

The Gospel According to Pixar sermon series

“Toy Story”

[John 15:12-17](#)

Today, we start a new sermon series, “The Gospel According to Pixar.” Each Sunday for the next 4 weeks, we will be watching clips from different Pixar films and exploring spiritual messages contained in them.

We begin with Toy Story, a movie that came out in 1995. It was the first feature-length computer-animated film and is considered to be one of the best animated films ever made. It was a box office hit, becoming popular worldwide. It resulted in two sequels that were even more successful. Pixar is now working on Toy Story 4, which is to come out sometime next year.

Toy Story is a tale about the secret lives of Andy’s toys, who come to life whenever the little boy leaves the room or goes to sleep. The film centers around two of the toys, Sheriff Woody and Buzz Lightyear and their unlikely friendship. Woody is an old pull-string cowboy, and Buzz is a state-of-the art space ranger with wings and laser beams.

Until Buzz arrives as a surprise gift for Andy on his birthday, Woody enjoys a charmed life as Andy’s favorite, #1 toy. He gets to go wherever Andy goes. Even sleeping in Andy’s bed as all the other toys are put away in a chest for the evening. Woody even has Andy’s name written at the bottom of his shoe! And owing to his status as Andy’s favorite toy, Woody serves as the leader of Andy’s toys, who include Bo Beep the Shepherdess, Mr. Potato Head, Rex the Dinosaur, Hamm the Piggy Bank, and Slinky Dog.

Unfortunately for Woody, everything changes with the arrival of Buzz Lightyear. As the new toy, he is the toy that gets all of Andy’s attention. And he quickly becomes Andy’s favorite, even taking over Woody’s role as the one toy Andy takes to bed at night. Yes, all the privileges Woody once enjoyed pass on to Buzz. And for the first time, Woody joins the rest of the toys in the toy chest at night.

As a brand new toy, Buzz does not know who he really is. As the world’s greatest superhero, he thinks that he is more important than anyone else. He believes he is a real space ranger, who crash landed on earth. He thinks he has to repair the cardboard box spaceship he was packaged in, so that he can return to Star Command and continue to fight the evil Emperor Zurg who threatens the entire universe. He impresses the other toys with the various cool features he comes with, including wings that take him “to infinity and beyond.” And, he boasts about his place as Andy’s favorite, showing off Andy’s name at the bottom of his shoe.

How does Woody respond to Buzz and his inflated ego? Of course, he is not happy about the unexpected changes the new toy brought to his life. He feels left out. He no longer feels like he is important to anyone. He is jealous. He struggles with the whole thing. Let’s take a look at the unpleasant beginning of Buzz and Woody’s friendship.

(Show clip #1)

Jealousy is a nasty thing. It can make us think and act irrationally. It can cause us to compromise our values and standards. Operating from a place of low-self esteem, insecurity, and instability, it can make us become negative, angry, and mean toward people we envy. It is one of the major hurdles to a healthy relationship.

Woody's jealousy toward Buzz quickly gets out of control. Woody keeps trying to eliminate Buzz, so that he will once again be Andy's favorite toy. Woody's jealousy even causes him to want to intentionally harm Buzz. Buzz fights back, and things get very complicated. Due to their conflict, one night, Woody and Buzz end up in the hands of Andy's next door neighbor, Sid. The mischievous little boy tortures toys for his own amusement. He takes his toys apart and reassembles them into scary looking creatures. And sometimes, he just destroys them for no reason.

Scared about what will happen to him, Woody attempts to escape from captivity but fails. While at Sid's, Buzz sees a TV commercial that is advertising a new toy called Buzz Lightyear. He realizes that Woody was right. He does not have special powers. His laser beam is just a blinking light. His spaceship is just made of cardboard. And that he isn't really a space ranger, but just a toy! Suddenly, he feels worthless. But at the spur of the moment, he tries to mount a daring escape. Let's take a look.

(Show clip #2)

Watching the scene of Buzz helplessly lying on the floor with his arm broken off his body and listening to the song, "I Will Go Sailing No More" in the background is emotional. Perhaps some of you couldn't help but have tears welling up in your eyes because you have been there or you are there now. You know how it feels to be in that state of embarrassment with a crushed ego and a wounded pride. You know how it feels to be in that state of vulnerability and helplessness. You know how it feels to be alone with your brokenness, whether it's in your body, your mind, or your soul.

For me one of those places was when I was sitting on the snow-covered icy driveway with broken teeth and a broken elbow after taking a hard fall out of the blue. I remember the sense of helplessness. I remember how embarrassed I felt on the day after my elbow surgery, the moment I realized that I could not bounce back from surgery just in a couple of days, as I had assumed. Believe it or not, in the e-news article I had written a day before my surgery on Wednesday, I said to my church family, "I am planning to come to worship with you this Sunday, though I might not be able to preach." Well, for the first time, I realized how little I knew about the nature of any major surgery and how un-empathetic I was about the pain of others...

Going back to Toy Story, Buzz soon finds out that he is not alone. In his vulnerability and defenselessness, he discovers help coming from a totally unexpected place. The weird looking toys in Sid's bedroom come together and repair his broken arm! And, guess who else helps Buzz restore his self-esteem and self-confidence? Let's take a look.

(Show clip #3)

Woody helps Buzz restore his self-worth and self-confidence by redefining his identity and purpose. Hear what Woody tells Buzz again: "Over in that house is a kid who thinks you're the greatest. And, it's not because you're a Space Ranger, pal. It's because you're a toy. You are his toy." Buzz realizes that he is important not because of what he does but because of who he is. He is Andy's favorite toy! The worth of Buzz is no longer defined by his job, but by his relationship to Andy.

In the process of encouraging Buzz, Woody says he is even willing to sacrifice his life for him. At this point, the relationship between Woody and Buzz starts to improve. When Buzz is taken outside to be blown up by Sid, Woody puts down his pride and pleads with Sid's toys for their help. When the rescue mission succeeds, Buzz thanks Woody and shakes his hand. It is a scene of love and redemption. Through the experience, their friendship is born, and they become best friends.

In all traditions and cultures, friendships are highly valued. Over the course of a lifetime, different types of friendships are developed and maintained. When we know we have made a friend, we experience joy. And, all meaningful relationships require some level of friendship.

In our modern world of social networking, it's difficult to understand the meaning of friendship. We live in a world where anyone can instantly become your friend. They just have to sign up and request to be your friend. And in a world where we can either friend or unfriend anyone with a click of the mouse or tap of the finger, traditional definitions of friends and friendship seem to no longer apply. On some level, we understand what friendship means, but on another level, we don't. We really don't.

And it's times like these that the Word of God is a lamp unto our feet. The biblical understanding of friendship is grounded in love, a love that we first receive from God. And this gift that we freely receive, the gift of friendship, comes to us in the form of Jesus Christ, who seeks a relationship with us, even on our worst days; even when we are not acting like ourselves with jealousy and envy; even when we are feeling alone and broken; even when we do not choose him. In today's scripture, Jesus says to his disciples, the ones he calls his friends, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And, I appointed you to go and bear fruit..."

Brothers and Sisters, friends, hear the good news of Jesus Christ, the One who tells us, you've got a friend in me; the One who has laid down his life for us, demonstrating God's great love for us and God's desire to be in relationship with us. May we follow his example and his command and be willing to offer others our friendship grounded in love! Jesus tells us, "Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things that I command you." Amen!

Let's take a look at the final scene of Toy Story. (Show clip #4.)

(["You've Got a Friend in Me"](#) song is sung immediately after the clip.)