Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and meditations of all our hearts be whole and good to you, God, our Rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Many of us have great and enduring family memories of trips to scared places; cultural and geographic modern-day shrines. These include Rocky Mountain National Park for the first time, Yellowstone, The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, the Smithsonian in Washington, or the first trip to see the ocean (particularly salient for those of you from landlocked states). These are sacred and deep memories for many of us. Then there is the ultimate “American” pilgrimage, in our culture, to Disneyworld or Disneyland. For our family, these were clearly understood as sacred pilgrimages to shrines of childhood imagination, creativity and visions of worlds beyond Fort Collins, time, and even space. After all, it is The Magic Kingdom.

A trip to Disneyland or Disneyworld was and is a cultural institution with all of the pseudo-religious and zealot trappings of ancient rites of passage. I remember the first time I went to Disney, I must have been about ten, and I refused to leave the international world expo section of Epcot because it was the closest I had ever felt to a real global trip around the world. It is a place where dreams have an interface with reality! Disney sends out cultural ideas in its movies and television station and then invites people to their land and their “Disneyworld” to experience the “Magic Kingdom” where dreams come true, they say. Hmmm sounds familiar: fostering imaginations and ideas and then facilitating spaces of meaning and fulfillment. It sounds a lot like the mission of the Church.

Interestingly, despite his many well documented personal and philosophical flaws, Walt Disney grew-up in a Congregational Church in Missouri. Life imitates art and art imitates life. Be that as it may, has Disney somehow usurped us in cultural importance? Has the Gospel been overtaken in our world by Goofy, Gaston, and the Genie? Where is the act of pilgrimage in our lives as religious people and Christians?

If nothing else, many of us have memories of the films or classic characters defined by Disney films. Regardless of if we agree at all (I usually don’t) with the ethics, motifs, or norms implied explicitly or implicitly in their movies, it is hard (if not impossible in the U.S.) to not somehow be impacted by or have certain cultural consciousness of Disney’s global enculturation. It is undeniably a more powerful force than the Mainline Church in modern American life and American pilgrimage.

At a media industry conference last month in California, the Walt Disney Company was celebrating the 60th Anniversary of Disneyland. Now, that is a great example of longevity: Mickey Mouse looks as good today as he did when he first appeared in 1928! When asked about the success and adaptability of Disneyland and the whole Disney brand, the company spokes person said:
"We really look at every aspect of our uniquely linked-together ecosystem… It really goes back to things that Walt did…that is a pattern that was long ago established."¹

How do we, as the church, “look at every aspect of our uniquely linked-together ecosystem?” What is it about the church that is unique in our lives and is connected into the ecosystem of each other beyond our pews? How do we create a Magic Kingdom (that we call the realm of God) as the church in peoples’ lives? The Disney spokesperson said that they remain focused in their work (their visioning and strategic planning) by going back to the vision of the founder, Walt. We, as the church, have a much more dynamic founder and head, who unlike Walt Disney, is still working and living and breathing in our midst- Jesus Christ. How do we work towards the Magic Kingdom of God in our midst by referring back to the pattern that was long ago established by Christ?

We turn today to a passage that is more powerful than any Disney movie because it does not confirm and repeat cultural norms, but it moves against them! Our Magic Kingdom of God is not magical to us because it affirms what we already know and do and imagine, but because it pushes us to better move towards a never neverland of authenticity and truth. Peter Pan might be able to fly with the help of Tinkerbelle, but Jesus can fly, walk on water, turn water into wine, and endure forever as the saving presence of God in our lives and community. Which superhero is better? I think it is ours. Our sacred story (unlike Disney) has a trump card in that fact. Listen to our passage again, hearing with me the details that make it magical for the Realm, Queendom, and Kingdom of God:

Mark 3: 31-35 (our Pattern long ago established)
“Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him [Jesus] and called him. A crowd was standing around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and brothers? And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, is my brother and sister and mother.”

This is not a rejection of family as bad. Jesus is not trying to hurt his mom’s feelings by saying that he disowns her or his family (Although I do not recommend reading this passage on Mother’s Day or Father’s Day). I have heard that argument. That would be a very incorrect reading of this passage. It is actually the opposite. Rather, Jesus is changing the paradigm of relationship. Here, Plymouth, here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God, is my brother and sister and mother. In a world where bloodline, power, patriarchy, and family power systems dominated, Jesus names everyone who is in solidarity, community, and the powerful word “fellowship” with him as mothers and brothers- closest family. This is not the ancient world’s Disney dominant message. It is a message that crosses over bounds of clan and family and creates an opening for a new kind of Magic Kingdom of God.

