The story of “Beauty and the Beast” has been around since 1740, when it was first published by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. It was quite a long and involved story that probably would have disappeared had it not been for the work of Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont, who abridged the story in 1757. It was in that same year that the first English translation was produced. So, for all intent and purpose, think of “Beauty and the Beast” being as old as the United States.

The folks at Disney took up the project in 1930 and again in 1950. But it wasn’t until 1991 that the final version of the story received the full Disney treatment. Howard Ashman and Alan Menken were brought in to write the score and songs. The film received a screenwriter, the first time a screenwriter had ever been used in a Disney animated film. Up to this point, the images and the story boards guided production. “Beauty and the Beast” was to be far more story driven than its predecessors. A stellar voice cast was assembled and in 1991 the movie premiered to resounding acceptance and acclaim. In April, 1994, “Beauty and the Beast” made its Broadway premiere and ran through 2007.

It is a great story, filled with great music, and just enough of the Disney magic to keep audiences of every age engaged in its tale.

But, there’s more to it than meets the eye. There’s a telling of the gospel story that must not be missed. It is to that story that we now turn.

Now, here’s the most important warning I can offer you: when you go to see “Beauty and the Beast” this summer, don’t be late! If you miss the first five minutes, you miss the whole story. Show up late and you’ll wonder what this is all about.
So, just in case you miss it, here’s what you need to know:

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, a young Prince lived in a shining castle.

Although he had everything his heart desired,

the Prince was spoiled, selfish, and unkind.

But then, one winter’s night, an old beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold.

Repulsed by her haggard appearance, the Prince sneered at the gift, and turned the old woman away.

But she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for Beauty is found within.

And when he dismissed her again, the old woman’s ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful Enchantress.

The Prince tried to apologize, but it was too late, for she had seen that there was no love in his heart.

And as punishment, she transformed him into a hideous beast, and placed a powerful spell on the castle, and all who lived there.

Ashamed of his monstrous form, the beast concealed himself inside his castle, with a magic mirror as his only window to the outside world.

The Rose she had offered, was truly an enchanted rose, which would bloom for many years.

If he could learn to love another, and earn her love in return by the time the last petal fell, then the spell would be broken.

If not, he would be doomed to remain a beast for all time.

As the years passed, he fell into despair, and lost all hope, for who could ever learn to love...a Beast?

Everything you need to know about the entire story is right there. And everything you need to know about this sermon is right there too.

What creates a beast? The inability to love. What defaces the image of God in which we were created? The unwillingness to love. What makes us less than what God created us to be? It is our self-centeredness that makes it impossible for us to see the needs of another and reach out to them.

And let’s be clear: we’re talking about a particular kind of love. We English-speaking people have one word for love – “love.” We love french fries, football, and other people. At some level that is an insult to someone or something. We use the word “love” with a kind of elasticity that is dangerous. We can stretch love to mean all kinds of things.

But the Greeks were nothing if not meticulous. They had four words for love and the word we’re dealing with in Galatians and Corinthians is a particular word. *Agapē* is the word in Greek that speaks of an unconditional, self-sacrificing,
outreaching love. It is the love that is commended to Christians as the love they should have for one another. Agapé is the love that seeks to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, offer comfort to the imprisoned, and share hope with the hopeless. Agapé is the love that makes us the people God intended us to be.

And as the author of the Letter to the Galatians reminds us, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” The way of God – the way of life and hope and, dare we say it, salvation – is summed up in this single commandment, “love your neighbor.” And if we fail to do that, we bite and devour one another as though we were – well, beasts.

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What makes a beast a beast? An absence of compassion – empathy – kindness – thoughtfulness – genuine concern. What makes a beast a beast? The unwillingness to practice love. What makes a beast a beast? The lack of love and compassion that defaces the image of God – the image in which we were created.

But, here’s the thing about that kind of agapé love and loving our neighbor: it isn’t easy. There isn’t one thing that’s simple or effortless about it. Loving our neighbor is just about one of the most difficult and demanding things we will ever be asked to do.

Part of the reason for that is that we have to put ourselves in a position that is less than prime. We are no longer first. We’re not even second. We’re third. That’s been my problem all along with the “I am second” campaign. The math is all wrong. The order, in case you’re wondering, is:
God is first.
My neighbor is second.
I am third.

That’s what the Bible teaches us and when you read the Bible and see that is, in fact, what it says, calling yourself “second” is a major problem. It keeps us from placing the love of neighbor where it is supposed to be and makes us, well, makes us…beasts.
And the hardest thing about loving our neighbor is that there are times when our neighbor is just so unlovable. Sometimes our neighbor is hard to love. Sometimes our neighbor drives us a little crazy. Sometimes we don’t much like our neighbor.

But, that can have nothing to do with it. The command is not to love our neighbor, so long as they are lovable. The command is to love.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians – who, by the way, could be a pretty unlovable lot – he reminded them of love’s truest nature:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

Love – especially loving a neighbor, even in the church – is hardly ever an easy thing to do. But it is the way that leads to life. It’s the way that keeps us from being a beast.

Who knows what would have happened to the Beast had it not been for Belle. Belle enters the Beast’s life and shows him what love is all about. She cares for him, tends his wounds, speaks with kindness and, bit by bit, we watch the Beast begin to change. He no longer is as self-absorbed and egocentric. The Beast begins to feel and to care for others. He begins to lose his “beastliness” long before he ceases to be the Beast.

And this is the way it goes. When we receive love from another and feel its life-giving power, we want to share it in return. When we are touched by love we want to touch others with love. When we reflect what we have received, the world is brighter and better and more of what God intended it to be.

It really is “a tale as old as time.” “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” Which is to say, the way of love – the way of life – is for now and evermore. Amen.