

The Gospel According to Disney sermon series
Wreck-It Ralph
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What's the most lost you have ever been? I remember in high school I was part of a basketball team that traveled to a small town in southern Virginia for a tournament. Now this town was so remote that even the colonists had yet to discover it. After one night game, we headed back to the hotel. There were four of us in the car, two white and two black, We were acutely aware that we were driving through an area where the KKK was considered a civic organization so we were eager to get back to the hotel.

As you know, the conversations of high school boys can be intellectually stimulating and quite engrossing, and I soon realized that I, the driver, had been so involved in our discussion – I think it was about either nuclear physics or girls, I'm not sure which – that I had not paid attention to where we were going. And I realized two things: first, we were lost, and second, we were very low on gas.

The car got extremely quiet – no small feat for four high schoolers talking about nuclear physics – as everyone else realized our dilemma. Nothing around us looked familiar or friendly. We drove blindly for several minutes, hoping against hope that we would stumble across a main road, or a paved road for that matter. Now, we were not religious folk at the time, but I believe the name of God was invoked more during this drive than at any other point in the history of Christianity. Finally, we saw a light on the side of the road that turned out to be a filling station. We gassed up, got directions, and made it back to our hotel, but I still remember how my heart felt that night. There's no feeling in the world like finding your way after you've been lost.

As we continue our "Gospel According to Disney" sermon series today, we are encountering two characters who are completely lost, not geographically but vocationally and, I would argue spiritually. On the surface, the two characters couldn't be more different. Wreck-It Ralph is a behemoth of a guy, a lumbering giant with bulging muscles and a love of destroying buildings. And Luke tells us that Zacchaeus is so short he can't see over the crowd that had gathered to meet Jesus. What the two have in common is that they both secretly want to change.

Wreck-It Ralph was the most popular animated story of 2012. That may surprise some of you. Why would a movie about a video game character be so popular? Obviously, you never spent any time in Aladdin's Castle. For those of us of a certain age, Aladdin's Castle was the magical oasis in the midst of the time-sucking shopping mall. While our moms browsed at Dillard's or Penney's, we would grab a slice from Sbarro or some pretzels from Auntie Anne's and head for Aladdin's Castle, the wall-to-wall arcade filled with pinball machines, video games, and the one challenge that I can't believe still hasn't been made an Olympic sport: skeeball. When you put your money in the change machine and heard the cascading tinkle of the quarters coming out, you knew you were about to live your best life. Or three lives, if you were playing Pacman or Galaga.

Wreck-It Ralph is a character in the game Fix-It Felix Jr. Ralph's job is to wreck the building inhabited by the Nicelanders, and Fix-It Felix's job is to repair it. Every game, all day long, Ralph wrecks it and Felix fixes it, until the arcade closes, the Nicelanders turn out their lights, and Ralph the bad guy goes to sleep in the dumpster. But here's the thing: Ralph doesn't want to be the bad guy.

Zacchaeus can relate to Ralph's existential dilemma because all the Jewish Nicelanders in Jericho considered Zacchaeus a bad guy. Not only was he a tax collector, but he was the chief tax collector. As you may remember, tax collectors were despised in Jesus' day, because they were Jews who worked for the Roman empire collecting unfair and oppressing taxes from the people, and usually charging more and keeping some for themselves. So as a chief, Zacchaeus was as hated and as feared as the mafia boss or the head drug dealer. He was a traitor, a cheater, and a deceiver. He was still technically a Jew, but for the community, he was lost forever. He was the quintessential bad guy.

Now, you know this had to take its toll on Zacchaeus. His lifestyle and career couldn't have made him happy or fulfilled. In fact, it probably made him miserable and isolated. My guess is he sat around at night, maybe trying to wash away his guilt with a bottle of wine, wondering how in the world he let himself get like this. Luke tells us he was a short man, but that doesn't just describe his physical stature. He's short spiritually, he's short on friends and loved ones, he's short in his relationship with God. And somewhere deep in his heart, just like Ralph, he wants to change.

