

When I say the phrase “Disney Princess,” it’s likely that a particular image comes into your mind. Even if you cannot recall a particular Disney Princess character, you know her characteristics: clear skin like Snow White; beautiful eyes like Belle; perfect hair like Sleeping Beauty; a poofy, regal gown like Cinderella. And you probably know that the Disney Princesses share common traits and characteristics: someone or something is out to harm them, their lives are somehow in danger, they need someone—a man—to come rescue them.

So, no wonder that it was a big news story when a new Disney movie included a scene that showed a completely different side and style of these well-known royal Disney characters. The new movie, *Wreck It Ralph*, shows Snow White in myopic glasses, Mulan wearing sneakers and jeans, Anna from *Frozen* lounging in flannel, and Tiana sipping a frappuccino with her natural Afro hair.

While the movie was still in production, this scene worried the higher-ups at Disney, because the Disney Princesses, you see, operate under a specific set of rules and norms meant to maintain their official Princess Images, all of which this new film violated. For example, the princesses are never to be portrayed out of official garb, yet here they are in their pajamas. They are never to appear in a scene together—because each exists in her own separate movie kingdom—yet here they are, all of them lounging with one another, joking about sexist structures. In the Disney executives’ minds, the Princesses had prescribed royal norms—reputations to maintain, celebrity statuses to uphold, *a specific power* they wield—and this scene violated all of them.

Let me be clear: I am *not* saying that Jesus is like a Disney Princess. But today, on Christ *the King* Sunday, I do see Pontius Pilate like one of those Disney executives when viewing the new Princess scene: puzzled, confused, and concerned, because he is faced with a new image of royal power that violates all the typical kingly norms.

Our reading from John's Gospel today finds Jesus before Pilate, the Roman governor of Palestine, who asks him outright, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Notice how Jesus never answers the question. Jesus never *claims* to be a king. "Do you ask this on your own . . . or because others said so?" Jesus replies. Pilate persists: "So are you a king?" "You say that I am a king," but Jesus never says it himself.

This certainly violates a kingly norm: for what king *denies* being a king? Here, Jesus denies not only royal status but practically any status altogether. He does not talk about himself, but the importance of the truth to which he points: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world: to testify to the truth." I came not to rule, Jesus says, but to testify to an otherworldly kingdom. To witness to another way of life. To reveal the deep truths in a world of shallow lies.

This is not a king Pilate is used to seeing: One who declines a royal scepter and regal robe for a shepherd's crosier and servant's garb instead. One whose territory is not of this world and whom the world does not know. One who, in humility, witnesses to the truth of God's extravagant love and abundant life.

No wonder Pilate has a hard time parsing whether Jesus is or is not a king. *The chief priests who hauled him in say he is, but he sure doesn't look or act like one.* Pilate wavers, confused, perhaps conflicted, yet in John's Gospel, eventually maintains the image of Jesus as King even if only to mock it. He dresses Jesus in royal purple, gives him a crown of thorns, and when Pilate hangs Jesus on the cross, he orders that a sign that says, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" be added.

Here is the most peculiar feature of Christ's king-ness: a sign that says "KING!" right above a naked, humiliated, beaten man, a tortured man, a dying man. This is far from a kingly norm.

This King's coronation ends up being a crucifixion. This ruler's ascension to the throne is being raised up on the cross. The royal crown is not made of gold, but of thorns and the assembled crowd does not cheer, but jeers.

Indeed, this violates all kinds of kingly norms, because the moment of this King's enthronement is the moment of this King's death.

It's as if the great chords of "Crown Him with Many Crowns" and the music of "What Wondrous Love is This?" overlap and interweave and create a new and strange song entirely when Jesus' status as King is made most visible in his crucifixion.

This is certainly a different kind of King with a different kind of royal power: A power that is not from here, not from our status-obsessed, image-preserving world. A power that is found not in earthly force, but in divine weakness—the power of God’s willingness to become flesh and live among us, in God’s willingness to die like us. And for us. The power of this King says that strength is found not in vengeance but in forgiveness, that God’s love is found not in subjugation before a harsh ruler but in radical, unexpected, unmerited grace from a compassionate parent. This King’s power says death is not the end; resurrection comes from the tomb; life goes on eternally; light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

My friends, the world is hungry for this power: this power that is, as Saint Paul says it, made perfect in weakness. The kind of power that comes from a king being laid bare. And appearing vulnerable. And being—dying, even—like us.

How can we tell that the world is hungry for this kind of “royal” power? Because when Disney released parts of the scene that showed the Princesses made-up faces stripped bare, with their hair undone, living like the rest of us, the Internet went wild. *People loved it.* When fans saw the Princesses wielding this type of power—not pretty, dolled-up power, but subversive, sneakers-on kind of power—they ate it up.

Yes, I believe we hunger for Jesus’ kind of kingly power. We long to have Christ as this kind of king: one in whom we see ourselves and our struggles. One who knows our weakness and bears our sins. One whose extravagant benevolence works in our everyday lives and whose extraordinary grace

comes into ordinary circumstances. One whose power is not just reserved for traditional kings and princesses, but is also made available to us.

The Good News is that we indeed have this kind of king and this kind of power. For Christ's kind of kingly power is that by which we are saved and by which the world will be saved. Christ's kind of kingly power is that by which we live, and by which we are called to live. Christ Our King testifies to the truth of this power. May we do so too.

AMEN.