

## **The Gospel according to Disney: Sanctuary!**

August 8, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Luke 18:9-14**

Today we get to continue with our fun, playful, end-of-summer series titled “The Gospel according to Disney,” a look at some favorite Disney animated movies – both old and new – that teach us profound truths rooted deeply in scripture. The last two weeks we explored a couple of Disney “originals” – stories that did not exist before the movies came out. But this week we are turning to a movie based on a book. Specifically, an 1830s French novel by Victor Hugo titled *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

So, it should probably go without saying that Disney’s *The Hunchback* is a totally and completely Disney-fied rendition on the novel. For any of you who are really into classic literature, you would probably be frustrated by this movie – because it takes a lot of liberties – to make it appropriate for kids. And even so, this movie really pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable for a kids’ movie in the ‘90s. It was probably the darkest animated movie that Disney had ever made up until that point. It played with the themes of prejudice, murder, cruelty, lust, and hell.

And it sought to answer one basic question, posed at the very beginning of the movie: What makes a monster, and what makes a man?

So in this story, we have four main characters.

The first one is Frollo. In Victor Hugo’s novel, Frollo was a clergyperson – a priest. An archdeacon, to be exact – so basically one of the higher-ups in the church. Somebody with power, and authority, with lots of other priests underneath him. I think Disney probably didn’t want to deal with the backlash that they would get from making the bad guy in their story a priest, or a pastor, so in the movie Frollo is a judge. And he is all about purging the city of Paris of what he believes to be ugliness, lawlessness, and unsavory people. And in his mind, the gypsy population had become a HUGE problem. He saw them as troublemakers. Rabblers. Petty thieves and bandits. People who practiced witchcraft and sorcery to lie and cheat and steal. So he made it his mission to wipe out all of the gypsies, in an effort to clean up the city.

So one day he is hunting down a group of gypsies and he catches one – a young woman carrying a bundle of cloths. Frollo assumes that it is a bag of stolen goods, so he yanks the bundle away from the woman, who falls down and hits her head on the steps of Notre Dame Cathedral and dies. Frollo realizes too late that this bundle is not stolen property, but is – in fact – a baby, who had been born misshapen. He tried to toss the baby down a well to kill it, but was caught in the act by the priest, who threatens him with divine judgment and forces him to raise the child as his own.

Yes, in case you were wondering...this is a G-rated *Disney* movie. I told you that it gets dark! And this is all just in the first 5 minutes!

So Frollo begrudgingly agrees. He names the child Quasimodo, which means “half-formed.” Or, that’s the way Disney tells it.

Actually, in the novel Frollo isn’t quite as villainous as he is in the movie. In the book, the story goes that he found the child abandoned, and out of the goodness of his heart he adopted and raised the child. The name Quasimodo actually comes from the Latin name for the first Sunday after Easter – the day that Frollo found the child. On that Sunday the Latin mass begins with the words “*Quasi modo geniti infantes*,” “Like newborn babies, crave spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” Basically, “Long for God. Seek God. Yearn for God. Rely totally and completely on God. Seek the spiritual nourishment that only God can offer.”

So, whether the name Quasimodo points to his deformed figure, or to our constant, unrelenting need for God, Quasimodo grows up as the bell ringer in the tower of Notre Dame Cathedral. And in the movie, even though he is raised in isolation, by Frollo, who is a mean and cruel man, and his only friends are the stone gargoyles, Quasimodo somehow, miraculously grows up into a timid yet kind and thoughtful young man who wants nothing more than to experience life outside the walls of the bell tower.

So one day, during the Feast of Fools – an annual gypsy celebration – Quasimodo sneaks out of the bell tower to join the festivities down on the square, and there he meets our third main character, Esmerelda.

Esmerelda is a young gypsy woman. In the book, she was a 16-year-old dancer who had been kidnapped by the gypsies, but in the movie she was an adult and she was a gypsy herself; someone who loved and advocated for her people, and someone who also, even though she herself was part of a marginalized and misunderstood group, was also a kind and gentle soul who always stood up for the “little guy,” for the outsider, for the misfit.

This got her into trouble sometimes, though, when she would stand up to Frollo. And when she stood up for Quasimodo and openly defied Frollo’s orders, he issued a warrant for her arrest and she sought sanctuary inside the cathedral.

And this is when we meet the fourth and final main character: Captain Phoebus. A captain of the army and Esmerelda’s new love interest – much to the dismay of both Quasimodo and Frollo, both of whom are very much attracted to this beautiful gypsy woman. Because, what’s a Disney movie without a good love triangle?

So, after Esmerelda takes refuge in the cathedral, she gets a little bit stir-crazy and discovers that she cannot stay locked up there forever. Quasimodo helps her escape;

Frollo launches an all-out manhunt that comes to a head when he orders an innocent family's home to be burned with the family locked inside.

*(Did I mention this is a Disney Movie?)*

And Phoebus, refusing to carry out Frollo's orders to murder innocent people, flees the army with a price now on *his* head. In the end, Frollo tricks Quasimodo into helping him find the gypsy hideout; he sentences Esmerelda and Phoebus to burn at the stake, Quasimodo rescues both of them, Frollo falls down off of the cathedral to his fiery death; Quasimodo gives Esmerelda and Phoebus his blessing, and the gypsy community welcomes Quasimodo into their fold with open arms. And they all lived happily ever after.

