

November 2, 2025 | All Saints' Sunday
The Rev. Jack Alvey

Not Magic, But Mercy

My formative years were spent being shaped by Disney classics such as *The Lion King*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Aladdin* — to name a few. In each of these films, there was a clear distinction made between good and evil. The heroes were brave, kind, virtuous. The villains were wicked, selfish, sinful. It was easy to glorify the good guys and demonize the bad ones. It was easy to forget that both hero and villain were only human.

But in more recent years, Disney has changed how it tells its stories. My children have been shaped by a much more nuanced distinction between good and evil. Even better, these more recent films give a more biblical understanding of the nature of humanity.

In *Encanto*, *Moana*, and *Frozen II*, the so-called villains aren't monsters. They're people just like you and me, whose fear, insecurity, and pain have driven them to act destructively. Their hearts weren't always hard. They were wounded. And through love, they are re-created.

These new Disney films remind us of a story much older than Walt Disney — a story where God Almighty declared all of creation very good. In the opening scene of our creation story, we are told that human beings are made in God's image. Humans are born with the divine potential to love, to forgive, to create beauty, and to show compassion.

From the very beginning, God planted that divine potential deep within us — the same dream Jesus would later call the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom isn't just up there in heaven; it's God's dream for how the world can be made right here, right now. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven* — as it is in Jesus.

This kingdom built in and through Jesus is not driven by selfish gain or fear, but by the desire to live for — even die for — the sake of one another. But sadly, it doesn't take long before we lose sight of that kingdom, before we start choosing fear over love, division over community.

Cain kills Abel because he believes he isn't enough in God's eyes. And ever since, we've repeated that same story. Fear, insecurity, and pain teach us there isn't enough love, enough grace, enough room at the table. We divide ourselves from one another and begin to see people not as image bearers of God, but as threats, burdens, problems to solve, enemies to conquer. Seeing others as less than beloved children of God is how we lose sight of the kingdom.

This short-sightedness is how we end up with systems that isolate and discard those whom Jesus calls "blessed" in Luke.

There's a small art gallery in Chattanooga that understands this. It's called the H*ART Gallery. When it first opened in a redeveloping part of town, its walls were constantly tagged with graffiti. Instead of calling the police, the owners did something unexpected. They invited those same artists inside, gave them brushes, canvases, and space to create. Soon, the gallery began to feature and sell their art.

The owners saw past the dehumanizing labels they carried and saw image bearers of the divine. They believed love could draw out what fear and pain had covered up. Suddenly, the same energy that once defaced walls began to create beauty — showing what God's compassion can draw out in us and others, teaching us that there is enough love, enough grace, enough room at the table for everyone.

That's what it looks like when love paints the picture of God's kingdom. The H*ART Gallery reminds us that God's kingdom is alive in each of us — even and especially in those whom society ignores, devalues, or labels as villains.

This is the truth Jesus is trying to convey in Luke's Gospel. Instead of drawing clearer lines between who is in and who is out, Jesus draws the circle wider. He lifts up the poor, the hungry, the grieving, and the rejected — and includes them among the blessed.

Luke's Jesus also speaks to the comfortable, the well-fed, the satisfied. Both the blessings and the woes are spoken in the same thought. He's not dividing one group against another; he's talking to the whole crowd. In Luke, the blessings and the woes are given in the second person. In Southern vernacular, Jesus is talking to y'all — all y'all.

Jesus doesn't let anyone stand at a distance. He is calling each of us to reflect on how our actions either nurture or suppress God's kingdom. His words aren't meant to divide the world into good guys and bad guys; instead, his words are meant to invite the whole crowd — rich and poor, joyful and grieving, powerful and powerless — to see that the kingdom of God is already in us all, waiting to be drawn out through acts of mercy, forgiveness, and love.

Jesus calls the poor, sorrowful, and hungry blessed, not because they are better than anyone else, but to encourage them and to remind the rest of us — who are tempted to think we are better — that they already bear the image of God, that the seeds of the kingdom are already alive within them. Likewise, the warnings — the woes — aren't about condemning others; they reveal the ways fear, pride, and selfishness can choke out God's dream within us — the same dynamic we saw in Cain and Abel.

The problems that face our world today are not an "us versus them" issue; it's an "all y'all" problem. God's kingdom grows when we open our eyes to see every person as a bearer of God's image. That includes even those we struggle to love the most — our enemies.

Jesus' call to love our enemies feels impossible — because, for mortals, it is impossible. But that's the point. It's not about our ability to love; it's about God's. With God, all things are possible. When we let Christ's love flow through us, we begin to see even those who oppose us as bearers of God's image.

The best place I know to let God's love flow through me is at the foot of the cross — where our desire to destroy the enemy leads to the death of the One who came to save us, and where God's desire to love the enemy is fully revealed, as Jesus pleads mercy for us all — for all y'all: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

On this All Saints' Sunday, we are reminded of the many in prior generations who, with God's help, have shown us what this love of enemy looks like in daily life. The saints weren't perfect; they didn't always play the hero. There was a little villain in them too — the same mix of light and dark we all carry. But they trusted that God's love lives in everyone, and they let that trust shape their faith, shape how they lived their lives.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is an example of one of these saints. MLK is remembered on the Episcopal liturgical calendar — our version of the list of saints. While he fought for justice for the voiceless, he lived by the truth that God's love is for all — even the so-called enemy. He didn't demonize his opponents. He recognized that even those who upheld systems of oppression were bound by fear and sin. He called for their liberation, too.

And that kind of love — love that refuses to draw lines between "us" and "them" — is the same love that guides our life together as a congregation. Our mission to make Christ known by our love for all — no asterisks, no conditions attached.

When we act generously, when we forgive, when we serve, when we love even the enemy, we aren't just "doing good things." We are nurturing the kingdom planted within us and drawing it out in others. When we volunteer at First Light or the Abbey, when we check in on a neighbor who is sick or grieving, when we prepare our space for worship and fellowship, when we gather to study God's Word, we aren't just checking things off a to-do list. Rather, we are opening our eyes — and the eyes of those around us — to the kingdom of God which draws near in Jesus.

And here's the truth for us today on All Saints' Sunday: each of us gathered in this place is part of that kingdom work. All y'all are saints of God, too, called to carry God's love wherever you go. And that's the heart of our *Upon This Rock* annual giving campaign — a reminder that our generosity isn't just about dollars and budgets, but about the kingdom of heaven taking root, right here among us.

Each pledge, each act of generosity, is a way God works through us to nurture God's kingdom — in our hearts and in the world around us. The kingdom of heaven is already within us — within all y'all — and by God's grace, each of us is invited to help it flourish.

Fairy tales end when the hero wins and the villain is defeated and the kingdom lives happily ever after. But the kingdom of heaven begins not when the bad guy loses, but when mercy, compassion, and kindness conquer the villain within us all — drawing out the goodness hidden behind the lines and labels we've made between us and them.

God's love has the power to transform our fear, insecurity, and pain, bringing forth the goodness that was there all along. It's not magic and fairy dust that transforms the world; it's God's mercy. And unlike the stories that fade when the credits roll, God's story keeps unfolding — here, now, in us.

In all y'all.