

Lectionary 18 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 6, 2017

Matthew 14:13-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls:

This past week, on Tuesday and Wednesday, I was in Anaheim with members of my family. At Disneyland and Disney's California Adventure. I don't know how you feel about Disneyland. This was the third time in my life that I've been there. I've never been to Orlando— to Walt Disney World and Epcot and all of that. Just to Anaheim.

On both days, we arrived before opening. They let you come into the park, up to a rope line. But they don't open the ropes until exactly opening time, 8 am. And at 8 am, they play a recorded welcome. It begins— as all official Disney announcements begin— "*Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls.*" A great way to begin. And on Tuesday, after the basic welcome, as they opened the ropes at Disney's California Adventure, and the people started to move into the park, they played the tune, "*Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho, It's Home From Work We Go.*"

And on Wednesday, after the basic welcome, as they opened the ropes at Disneyland, and as we all strolled into the park, they played the tune "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." And my 18 year-old nephew said, "We can't actually sing the lyrics to this song." And so as this song swelled around us, and we all rushed into Disneyland, my nephew reminded me that he grew up in a culture that knows Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah, but can't sing the lyrics. A culture that knows the tune for Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah, but that can't sing the lyrics. Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah was part of "Song of the South." A classic 1946 Disney movie that is so out-of-sync with contemporary views about race and slavery and the south that "Song of the South" has been made unavailable by Disney in the United States of America for many decades.

If you are interested in religion or anthropology, the Disney realm is probably quite interesting to you. I often say that Disney does much of what the Church tries to do, only they do it significantly better than the Church. At the heart of Disney is a set of stories. Stories that are told and re-told. The classics of Disney— like Pinocchio, like Cinderella, like Peter Pan— deal with the great themes of literature and mythology, especially for children: the theme of adults and parents who are incompetent at best, or evil, at worst; the theme of what it means to be human; the theme of childhood and adulthood, and how one can be concealed within the other.

These great themes, these masterpieces of stories are told and re-told; they are set to robust music; they are acted out in costumes, they are portrayed on the silver screen, they are embodied in toys and rides and attractions. Children encounter them. And children grow up and bring the

Disney stories and Disney experiences to their own children, and eventually grandchildren. So that the standard Disney welcome— *Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls*— truly identifies the audience.

This is a large part of what Christianity is really like. At the heart of Christianity is a set of stories. (The Church even has to deal with challenges like Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah, treasured gems of our heritage that originated contexts which we can no longer accept or embrace. And the gem is still valuable, even though the jewelry in which it was originally mounted is broken and tarnished.) At the heart of Christianity is a set of stories. Such as today's story of Jesus feeding thousands of people. Told four different ways by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The stories are told over and over. And there are songs that are written about the stories. And the stories, at best, transform us and shape our character. In the case of the classic Disney stories, I hope that, ideally, children who soak in the Disney stories might develop resilience in the face of adversity, and might embrace creative solutions to challenges, and might, over the course of their lives, sometimes choose generosity and decency over selfishness and meanness.

This is what I mean when I say that these classic stories shape character. I've never asked a child what the lesson of Peter Pan is. Presumably, it's to stay away from crocodiles. I've never asked a child what the lesson of Snow White is. Presumably, it's to avoid apples given away by haggard old women. The stories cannot be distilled down to a moral point. If they could, you could teach the moral point without all the encumbering and distracting aspects of the story.

The dumbest thing I've ever heard in my life is when preachers or Sunday School teachers tell us that when Jesus fed the crowds— five thousand men, plus women and children— so lets says 10,000. The preacher wills say that because one person shared, then everyone else followed his example, and when everyone shared, there was enough. That is the most banal, the most asinine, the most dim-witted suggestion I've ever heard in my life. Sharing is an important feature of the story. But the story is not about how everyone shared. It's a miracle story. Jesus took a little bit that was available, that was shared, and he fed a multitude. It's a miracle.

Jesus was born to a virgin. He cured incurable diseases. He overcame the devil. He walked on water. He brought dead Lazarus back to life. He controlled the weather. He changed water into wine. He rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven. The Bible tells us Jesus did all those things and more.

But for some reason, the idea that he multiplied loaves of bread is just too extreme to believe, and so Lutheran preachers love to get up and explain that no, there was really no miracle. It was just a story about sharing. And I think I can speak for every child on the planet, every person who has ever enjoyed a classic Disney story, when I say that is the most banal, the most asinine, the most dim-witted idea that anyone has ever put forward in the history of organized religion. It's not the worst thing anyone has ever said, nor is it the most evil thing. It's just the stupidest.

The story begins with the beheading of John the Baptist. John the Baptist had his head chopped

off and served on a platter. So Jesus, who was very much like John the Baptist as a wandering spiritual teacher decided that he needed to get out of town fast. Now this would make a good Disney ride. First, John's head is chopped off and falls down on a silver platter. Next, Jesus heads out into the wilderness.

And yet, Jesus is so popular, he is so important to so many people, that crowds follow him into the deserted region where he had headed to escape. And it's in that setting that Jesus feeds the crowd. It's in an evil world of bad people. Malefactors. And it's a desperate world, for all the rest of us, crowded with hungry and needy people. And Jesus is in those places with us. And Jesus provides for us abundantly in those places. And the story says there were leftovers. Most restaurants will give you a box for your leftovers. A doggie box. The story says there were twelve baskets of leftovers. How many disciples did Jesus have? *Twelve*. So each of them had a take-home basket of leftovers. Peter had one. James had one. Thomas had one. Each and every one of the twelve followers got a take-away basket. Why? To make the point, in an almost comic way, that in those harsh and desperate places in life, God will provide for us. No matter what. If it were a Disney ride, it would end with each of the twelve walking away with a big basket on their shoulders. Laden with the goodness of God. *"A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over,"* as Jesus would say elsewhere.

So it's not a story about how everyone pulled food out of their own knapsacks. The point of the story is not that we already have everything we need and that we can depend on ourselves and provide our own solutions. No, it's a miracle story. That God sees us and accompanies us in those hungry and abandoned and scary regions of our lives. The places precisely where we do *NOT* have everything we need, and where we cannot rely on ourselves and where we cannot make our own solutions. God is with us and providing for us in those places.

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. Disney is part of consumer culture. It makes money from the stories that it tells and the products that it sells. But Disney can nevertheless teach us a few things about the value of stories. Our Christian stories— the stories of Jesus and the Bible— are not commercial products, and we are not turned into consumers when we share them. But what I said about children and Disney stories ought to be said about Christians and the classic stories of the Church. I hope that, ideally, children who soak in the Disney stories might develop resilience in the face of adversity, and might embrace creative solutions to challenges, and might, over the course of their lives, sometimes choose generosity and decency over selfishness and meanness.

Likewise, the great stories and hymns and illustrations of the Church when shared over and over from one generation to another ideally our stories might cultivate in us resilience in the face of adversity, creativity when we are confronted with challenges, and a spirit of generosity and decency that will prevail over the inclinations of selfishness and meanness. Amen.