¹ http://www.marketplace.org/topics/economy/how-disney-ecosystem-works
What we offer as the church that is unique, “the pattern of the founder” in the words of Disney, is a pattern of *fellowship* that is companionship for the journey. Fellowship. Jesus proposes here a new paradigm for relationship that is not based on family lines and blood, but it is based on fellowship - companionship with each other. This is what we have to offer than Disney cannot! In one word: Fellowship.

Our Christian story, in the canon of the Bible, also recognizes that happily ever after is not always the way the world works. Believing that everything leads to “happily ever after” is not the way life really works. Amen? Unlike cartoons, our story admits that life requires grace and is filled with contradiction and complexity. It is not a simple happily ever after, but a life lived in fellowship through grace and work in the world for Social Justice.

This is as salient and important today as it was in the time of Jesus, and in some ways we are in a similar period to that one which Mark was addressing in this Gospel passage. PSR professor emeritus, Mary Ann Tolbert in her book, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark’s World in Literary-Historical Perspective*, addresses our passage from Mark, Chapter 3 for today by saying, “The complex cultural phenomenon that was Hellenism shifted the entire Mediterranean world into a different key. Encouraged by a common language and a common paideia [education], mobility increased... Such movement brought with it the inevitable breakdown of older, more stable native traditions, families, and tribes and thus endured increased anxiety, and alienation... In so many ways, Jesus, as Mark characterizes him, epitomizes the situation of the Hellene, caught between suffering and hope, the breakdown of the old and the promise of the new.”

“Caught between the breakdown of the old and the promise of the new.” Does that sound familiar, church? And what is the pattern Jesus proposes? In this time of cultural uncertainty, in this time when the magic Mickey Mouse is more powerful than the Pope or our small still speaking UCC denomination, what do we offer? Here, says Christ, are my mothers my brothers... my fellowship. Caught between the breakdown of the old and the promise of the new, Jesus gives us each other for the journey to seek something greater. Our magic kingdom in this place is one of authenticity and hope: the promise of the new.

Yes, the church (especially the Mainline denominations) has lost its cultural dominance to other cultural forces like Disney. Yes, that can be scary. **But I think it is an explicitly good thing. We have lost dominance, yes, but who wants to be dominant in a post-colonial world anyway?** We have lost our dominance, but we have regained our authenticity as Christians to the call to community fellowship. We have lost our dominance, but it has brought a re-awakening of ecumenical collaboration and conversation.

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Our music today comes from the Taizé community in France, where I once spent a week on pilgrimage. It is a place that represents the unity in one small French monastic community overcoming generations of conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Europe and promoting conversation and peace: real fellowship. Do you feel the Magic of the Kingdom of God as we get lost in the songs together today?

Yes, Disney’s magic kingdom is dominant as a “pilgrimage” site in our country, but it is our pilgrimages to Church (HERE) each and every Sunday that is the sign and symbol of our living in the pattern of Christ—the call to fellowship that is real, familial, and not a cartoon produced in Burbank, California. Yes, we have lost our cultural dominance, but we have our fellowship. Can I get an “amen” for losing dominance? Who wants to be dominant when you can be real?

Our imaginations are bigger than anything Disney can imagine or replicate. We imagine a world of equanimity, Social Justice, love, realness, closeness, hope, peace, JOY, and dare we say- fellowship (companionship) on the pilgrimage of life. Verse 34-35: Here are my mothers, [fathers], and my brothers [siblings]! Whoever does the will of God, is my brother and sister and mother.”

Every Sunday, as we set out from our homes to pilgrimage again to this sanctuary (place of gathering in safety and love)—as we assemble in this Magic Kingdom/ Realm of God, may we all find that somewhere over the rainbow, that never neverland, that zipadeedoda that is GREATER than cultural dominance or bloodlines of denominational family power and endowments and pension boards! May we in this place, find our fellow pilgrims of fellowship and family and something that is more real than Cartoons.

May this fellowship be our pattern, unlike those who go to Disney, who are tourists. May we be more than just “Spiritual but not Religious” tourists of faith, but may we be pilgrims together on this journey of fellowship- awakened to the deep faith that connects us and endures beyond all time and all imagination. Church is not where dreams come true, but it is the place where dreams are born and imagination becomes action. It is the place where being together becomes a fellowship and a family. Here is our family. Amen, zipadeedooda, and may the peace of Christ be with you all in this time of newness and truth.