

Perfectly Imperfect

Sermon 90 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 14, 2021
2 Corinthians 4: 1-6

John Lasseter is an American film director, producer, screenwriter, and animator who has worked as the Chief Creative Officer of Pixar Animation Studios, Walt Disney Animation Studios, and Disneytoon Studios as well as being the Principal Creative Advisor for Walt Disney Imagineering.¹ He was born and raised in Los Angeles, California where his mother was an art teacher and his father a parts manager at a Chevrolet dealership.² Of his hometown, Lasseter says that anyone who is born and raised in LA has a sort of engrained love of cars. He was no different.

As a young boy his favorite season of the year was late summer when school was starting back and all the car dealerships were beginning to unveil their new models. He remembers the glass of the dealership walls where his father worked being painted white in order to conceal the new designs until the much anticipated moment of reveal. The new models had a certain energy to them that captivated young Lasseter more than anything that was happening at school. As he grew older he got a job working in the parts department with his dad where he got to see all kinds of vehicles come in for repairs and maintenance. Here his love grew into a lifelong fascination, which eventually led to the creation of the blockbuster, digitally-animated film, *Cars*.

The film debuted at Lowe's Motor Speedway in Concord, North Carolina in May of 2006 and ultimately grossed \$462 million in sales. It was nominated for several Academy Awards. Its success launched a multimedia franchise and sequels and spinoffs that were produced by Disneytoon studios. If you haven't yet seen this movie, you really should!

In 2006, Lasseter spoke with Michele Norris on National Public Radio. She commented on the amazing photo-realism of the film which was created entirely by computers. "The cars glisten," she said, "It looks like we're seeing photography [not computer animation]... With everything you can do with computer-generated animation, are there still limitations?"

"Absolutely," Lasseter responded, "A simple rule of thumb, the more organic something is in the way it looks or the way it moves, the harder it is to create it with a computer. The computer is, you know, likes things to be perfectly geometric, perfectly clean. It could do that really easily. But the more you make it look like something that we see in our world, the harder it is to do."³ In fact every frame of that feature length film, *Cars*, took an average of 17 hours (every frame!). That's quite an investment of time to create an animated film trying to recreate something as perfectly imperfect as a rusty bumper on an old dodge van.

¹ Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Lasseter

² John Lasseter Talks 'Cars' on *Fresh Air*, June 7, 2006. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5459668>

³ John Lasseter and Michele Norris, NPR, June 8, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/5471976>

There is something comforting though, about the extensive attempts of even the best and most richly resourced filmmakers struggling to replicate something that seems so effortlessly beautiful out in the real world. It is easy to imagine that with all the money, the staff, and the technology companies like Pixar and Disney have at their disposal, creating a perfect product, a perfect film, would be a piece of cake. But here, we learn from Lasseter himself that there is always room for improvement.

It is a grace-filled realization for so many of us who spend our days chasing after perfection. Whether we are searching for the perfect job, the perfect spouse, the perfect children, the perfect body, the perfect vacation, or the perfect house, the idea that we could ever get it all right draws us in and consumes our thoughts. The lure of perfection can motivate us and help us accomplish our most ambitious goals.

There is also a shadow side of our attempts to be perfect people. On the back of our successes, we can be brutally hard on ourselves and everyone around us, acting out in anger and frustration when things fall short of the impossible goal. We can trap ourselves in cycles of shame, insisting that we are unworthy of love and that we will never belong because we have fallen short of the impossible goal of perfection. Many of us may be experiencing this now, as productivity and motivation have diminished as our daily routines have us confined to the house for work, school, and play.

Sometimes our ideas about the perfect people we want to be keep us from trying anything new because we are afraid that we might fail. When we're young this fear keeps us from trying out for the sports team or applying to the reach school. We'd rather shield ourselves from the disappointment of rejection and failure. Sure, we grow out of those kinds of situations over time, but the fear of failure and the shame of our imperfections never really go away.

There is another kind of perfectionism that we have to contend with as well: a theological one. This theological perfectionism makes churches pretend that they have all the answers, that they know everything there is to know about God, that their doctrines and practices are "right" while everyone who knows God to be a little different must be wrong. In these kinds of environments, fear and shame run rampant while authenticity and holy creativity are nowhere to be found.

What's more, when church gets to feeling this way, there is no room for honesty, for curiosity, for brokenness, or really even for humanity.

Poet Robert Drake says that "to be human is to be broken..."

It sounds a little bit like Paul's words to the Corinthians reminding them that our human bodies are like clay vessels that can so easily be crushed and shattered. Drake finishes the thought saying: "to be human is to be broken... and broken is its own kind of beautiful."

