, he fell into despair and lost all hope. For who could ever learn to love a beast?*

In the setup of the movie, we learn the prince has everything he wants. But the problem comes when he turns the intruder away because he is disgusted by her outward appearance. Did you hear what the woman said to him? “Do not be deceived by appearances, for beauty is found within.”

The woman at first appears poor and haggard on the outside, but then she reveals that on the inside she is a beautiful enchantress. The prince is handsome and well-dressed on the outside, but she can see who he really is on the inside: “There was no love in his heart.”
The prince is the opposite of love as described in 1 Corinthians 13 that we heard earlier. The prince is not patient. He is not kind. He is boastful, arrogant, and rude. He insists on having his own way. When the prince is turned into a beast, he simply becomes on the outside what he already is on the inside.

I love books and movies because every good story connects with God’s Big Story of creation, fall, and redemption. God created the world good and created us to live in loving relationships with Him and others. But like the beast, each one of us has turned from God and gone our own way. Though we haven’t been turned into beasts, we are not what we were meant to be.

Has anyone here ever acted like the prince—spoiled, selfish, and unkind? Has anyone ever judged others by what they look like or what they wear? Has anyone ever acted rather beastly by throwing a fit or hurting someone by our words or actions?

Romans 3 says, “There is no one who is righteous, not even one; All have turned aside…. There is no one who shows kindness….All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” And like the beast, we are helpless and hopeless to change ourselves. We need someone to help. In the story, Belle is that person who comes from the outside and helps the Beast “to learn to love another and be loved in return.”

We need someone, too, and Jesus is that person. In John 3:16 we read: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.” God has loved us and sent His Son Jesus to do for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves to make it possible for us to become what we are meant to be.

*Beauty and the Beast* connects with God’s Big Story and our stories. Just as the beast needs the transforming power of love in his life, so we need the transforming power of God’s love for us in Jesus. He really can change us and make us more and more like Him—people who can love God and love others.
Sermon: In January, our family went to Disney World for the first time. I was amazed by witnessing staff or “cast members” as they welcomed and greeted, interacted with, and assisted guests in every way imaginable. For several days, we experienced the power of hospitality and the joy of being treated like special guests.

This experience spoke to me because hospitality is such an important biblical concept. I have said before, “Hospitality is making room for love.” Strangers and travelers used to be dependent on the hospitality and kindness of others because there was no hospitality industry with hotels, restaurants, and so on. This helps explain why in the movie Beauty and the Beast the prince’s refusal to extend hospitality to a stranger was so wrong.

In Hebrews 13:1-2, we read, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

The stranger in the movie is viewed by the prince as an intruder—an outsider who is not wanted or invited. But she is more than she at first appears to be. The prince’s refusal to make room for love turns out to be a costly mistake.

The movie highlights that it matters how we treat people no matter who they are, where they come from, or what they look like. In the Old Testament we read, “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:33–34). Outsiders are to be welcomed as insiders, as citizens. Why? Because the Israelites were once outsiders who have received God’s hospitality in welcoming and caring for them. So they in turn are to love others as God has loved them.

This is Jesus’ Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-40).
In the story of *Beauty and the Beast*, we see the beginning of hospitality as Belle comes to the castle looking for her father, Maurice, and finds that he has been imprisoned by the beast for picking a rose he intended to give her. Belle makes room for love as she willingly takes her father’s place in prison.

Belle is truly a beauty on the inside and outside. The love of her father has shaped her into a loving person who willingly lays down her life for the father she loves. Her outward actions simply reflect her inward character. Even in prison, she is more free than the Beast has ever been because she knows the joy of receiving and giving love.

It looks like the Beast is doomed because he has estranged and imprisoned the one person who might help him. But his enchanted servants who have become household objects have other ideas. The next song says it all:

*Be our guest, be our guest, put our service to the test,*
*Tie your napkin 'round your neck, Cherie, and we provide the rest!*
*Soup du jour, hot hors d'oeuvres. Why we only live to serve. Try the grey stuff, it's delicious. Don't believe me? Ask the dishes! They can sing, they can dance. After all, miss, this is France. And a dinner here is never second best. Go on, unfold your menu.*
*Take a glance and then you'll be our guest, oui, our guest. Be our guest.*

This is a fun scene, but actually makes an important point about hospitality. In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen writes, “Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But still—it is our vocation: to convert the hostility into hospitality, the enemy into a guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.”

While the Beast exemplifies hostility, the servants want to convert that hostility into hospitality. They know who they are—they are servants of a prince who live to serve and care for the needs of others. They know who Belle is. She is not an intruder or enemy. She is not a prisoner but their
guest, and guests are meant to be shown hospitality as they are welcomed and cared for.

Marjorie Thompson writes in her book *Soul Feast*, “Hospitality is essentially an expression of love. It is a movement to include the guest in the very best of what we ourselves have received and can therefore offer. It is the act of sharing who we are as well as what we have. Thus, hospitality of heart lies beneath every hospitable act. The classic elements of hospitality offered to guests are food and drink, shelter and rest, protection and care, enjoyment and peace. These paired categories cover a basic range of physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. They reveal that hospitality is concerned with the total well-being of the guest.”

In a charming way, the movie depicts that the servants do what they can to extend hospitality to their guest. They cannot change their master or themselves, but they can serve and set the table where the transforming power of love can change everything.

What a great picture of what we as followers of Christ are called to be and do as we make room for love in our homes, work places, and our neighborhoods. As we cultivate community and serve others, we make it possible for people to experience the transforming power of Christ’s love.

It’s so gratifying to be a part of a church where there are so many ways we make room for love as we welcome guests into our midst, care for each other, and serve, using our gifts, passions, and abilities. Just this summer we have experienced this in worship, summer breakfast, Vacation Bible School, Summer Mission Projects, including the Cunningham Park project this past week.

