

"Sent"

John 4:23-28

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The story was written in Italy in 1883 by a man named Carlo Collodi. And in the century and a quarter since it was first published it's turned into one of the most beloved tales ever told. It's been adapted into plays, musicals, even an opera. And it's inspired poems, paintings, and more than a dozen movies.

And when I tell you the story I'm talking about is called "The Adventures of Pinocchio" I imagine most of you will think of the movie Walt Disney said was one of his favorites. But the movie I want to tell you about this morning isn't the Disney film. It's a movie made in 2008, near the city of Florence, the same city where Carlo Collodi first published "Pinocchio."

The reason I want to you to know about it is because this recent version preserves a line from the original Italian story that we don't usually hear. The line comes at the end of the famous scene where Gepetto, the woodcarver first meets Pinocchio the puppet a fairy brought to life.

Geppetto looks at Pinocchio with amazement and asks, "Who are you?"

"Well, you should know," Pinocchio says. "You gave me my name."

"Pi ... Pi ..." Geppetto struggles.

"Pinocchio!" the boy shouts.

"The puppet?" Geppetto says. "No. No. It can't be!"

And Pinocchio responds, "How about that! You're the one that made me! And now you don't even recognize me!"

"You're not real. You can't be."

"Yes, I am!" says Pinocchio. "I'm real! Well, not all of me. My heart's still made of wood, but when I hear it beat, then I'll be truly real! That's what the fairy told me!"

"The fairy?" Geppetto asks. "You mean there's a fairy here, too?"

Pinocchio nods.

Gepetto walks over, reaches out, touches Pinocchio's arms and face. And tears well up in his eyes. But through the tears he says to Pinocchio, "You're alive!"

Then he turns to look at a portrait of his late wife. It's hanging on the wall. "If only you were here!," he says. "You could see him, too! He's alive!"

He turns back to Pinnochio who looks pensive now.

"But what does it mean," Pinnochio asks. "What does it mean to be alive?"

"What does it mean?" says Gepetto. "Well, unless I'm going mad, it means you have a life to live."

"And what do you have a life for?" Pinocchio asks.

In the original tale of Pinnochio, that was the question that Carlo Collodi meant the whole story to center on, the question he wanted his readers to think about. But the truth is most of us don't. Most of us don't think about that question when we think about the life and adventures of Pinnochio. And most of us don't think about it very much when we think about our own lives and adventures either.

But Jesus did. That's why in the Gospel of John at the end of his conversation with the woman at the well in Samaria, when his disciples return from their trip into town to buy bread, Jesus tells them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about ... my food is do the will of him who sent me."

You see, in the Gospel of John, there is one thing that Jesus is clear about, crystal clear. He has not been simply born into the world. He's been sent. Over and over again that's what he says. He's been sent by God, sent to do God's work, sent to speak God's word, sent to give life, sent to save. And it's that sense of being sent that according to John shaped Jesus' life.

So let's go ahead and ask the question. As disciples of Christ, as those to whom Jesus says at the end of the Gospel of John "as the Father has sent me, so send I you." How much does a sense of being sent into the world shape your life, or mine? Do we think of ourselves as people who've only been born into the world or as people who've been sent? Was your birth just a chance, a chance to make a life for yourself? Or was it a call, a call to discover why God sent you into the world?

You know, in the story, after he comes to life, Pinnochio leaves Gepetto. And in the middle of his story Carlo Collodi sends him out into the world. And the middle of the story of Pinnochio, according to scholars who've studied the original Italian version, was meant by Collodi as an allegory. It was meant to show us some of the futile ways that we search for an answer to Pinnochio's question. What do we have a life for?

And maybe it's been a while since you read through the story. But I expect it won't be too hard for me to bring it back to you. For in the middle of the story

Pinnocchio runs into a fox and a cat. And even though Pinnocchio's not a puppet any more, the fox and the cat pull his strings and lead him along until he finds himself, caught by a circus, trapped into performing in a kind of life from which he can't escape.

A few years ago, a friend of mine took a business trip to Hong Kong. Afterwards we got a chance to go to lunch. And at lunch, just to make conversation, I asked him about his trip. "Did you have any adventures while you were in Hong Kong?" I asked him. And this is the story he shared with me.

"One night after dinner," he said, "I was walking down the street back to my hotel. And I walked past a tattoo shop. In the window were photos, samples of some of the tattoos that were popular with people in Hong Kong. A lot of the tattoos in the photos were pictures; dragons, warriors, swords; the kind of thing you'd expect.

But then I saw a design that surprised me. It was a tattoo that was made up of only three words written in large letters. The three words said *Born to lose*.

And for some reason," my friend told me, "when I read those words I stopped. I walked inside. I said hello to the owner who spoke pretty good broken English. Then I pointed to the picture of the tattoo in the window. I'm curious, I said to him, Do many people in Hong Kong really want those words, *Born to lose* to be their tattoo?"