Ralph deals with these feelings by going to a Bad Guys Anonymous club and confessing that he's a bad guy who no longer wants to be bad. One of the other members consoles him by saying, "You are a bad guy, but that doesn't mean you're a *bad guy*." Another says, "Ralph, Ralph, we get it. But we can't change who we are. The sooner you accept that, the better off you, and your game, will be." And then they all repeat the Bad Guys Anonymous motto: "I'm bad, and that's good. I will never be good, and that's not bad. There's no one I'd rather be than me."

"I will never be good, and that's not bad." I know a few folks like that. Some people feel like they are just a glitch in the system, that God doesn't care about them, that they deserve to be looked down on by the Nicelanders who have the perfect kids and the perfect yard and the perfect life. They've resigned themselves to being seen as bad, just knowing the Nicelanders will never be able to see them as good, if they even see them at all.

But that's not good enough for Ralph or Zacchaeus. They believe in their hearts that are not meant to be bad, even if life's circumstances have put them in that position. So, both of them take drastic steps to change their situation. When the Nicelanders exclude Ralph from the video game's 30th-anniversary party, Ralph escapes his game in search of a gold medal which will prove to the Nicelanders that he's really a good guy at heart. On the other hand, Zacchaeus tosses out all social convention and climbs a tree just to get a glimpse of Jesus, the one person he believes will see him for who he really is, not for what society tells him he is, not who others think he is.

Jesus' response must have shocked the Nicelanders in the crowd as much as it did Zacchaeus. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." Jesus speaks with such urgency, as if this were a life-or-death statement! He didn't say, "Hey, Zacchaeus, I'd like to stop by sometime." Zacchaeus didn't pull out calendar and say, "Well, I'm free next Tuesday after lunch." Jesus says, "*Hurry* and come down, I *must* stay at your house *today*."

So Zacchaeus came down and accepted Jesus into his home and into his heart, and was saved from being lost. Little Zacchaeus stood tall to announce that he was a changed man and promised to make up for his evil deeds. By calling him a son of Abraham, Jesus reconnected Zacchaeus to the foundation of his heritage. In effect, Jesus was saying, "Zacchaeus, you've been lost, but now you are found, and are restored to your rightful place as a Jew and one of God's children."

Jesus was able to help Zacchaeus understand something that many of us struggle with our whole lives. He was able to help Zacchaeus understand the difference between what he does and who he is. It's the same wisdom Ralph was given at the Bad Guys Anonymous meeting: Just because you're a bad guy doesn't mean you're a bad guy. You see, it's all a matter of perspective, because we all have the capacity to be bad guys. Our sinful nature turns us into Wreck-It Ralphs. We wreck relationships, we wreck how other people are seen and treated, we wreck the justice and equality God envisioned for our communities. Even the Nicelanders in our world can wreck things.

But that's not who we are. We are, at our core, children of God. Doesn't matter if we're tall or short. Doesn't matter where we live or what we do for work or who we love. We are all God's creation, an important part of God's body. No one is a glitch in God's system. We all have a place here. We all matter. And we all are called to embrace Christ's love for us, to leave behind whatever is wrecking our relationship with God.

That sounds good, doesn't it? I've meaning to do that. I really need to find time to do that. I bet my life would be better if I did that. But, you know, there's so much going on and life is busy and I'll get to it as soon as I have a moment. What if Ralph had kept putting off making a change? What if Zacchaeus was too busy to climb that tree? They'd be stuck right where they were, living a life far less than what God had intended for them. At some point, they had to say, "Today." Today is that day to make a change. Today is the day to seek out Jesus. Today is the day to start living more like who God created us to be.

Maybe today is your today. Maybe tomorrow will be your today. Or the next day. I don't know when your today will be, but I do know that if you don't choose what day will be your "today," then you'll just go on wrecking things. You know the trite axiom, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life"? We've heard it a million times. But what if that's actually true? What if today is THE day? Whatever it is that's keeping you from a closer relationship with God, today is the day to stop, to start fresh, to receive God's grace. "There's no one I'd rather be than me." Go be the you God created you to be.