We can continue to make room for love in the weeks ahead. The activities you find in the bulletin and in our August monthly newsletter available today are actually invitations from God to make room for love:

- Invite someone to join you for the potluck and Jesus film this Friday.
- Develop your skills as a servant and leader of Christ’s Kingdom by attending the Leadership Summit.
- Attend the upcoming Ignite Outreach Meetings to explore ways we can together love and serve our neighbors in this community.
- Consider becoming a part of a small group, or welcoming new people into your group, and using your gifts to serve children, students, or adults.

These are only a few of the limitless possibilities of how we might make room for love.

Let’s return to the movie. Belle delights in these winsome servants, but a bad encounter with the Beast drives her to run away. The Beast runs after her and becomes badly wounded while saving her from vicious wolves. Like the Good Samaritan, she takes him back to the castle to care for him. Each of them has chosen to make room for love in a way that was needed. This is the turning point of the story. Their friendship begins to develop and the Beast begins to change little by little over time with a series of small surrenders. The Beast gives Belle his enormous library. She in turn reads aloud to him helping to see life and the world in a way he never has before. She teaches him the quality of kindness and gentleness so that he can enjoy petting her horse and feeding birds. They share meals together, and when the Beast is unable to eat politely, Belle puts down her spoon and drinks from the bowl, accommodating the limitations of the Beast.

Because of his relationship with Belle, the Beast is being transformed from the inside out. He is becoming more human—someone who can appreciate beauty, truth, and goodness and has the capacity to love. These small surrenders are depicted beautifully in a scene in which the Beast has a makeover and puts on clothes worthy of a prince and then dances with Belle. Many are so focused on the beauty of the setting and dress that they fail to pay attention to the words. So listen to the lyrics as we watch the clip.

Did you catch the lyrics? “Barely even friends, then somebody bends unexpectedly. Just a little change. Small to say the least.” Small changes lead to a big impact. Dancing is a metaphor that is used in the movie to
help us see how relationships work. In marriage, family, and friendship, we have to pay attention to what is going on in the heart and mind and soul of the other. Moreover, we have to be willing to bend and make many small surrenders in order to be in step with them, to love them. It is in relationships that we learn to truly love and be loved.

In Colossians 3:12-14 we read, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

As followers of Christ, our true identity is that we are holy and beloved. This is who we are on the inside, but we still need to be transformed on the outside. This is a work of grace and the power of the Spirit, but we can choose to make small surrenders that enable us to get into the flow of God’s love and grace and power. How does it happen?

In relationships with others, seemly small things like spending time together eating meals, reading books, and playing games can have a big impact on helping us experience love in relationships.

In relationship with God, we make small surrenders as we worship, pray, read His word, and share life in community with others. God uses these seemingly small changes to make a big impact in transforming us to become like Him—people who truly love the Lord and love the people, serve the Lord and serve the people.

Directly after the dance scene, the Beast asks Belle if she is happy. She says that she is, but she misses her father. When she learns her father is in trouble, the Beast sets her free to go help him. Even though time is running out for him and he knows he will probably remain a beast forever, he lets her go. Why? Because he loves her.

His actions reveal what is in his heart. He has experienced the transforming power of love as described in Philippians: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than
yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:3-5, 8).

The Beast willingly lays down his life for Belle, which connects to Jesus’ commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:12-13).

In his book, The Good and Beautiful God, James Bryan Smith writes, “Being vulnerable seems weak, but maybe not; maybe vulnerability is true strength. Maybe sacrificing yourself for the good of another is not a sign of weakness but is the greatest power the world ever knows.” This is the power of transforming love.

A lot more happens in the movie that we don’t have time to explore, but Belle does eventually return to the castle to help the beast, who has been mortally wounded. As he is dying, she tells him, “I love you.” The impossible has happened. The Beast did “learn to love another and be loved in return,” but, alas, it seems too late. But then, in a powerful visual scene, we see the Beast brought back to life and transformed back into a man. This is the transforming power of love: the beast becomes on the outside what he has now become on the inside.

Again, this story connects with God’s Big Story and our stories. In his life, death and resurrection, and ascension, Jesus has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. We who were once dead are now alive. We who were enemies of God are now friends of God, children of the king, and citizens of heaven. We, too, are meant to experience the transforming power of love that helps us become like Christ in our attitudes, words, and actions. We are becoming the kind of people who are able to do as he commanded: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

In romantic stories, this seems like the end—the problem is resolved, the prince and Belle live happily ever after. Actually, there is more to the
story than creation, fall, and redemption. There is also restoration. Not only is the prince transformed back to his human state, but all his servants are restored from being household objects to being human again. They are reconciled with their families and with the community. As we watch the final clip and another dance as we again listen carefully to the words:

- Tale as old as time. Tune as old as song.
- Bittersweet and strange. Finding you can change. Learning you were wrong. Winter turns to spring. Famine turns to feast. Nature points the way. Nothing left to say. Beauty and the Beast.

I love this scene and the lyrics of the song because this is the tale as old as time. This is God’s Big Story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Just as the sun turns winter to spring and famine turns to feast, the transforming power of God’s love for us in His Son Jesus has changed us from sinners to saints.

Dancing and feasting are the images of a restored kingdom, but this time we see the dance is not just for the elite or the central characters. The kingdom dance is meant for all to enjoy together in relationship with God and in community. It is a picture of what Christ is doing and will do.

One glorious day, Jesus will return and restore his creation—including us—to all it was meant to be. Jesus-followers from every time and place will enjoy feasting at his great banquet and dancing together with our King. But for now, we are to do all we can to allow the transforming power of his love to help us become more like Christ together for the world. We are to do all we can to invite others into this great kingdom dance by making room for love.