And Paul concludes that despite our human frailty and fragility, we can still bear witness to the light of Christ that shines through us.

While we don't get to know the whole story about what was happening in Corinth to cause Paul to write this letter, there are clues within the two letters we do have, telling us that in Paul's absence, other preachers, other apostles came through promoting an easier, simpler, happier Gospel, notably, one that didn't include struggle, persecution, and suffering. One that was perhaps an ancient version of the prosperity gospel that lures so many today. But Paul is clear about where he stands saying *the god of this world has blinded their minds and kept them from seeing the light of the Gospel of Christ who is the image of God*. For Paul, the Gospel of Christ did not exist without struggle and suffering, that was why he always referred to Jesus as the crucified one. For Paul, resurrection was only possible after the cross and so to live in Christ was also to bear the cross of Christ. You couldn't have one without the other. For Paul, it was in those situations of suffering and struggle that the light of Christ really could shine through.

Struggle and suffering provide the cracks in the clay pots, through which the light can shine.

And in this letter Paul is also quick to remind his church that we are just the vessels through which that Christ light shines and we are not to be confused for the light itself. In other words, the good news we proclaim with our lives, in good times and in moments of struggle and despair, is not about how perfect we are or how strong we are or how much we have it together... but the good news we proclaim is about the light within, the Christ who shines through us... sometimes even through the brokenness and imperfection we want so badly to cover up and hide.

This Wednesday we begin the season of Lent, which is a period of time set aside for us to remember our limitations, our imperfections, our brokenness... our humanity. Taking that kind of honest look in the proverbial mirror can be scary... especially after a year like the last one we've had. Maybe we've grown more angry, more short-tempered. Maybe we've grown restless and lost our sense of focus and purpose for our lives. Maybe we've gotten bored and disenchanted with online church and we're starting to disconnect from our communities of faith. ...maybe we have begun to lose faith altogether.

When John Lasseter talks about creating digitally-animated movies like *Cars* and *A Bug's Life*, he talks about how hard it is to use a computer to create something that is perfectly imperfect. It's easy to create a perfectly proportioned insect, or a classic hot rod with shiny rims. What is not so easy, is to show how that ant moves and walks with nuance and individuality in a row of millions of others that are similar but not exactly the same. What is not so easy is to place the tiny speck of rust on the bottom of the door panel in such a way that people actually believe the hot rod has been driven on a real road! These tiny imperfections are what bring animation to life... they are the flaws that make the story believable, approachable, relatable... and real.

I think our Christian faith is meant to be lived exactly the same way.

We could spend countless hours and insane amounts of money trying to reach the unattainable goals of perfection. Perfect faith, perfect family, perfect home, perfect job, perfect life... maybe even perfect church. But I've got to tell you, I don't think any of those things would help us to reflect the Gospel of Jesus, the crucified Christ (to put it in Pauline terms) who thought it best to save the world with nothing more than a broken human body.

Maybe God knew exactly what God was doing in naming the church "the body of Christ". We are inherently broken because we are made up of human beings, flawed, sinful, grieving, messy, and absolutely imperfect. But through all of those imperfections, the light of Christ, the fully exposed unveiled Gospel shines through all of our darkness.

Paul never explicitly says what the "god of this world" is. Is it greed? Is it lust? Is it selfishness or prejudice? Is it hatred or contempt? We don't know. And I kind of like that. Because when the category remains open, we can allow the text to speak to us differently each time we come to it. So today I wonder if the "god of this world" isn't our love of perfection? What if it is the lure and appeal of the perfect "fill-in-the-blank" that prevents us from seeing the fullest revelation of God that shines through the rougher spots?

Ernest Hemmingway wrote in his book *A Farewell to Arms*:

The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially...⁴

Many are strong at the broken places, but those that will not break... it kills.

What a tragically beautiful and yet empowering image for the Church of Jesus Christ in this day and time.

We are all broken people, living in an incredibly broken moment in history, vulnerably waking up to problems for which there seem to be no answers, and yet trying to somehow reflect the light of Christ in our world. In times like these, times of trial and times of struggle, we may wish to be strong but feel utterly helpless. And so we turn to one another, remembering that we alone are not the body of Christ, but that we – together – are the body of Christ in this world... broken and yet resurrected, strong at the most broken places, perfectly imperfect... ready to welcome all who come in search of healing. Not because of any power we have on our own, but because of the great Light that somehow, someway, by God's own grace and mercy, shines through us...

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts...

⁴ Earnest Hemingway. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6592630-the-world-breaks-everyone-and-afterward-many-are-strong-at>