"Yes," the owner replied, "That tattoo very popular." "You know," my friend said, "I can't believe someone would want to wear a slogan like that on their body. But the owner of the tattoo shop, my friend told me simply tapped his finger to his head and said "Before tattoo on body, tattoo on mind."

Now I imagine you all know this, but the truth that Hong Kong tattoo shop owner told my friend is a truth that a lot of people have to live with. It's imprinted itself on their minds and their souls. They're people who feel like they're trapped just like Pinnocchio, trapped in dead-end jobs, dead-end relationships, dead-end lives. And their daily routine feels to them like a circus performance, a routine from which they just can't escape.

The woman who came to the well that day about noon was a person like that. And maybe you are too. Because the truth is I really can't tell, not just from looking at you. Because on the outside everything looks good. You're going through the motions. You look fine. But on the inside, the side that only God and you can see, you both know the sad truth. It's all a performance.

And it's that same sad truth that Jesus' slowly draws out of the woman at the well, isn't it? The truth about who she really is and the lifeless way she's been living. But then Jesus offers her another truth. He offers her the truth about who he really is and how he can give her what she most desires, living water, water that will make her come alive again and give her real life that will start now and last into eternity.

And friends, Jesus wants to offer the same gift to you this morning. He wants to offer you the same opportunity to tell him the truth, that you're tired of lifeless living, that you're ready to receive the water that can give you real life.

But believe it or not, there's more. Because the truth Jesus offered the woman at the well that day was not only the truth that set her free. The truth Jesus offered her was a truth helped changed her from a woman who felt like she was born to lose into a woman who knew she was born to be sent.

Remember the rest of the story? At the end of John 4, after the disciples come back, the woman returns to her town. She starts telling everyone she meets about a man who just could be the Christ. In other words she starts acting like a woman who's been sent, sent to partner with God in the work he wants to do in a town in Samaria.

That's how the gospel worked in her life. And that's how the gospel is meant to work in our lives too. Because the Gospel is not only a message that's meant to save us. It's a message that's meant to send us. We were meant to be sent. We were meant to be God's partners, people whose words, and works, God can use to call people out of lifeless living and into real life. But do we do that? Do we allow ourselves to be sent?

A while ago, a pastor from Maryland was walking through the Baltimore-Washington International airport. Along with everyone else he was checking his bags. Unfortunately for him, (or maybe it was fortunately ... you'll have to decide when you hear the rest of the story) his bag was randomly selected for a complete security screen. So he was directed to stand in a line along with several other people so his bag could be searched by hand. When his turn came, he put his bag on the table so the screener could look through it. And this is what he says happened next.

"The screener politely asked me to step back and resist the urge to reach out and help him. As he unloaded things, and unzipped pockets, and felt the linings of my bag, I noticed a ring on his right hand. It was a silver ring with a cross on it. Interesting ring, I said. And he paused for a moment and glanced at me.

I'm sure the look on my face was one of frustration, the pastor says. I didn't want to be in that line. I wanted to be headed toward my gate and toward a cup of coffee on the way. But the screener continued his search and as he did, he said something like this

Yeah, the ring. I wear it because I'm a Christian. And you know, in my job, one of the things we worry about in my profession is an explosive device. So I wonder, do you know where the word for dynamite comes from? The other night at a Bible study I learned it comes from the Greek word for power and it's found in the New Testament. Of course, as a Christian, I know God's power's the most powerful power of all. So all day while I'm doing my job, I know He's doing His job. And that gives me a lot peace.

Then he said to me, Well, I'm done. I hope you have a great trip. And he zipped up my bag and handed it back to me and called the next person in line. And I walked away from him. But as I did, I thought to myself how easily and naturally this man had risen to the opportunity to share part of his Christian faith with a man he'd never met.

It certainly wasn't the right time for an extended conversation. There was a long line of people behind me and he had plenty of work to do. But in less than thirty seconds, he spoke about a God he trusted with a total stranger. And he did it calmly and peacefully. He wasn't trying to convert me. He was just taking an opportunity to share some of his faith with me."

So I wonder this morning, when was the last time you did that? When was the last time you took an opportunity to share some of your faith with someone else? Because the truth is that's the answer to Pinnochio's question. That's what life is meant for. We were meant to be sent. So let me leave you with some homework morning. The season is Lent. And in the next few weeks from now until Easter I wonder if you would allow yourself to think of yourself a little differently. I wonder if you would allow yourself to think of yourself as someone God wants to send into your part of the world, someone God wants to send to tell someone else about the way that the living water of Christian faith has made a difference in your life. You don't have to convert anybody. I'm not asking you to do that. Actually God isn't either. All we're asking you to do is to think of yourself as partner in a process, a harvest.

"Don't you have a saying," Jesus said. "Don't you say it's still four months until harvest? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields. They are ripe for harvest." Will you let yourself be part of the process? Will you let yourself be

sent? Will you let yourself talk with someone about the difference your faith in Christ makes in your life this Lent? I hope you will.

Let's pray ...