

“Zootopia: A Place for All...Really?”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, May 18, 2025

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/>

Scripture for the day:

Ephesians 3:14-15; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 3:16-19 [NRSV]

And the **Disney•Pixar** classic, *Zootopia* (2016).

CVLI Reference: <https://www.screenvue.com/movie/zootopia>

OPENING

We continue today with our Easter worship series:
Easter Through the Eyes of a Child.

This series emphasizes what I find to be a central teaching of Easter: We need not be stuck in patterns of thought and behavior that have the power to rob us of life and entomb us.

Jesus’ passing from death to life through His resurrection, accompanied by His invitation to follow Him and become a new creation in Him (2 Cor. 5:17), means that we can pass from death to life, too. That is, we can be transformed in our inner being through relationship with Christ, into all that God dreams of us becoming. But we have to have eyes to see and ears to hear, along with a willingness to respond, to what the Spirit of God is showing us.

As I’ve said in opening of each of the sermons this season, the driving illustrations for this series are five classic **Disney•Pixar** movies that put some very

grown up themes in playful terms that children AND adults can understand and benefit from.

The movie for today is *Zootopia* from 2016.

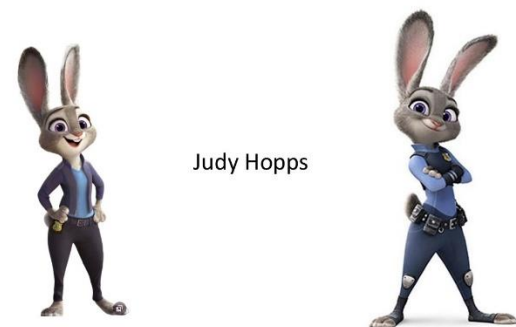
It is set in the animal kingdom in an imaginary time when the natural divisions between predator and prey have been dissolved and the various animal species have learned to overcome their instincts to prey on the lives of the vulnerable – those not equipped to successfully fight tooth-and-nail for their survival.

In the movie, the setting is developed as an ideal one of openness and celebration of differences among the various species, with each one having a place in the community. Reminds me of the kids’ song by Bill Staines “All God’s Creatures Got a Place in the Choir” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTKJUx18TL4>)

Back to Zootopia...

The story revolves around two central characters:

Judy Hopps...



AND, Nick Wilde...



Nick Wilde



Along with a whole bunch of other Critters in the “Choir”



The Zootopia “Choir”

Turns out that Judy, whom Nick affectionately – and also condescendingly – calls “Carrots”...turns out that she and Nick are motivated deep down by the same thing: a disdain for INjustice and an accompanying passion to see justice done in the world.

But how they came to be together in the idealized city of Zootopia was by very different paths. Judy, even as a young bunny in her hometown of Bunnyburrow, dreamed of becoming a police officer – contrary to the

admonitions of her overly cautious parents who warned her not to dream too big, lest she be bitterly disappointed in life.

As a young fox kit, Nick had long wanted to be a member of the Junior Ranger Scouts, a group with a code of ethics and behavioral standards similar to the Cub Scouts today. But, when he was finally able to join them – only after his mother scraped enough together to buy him a uniform – he was humiliated by the prejudice of the older members of the pack simply for his being a fox.

This jaded young Nick, who suppressed his disdain for injustice and became a conman, “looking out for Number 1”, and taking advantage of his famous “fox cunning” at the expense of those taken in by his unethical schemes. You might say his motto was, “Nice guys finish last.”

Naturally, Judy and Nick were on a collision course when she finally made it through the Zootopia Police Academy – at the top of her class! – and was assigned to duty in the City: parking duty – far from what she dreamed of!

Eventually, though, Judy and Nick ended up on the same side of justice, working together to find out where several missing predatory animals were being held – animals who, for some mysterious reason, had reverted to their old, instinctual vicious ways.

Against all odds and with significant handicaps due to their small size and meager strength, Judy and Nick ended up discovering the prison-like facility where the

animals were being held. Unsuitable for release back into the community because of their ferocious, predatory relapse, they were moved to what we might call “protective custody” until the cause of their relapse could be determined and remedied.

As the story continues to unfold, Judy and Nick uncover an evil scheme afoot in Zootopia to destroy all of the predatory species in the city – a kind of retribution for all of those on whom they had preyed and who now outnumbered the predators 10-to-1. The scheme is masterminded by the unassuming, meek and mild-mannered Assistant Mayor of Zootopia, Dawn Bellweather.



Asst. Mayor
Dawn Bellweather



In the end, the Assistant Mayor is brought down, justice is served, and a remedy to the predatory relapse is developed. This restores not only the victims of the evil scheme, but the level of trust in their society, as well – along with an appreciation of the fact that all God’s creatures DO have a place in the Choir! And, of course, Judy and Nick are recognized as the unsung heroes they are – and Nick

finally has a place to belong – REALLY!

Zootopia ending scene:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kzx6ee_1sM

SERMON THOUGHTS: Not-so-childish Themes Running through the Movie

I’ve alluded to one of the themes already:

Inclusion → “All God’s creatures got a place in the choir.” Or in the words of Judy Hopps, “From the biggest elephant to our first fox” – the community needs all of us. And it is incumbent on all of us to work toward INclusion, not EXclusion.

It’s as Peter hears as he is praying on the roof of the home of Simon the tanner in Acts 10: “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean” (Acts 10:8). In other words, none of us has the right to declare another unfit to belong.

A second theme is related to this one: Diversity is a reflection of God’s boundless love and unlimited creativity. The community is made stronger by making a place for “the other”, making a place for difference, not by making “the other” – the different – into pariahs. To reject the value of diversity in community is to reject a central tenet of what Jesus envisioned as the Kingdom of God.

A third theme is similar to one from *Monsters, Inc.*: the manipulation of others’ emotions to achieve one’s goals, no matter what those goals are, is immoral and has no place in a healthy society. Justice demands a place of safety for all, and that means checking the

systems that contribute to injustice and inequity.

Finally is the importance of reaching for the stars. Dream big! Don't let rigid ideas of role or custom or fear of the unknown limit what might be possible in your life. Working hard, taking responsibility for your life, creating opportunity out of challenge – these things are hallmarks of successful individuals and communities.

RESURRECTION / TRANSFORMATION:

The Easter message in Zootopia – that we need not be stuck in patterns of thought and behavior that have the power to rob us of life and entomb us – is found wrapped up in the Scripture readings for this morning.

“Every family in heaven and on earth”, that is, all of us created in the image and likeness of God, are part of God's larger community of life (Eph. 3:14). The understanding is that we are part of God's family, not that only those whom we favor are a part of ours. To preference ourselves as the referent or source of significance in the created order is to get things dangerously backwards. It is also the height of idolatry and sin.

Our significance in the created order comes from the grace of God in Christ and our inclusion in God's family of beings. That's why Paul can erase the lines of division in his day and write, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal. 3:28).

And the driving force behind that reality is “*the breadth and length and height and depth*” of the love of Christ which, if we are grounded in it, fills us “*with all the fullness of God*” (Eph. 3:18-19).

WRAP-UP

To go back to the choir's anthem, it isn't only about the attribute of God's deep love. It's about how that love finds expression and how it is directed: Not to “me”, but to “us”. “*For God so loved the world*” – not just me or those whom I am comfortable including in my circle of association – “*that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever might believe in Him*” – align their lives with His Way – “*might not perish but have everlasting life. The Son did not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.*”

And *THAT* is Good News this morning, my friends.

🎵 REPRISE of Choral Anthem, “How Deep the Father's Love for Us”