

The Gospel According to Disney sermon series  
Pinocchio  
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Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

We're in the middle of our "Gospel according to Disney" sermon series, but Amy and I have been watching so many Disney movies that we decided this week to take a break. Instead, we watched a slightly disturbing movie about a young juvenile delinquent runaway who pays no attention to authority and constantly gets into trouble, doing things like smoking, drinking, and oogling at girls. Can you imagine such behavior for a kid who's probably not even 10 yet? Well, turns out we were watching "Pinocchio." You sure could get away with a lot in the 1940s!

"Pinocchio" was Disney's second feature-length film, following three years after 1937's "Snow White." It's based on an 1883 children's story by Carlo Collodi and tells the tale of a toymaker named Geppetto who creates a marionette of a little boy, and then wishes for him to come to life. A fairy grants that wish and then, as you might say, hijinks ensue.

Most people know Pinocchio as the little puppet whose nose would grow when he would tell a lie. In fact, that very threat kept me in line when I was a kid. When I would try to get away with something, the fear of my nose growing scared me out of lying...mostly. Every once in a while, I'd tell a little fib about how many cookies I had before dinner, then would run to the bathroom and check the mirror to see if my schnozz had grown.

While lying may be what Pinocchio is known for, there's a whole lot more to this story. It's a story about what it means to be free. It's a story about what it means to be real. It's a story about transformation and what it means to choose between right and wrong. And it's a story about a cricket who gets commissioned to be Pinocchio's conscience and does a really, really horrible job. Think about all the trouble Pinocchio gets into after Jiminy is appointed to be his conscience! When Jiminy Cricket is awarded a gold star at the end of the movie, I literally shouted at the TV, "He doesn't deserve that!" I guess there's room for grace in this world, even for crickets.

Once the fairy brings Pinocchio to life, Geppetto sends him off to school. But the naïve Pinocchio is quickly waylaid by a sly fox, who recognizes the value in a marionette with no strings attached. He seduces Pinocchio on the "easy road to success" and promises, "It's great to be a celebrity!" So, Pinocchio ditches school, starts his own Tik Tok account, and becomes an influencer...well, that's what he would probably do today. Instead, he joins the traveling entertainment show run by Stromboli, who sees Pinocchio as his stringless cash cow and features him in the main act.

While surrounded by seductively clad marionettes dancing in a decidedly PG-13 way, Pinocchio sings his signature song: "I've got no strings to hold me down, to make me fret or make me frown. I had strings, but now I'm free. There are no strings on me!" Ironically, the song finishes with Pinocchio singing that last line while caught up in a jumble of strings from the marionettes around him.

Do you have any strings on you? I don't think I do. I know I have a lot of dog hair on me, maybe a stray chicken feather, but that comes with the territory in our house. But do we have strings? My guess is we would say we don't for two reasons. First, we're Americans, and no one can tell us what to do. We don't answer to a king or an emperor, and we sometimes only reluctantly answer to the laws of our government, depending on who's in charge and whether or not I think someone's watching when I roll through a stop sign.

But we're also free in a deeper way. We are free because of what Christ has done for us. As Paul writes in Romans, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." Before Jesus, believers were governed by God's law, which restricted what they could and couldn't do as people of faith. But because Christ has come, we are free to do whatever we want, because we know we'll be forgiven. Right?

Yes, we have freedom as both Americans and Christians, but the truth we all know is that there are still strings attached. We are gloriously, wonderfully free, but not to do whatever we want. I'm free to roll through that stop sign, but the police officer who was watching is also free to give me a ticket. Likewise, I'm free as a Christian from the laws that told me how to behave, but that doesn't mean I'm free to do whatever I want. Because, as we know, with actions come consequences. There are still strings attached.

The story I read today tells about another juvenile delinquent, one who thought he was free to do whatever he wanted. Like Pinocchio, he runs away to live the life he thinks is best for him, free from the authority of his loving father. We're told he takes his inheritance to a distant country and "squanders his property on dissolute living."

