

“Loving Our Beasts”

Luke 18:9-14

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San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

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Did you know that Halloween or “All Hallows Eve” is a holiday with roots in Christian history? This holiday was important because it was the night before “All Saints Day,” and on All Hallows Eve the evil spirits symbolically had one last night of power before the Saints filled with the power of God reigned supreme. On Halloween night we see children and the childlike , dressed up looking kind and good like butterflies and ballerinas, and others dressed as monsters and ghosts looking bad and scary. All these characters are symbolic of our mixed up world--a world where good and evil coexist, comedy and tragedy occurs nearly simultaneously, and we human beings are both beautiful as well as beastly.

It’s the human predicament. How are we redeemed after “the fall?” In Genesis we hear declared “And God made woman and man in God’s image, and they were good.” And then just two short chapters later the man and woman have sinned and are separated from their Creator. The entire Bible follows as a path to how Creator and creation can be reunited again.

This theme of redemption and transformation, is a “tale as old as time.” It is seen not only in the Bible and but also in examples all around us. When Jesus taught he used illustrations from the everyday life of the those who listened so I’d like to use an everyday example from today’s world to illustrate my point. There’s a movie that I’ve always felt did a particularly good job of portraying redemption and transformation. The movie is “Beauty and the Beast.”

The story begins by telling us why a handsome prince was turned into a beast. One cold, rainy night, the prince refused to give hospitality to an old woman. Because the prince was selfish and cruel, he was turned into a Beast, and he and his castle were placed under a spell. We might say much like the spell that sin casts on humankind. The Beast had fallen from grace and the only power that could save him from staying a beast forever was the power of love. He must learn to truly love and to be loved in return.

In the movie, a young woman named, Belle is like a Christ figure because she brings salvation to the beast. But I’m getting ahead of the story. Belle longs for adventure; she seeks a greater calling than the provincial life available to women in her village; but she doesn’t know what that calling is. She knows one thing, however, and that is she is not called to marry the handsome, but self-centered, Gaston, a Mr. Universe type, who thinks Belle should marry him and produce sons in his own image.

One dark night Belle’s father gets lost in the forest and accidentally trespasses onto the Beasts property. He’s put in the Beast’s dungeon and Belle goes to rescue him. She offers herself in place of her father, and swears to stay with the beast forever if he will only let her father go. So Belle is left with this fearsome beast who she begins to care about in spite of his loathsome appearance.

In the movie the really bad guy is this Gaston fellow. The comparison between Gaston who thinks he’s God’s gift to women and the lonely, ugly Beast reminds me of today’s biblical text. Jesus describes a Pharisee and a tax collector who both are praying in the temple. The Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other people and does not sin like others sin but rather lives righteously tithing all he has. On the other hand, the tax collector despised by others and even by himself, beats his breast and cries, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Like the Beast he

knows his dark side and the truth about his nature. And Jesus says, it's the tax collector who is willing to confess his sinful nature, that will in the end, be justified.

Now the self-righteous Gaston is quick to proclaim, "kill the beast." He reminds us how easy it is to find the beast, the enemy, "out there." But in the end, Gaston loses his life because he will not offer any grace to the Beast.

It is the power of a great love, a love that transforms that God offers each of us, no matter how beastly we might be. Often it is the beast within us that is hardest for us to accept. We want to ignore our "thorn in the flesh" and hide those parts of us that are not beautiful. It takes courage, to face our "beastliness." But Jesus' ministry is one of helping people with their beastliness. Jesus accepted and sometimes confronted "the beast" in others and the power of Christ's love transformed what was beastly into something beautiful.

The church can be a place for transformation whenever it allows for truth telling and confession so that transforming love and forgiveness can be felt by its people. Like God's unconditional love that transforms us, Belle is able to love the Beast and her unconditional love enables him to be transformed from Beast to prince once more. It is the Belles of our lives, those who recognize the spirit of God within us in spite of our beastliness, through whom God's love works enabling us to be transformed and redeemed.

There are many beasts in our world; some are the institutional sins of society. They are all the structures that separate this world and human beings from our Creator. We may try to "kill the beasts" but beasts are rarely killed; they can, however, be transformed. It is best to look to God for how to redeem the beasts and transform them into harmony with their Creator once more.

Which masks will we wear this "All Hallows Eve"? Will it be the mask of beauty or the mask of the beast? Will we confess that within our world and within ourselves both beauty and beast reside? Every day we must "fall on our knees with our face to the rising sun and say 'Oh Lord, have mercy on me.'" Only our openness to confessing our inward beasts can make room for the beauty of God's grace.

Today's scripture lesson, as well as the movie I've used to illustrate its themes, is a "tale as old as time" which has always been God's message to us. It is through loving and being loved that we are redeemed and transformed. It is through loving and being loved that we belong in God's world, and it is through extending that love to others that in the end will reconcile and redeem and transform us into the people God calls us to be. AMEN