In the movie, that is. In the book, they all died. But because this is Disney and not a 19<sup>th</sup> century French novel, they all lived happily ever after. The end.

What makes a monster, and what makes a man?

Where is the dividing line between good and evil? Between right and wrong? Between righteousness and sin?

That is the big question that this movie addresses. And while the movie makes it totally obvious: Frollo is bad and everybody else is good, life is sometimes a little bit more nuanced than that.

On the one hand: We have a judge. Or a priest (depending on whether you are going by the book or the movie). A respected member of the community. A keeper of the law. A champion of order and decorum. Somebody who tries to do right, to live by the letter of the law, and to carry out his responsibility dutifully. He sees himself as a righteous man, who values purity above all else. And he simply cannot understand those who see life differently from him. And he is swift to carry out what he views to be justice. Unfortunately, though, it is a justice devoid of mercy. What he lacks is compassion.

And then we have, on the other hand, Quasimodo and Esmerelda. On the outside, they just look to be a hot mess. Quasimodo is disfigured and deformed. In the book he is also partially blind and he has gone almost totally deaf as a result of ringing the bells for so many years. He does what is asked of him and he mostly follows the rules, but he doesn't *look* the part of a respectable member of society. Esmerelda definitely *looks* the part, but she doesn't *act* the part. She is a rebel. She doesn't run with a genteel or polite crowd; she will bend and break the rules whenever it suits her. She may not be a lawless criminal, but she's certainly not an innocent victim, either. And yet, she has kindness and compassion in spades.

Frollo's problem is that he *thinks* he is the good guy. When in fact, he is the villain. Quasimodo *thinks* he is a monster. When in fact, he is the hero.

All of their assumptions about themselves are turned upside-down. In the words of the head of the gypsies:

*Topsy turvy! Ev'rything is upsy daysy!  
Topsy turvy! Ev'ryone is acting crazy  
Dross is gold and weeds are a bouquet  
That's the way on Topsy Turvy Day*

And what we come to discover is that people are not always what they seem at first glance. Those who look to be pious and righteous also have demons that they are fighting, and those who seem messy and broken may, in fact, be deeply-abiding people who are worth getting to know.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus was always all about the topsy-turvy. He delighted in blowing people's minds and turning expectations on their heads. Especially when it came to the Pharisees.

We love to rag on the Pharisees a lot. In the gospels, they never come out looking good. But the truth is, if it weren't for the Pharisees, there may never have been a Jewish community in the New Testament, and thus, there may never have been a Christian church to be born out of the Jewish faith. The Pharisees were the keepers of the law; the keepers of tradition. They were the historians of the faith community. The ones who remembered and re-told and passed down the stories of their people from one generation, to the next, to the next. They made sure that their people never forgot who they were, or whose they were.

They were obsessive rule-followers, because in their minds, breaking God's law was like spitting in God's face. Unfortunately, though, they would occasionally get a wee bit too rigid in their legalism, and they would forget that the law existed to point people to God, not the other way around. They could also get pretty self-righteous, believing that they were better than everybody else because they (and they alone) followed *all* of God's requirements. And they would look upon those who would bend and even break the rules (including Jesus himself) with a great deal of scorn.

And while I think Jesus probably appreciated their dedication to God's commandments, he was fond of pointing out to them that "it seems like you've got everything upside-down. You've lost the *point* of the law in your *following* of the law. And in so doing, you have made the law – an idol. And as such, you have broken the very first commandment – to love and serve God only. So it's time to go back to the drawing board."

And to drive home this point, Jesus tells the story of a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. It could've been the story of a judge and a gypsy, or of an archdeacon and a hunchback, because it's really the same story. A Pharisee who, when he prays, prays "God, thank you that I'm not like that sinner over there," pointing to a tax collector, a common criminal and petty thief, who had kneeled down to pray "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

“It’s not the lawkeeper who went home justified,” Jesus told the religious leaders. “It’s the tax collector. The gypsy. The hunchback. The petty thief. The bandit dying on the cross next to Jesus. It’s the one living the messy and broken life who recognizes their need for a savior. The one who knows that their life is a mess, and who stops trying to fix it by their own power. The one who is forced to turn to God, because they are out of other options. *That* is the person who will encounter God today. Not the one who has taken it upon himself to fix everybody else, but the one who humbly asks God to please fix *me*. “Lord, show me, *me*.”

Friends, we live in a culture filled with finger-pointing. The truth is, we as human beings have *always* been experts at pointing out the faults of others and turning a blind eye to ourselves, but I think it is worse today. The combination of 24-hour news cycles, plus the Internet, plus social media has given us a little, peephole-sized window into the life of pretty much anybody we could think of, from our next-door neighbor, to our elected officials and world leaders across the globe. And then, the political and ideological divisions in our society have given every single one of us the illusion that we alone hold the moral high ground. And that combination is a dangerous one, because it makes it so easy to demonize one another based on half-truths and misinformation – when the only lives we can ever really speak to are our own.

And we can only even know ourselves when we ask God to show us ourselves – both the beautiful *and* the ugly; the places where we are trying hard and missing the mark, as well as the places where God’s image already shines brightly upon and through us.

So today, may we come before God humbly, knowing that we are loved, and knowing that we are messy. Knowing that we are created in God’s image, and knowing that we sometimes fail to display God’s image. May we come, ready to be received by God, and in the same breath transformed by God – that we, like Quasimodo, like Esmerelda, like the tax collector, may be filled with hope, with joy, and with belonging.