So does Pinocchio. Even when given a second chance, he lets himself be tempted to venture to Pleasure Island, the place where bad boys go to give into their temptations, like playing pool and smoking cigars. What they don't know is that the more they give into this bad behavior, the more they change into donkeys, with literal donkey ears and tails. Incidentally, in a move that lacks any irony, in 1989 Walt Disney World opened up an entertainment area right outside its theme park with restaurants, bars, and nightclubs. The name? Pleasure Island. I'm sure a lot of people made donkeys of themselves there, too.

This part of the movie highlights the challenge we all deal with when faced with temptation. The truth of our existence is that we are never staying the same. The old axiom is you never dip your toe in the same stream twice, because the water is always moving. Every decision we make changes the course of our lives. What if we hadn't gone to that party or said yes to that second date or took that job out of town? But it's not just the big decisions. Even the small ones have consequences, both good and bad. If I hadn't decided to hop onto a dating app on my Sunday evening in July of 2020, I never would have met this cute girl from South Carolina. Our decisions always have ripple effects.

So, if we're never staying the same, if we're always changing, what are we changing into? Pinocchio wants to transform into a real boy, but his choices lead him to turn into a donkey instead. When he gives into his temptations, when he lets his sinful nature drive the bus, he ends up enjoying earthly pleasures but with potentially eternal consequences. Early in the movie, Jiminy Cricket defines temptations as "the wrong things that seem right at the time." Pinocchio is indeed transforming but isn't not the transformation he wanted. He's giving into the wrong things that seem right at the time.

What about us? Are we becoming the people we want to be? It's so easy to get caught up in the temptations and responsibilities of life, to get tangled in the strings that hold us down, and realize down the road that while we wanted to be come real in the way God created us to be, we've spend too much time making donkeys of ourselves, letting others dictate our direction, listening to voices that drown out the voice of God.

That's what happened to the Prodigal Son, but he comes to his senses and realizes that he needs to be reminded of who he really is. He realizes that in his pursuit of everything he wanted, he lost everything he loved. So, he heads home, prepared to work on his father's farm as a servant. Likewise, Pinocchio comes to the same realization that his pursuit of pleasure and his

deceitful life have cost him the things he held most dear: family, friends, even his own freedom. So, he escapes Pleasure Island and heads home to his father, his creator, to be reminded of who he really is, to be grounded once again in his father's love.

Only his father isn't home. Geppetto has gone searching for him and has been swallowed by a giant whale. Jonah, anyone? Pinocchio goes after his father and rescues him, only to lose his own life in the process. When the fairy brought Pinocchio to life, she told him, "Prove yourself brave, truthful and unselfish, and someday you will be a real boy." Through his valiant efforts to save his father, Pinocchio has done this, so the fairy returns. Forgiving all the wrong steps Pinocchio has taken, she grants Geppetto's wish. Pinocchio transforms into a fully alive human being.

Thankfully, we worship a God who doesn't ask us to prove anything. God doesn't call us to transform into something we're not; God only asks us to be who we were fully created to be. God knows how hard that is for us, how easily we fall short, how much we give into the temptations around us. So, our Creator sent us his son as a fully alive human being, offering us grace and love and the reminder that forgiveness is ours for the asking.

That's what the Prodigal Son learns when he returns home. Rather than punishing him, the father runs out to greet his lost son and throws him a lavish party. I believe God responds the same way every time we come to our senses, realize our wrong steps, and return to God's grace. This process of transformation is not linear. Sometimes it's one step forward, two steps toward Pleasure Island. But God has graciously cut the strings that have kept us bound to that kind of life. We can still choose it, mind you. We can still choose to live in a way that hides God's light in us, that puts our own needs over others, that relegates faith to a Sunday-only pursuit. We can do that. But that's not who we are. That's not who we are created to be, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians: "Surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

In the end, Pinocchio transformation is complete. Ours, however, is a life-long endeavor. I don't believe we ever fully get there. But I like to think that transformation is not found in the destination, but in the journey itself, as each day we take one step closer to being who Christ has called us to be. What are you going to do today to take that step? What are you going to say...or not say to be more like Jesus? Who are you going to call? What are you going to give up or give away? Every choice you make is a step toward transformation. Every decision has a string attached that can lead to positive or negative consequences for ourselves and others. Yes, we are free, and thank God for that. We are free to choose how we will transform. So, the question Pinocchio leaves us with is a simple one: what are you transforming into?