

HOW I BECAME MICKEY MOUSE

I am sitting here drinking coffee (a rather grown-up drink) from a Mickey Mouse mug. Next to the mug is my iPhone with a smiling Mickey Mouse cover on the exterior. In my office drawer is a collection of Mickey Mouse pens, given as a present. In my closet is a special section dedicated exclusively to Mickey Mouse ties, most of which are out of present day circulation, except for the days I wear them. I most often wear them when I make hospital visits, especially to children. I love the way kids' faces light up when they see the unmistakable mouse on my tie and even in the greatest discomfort will manage to yell, "Mickey Mouse!"

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, our church helped over 2,600 refugees in our building. We had upwards to 320 people spending the night at our church every evening for twenty-one days. Through the night, cries were heard when loved ones found relatives they presumed had perished in the storm. One day a blind man staying with us found his seeing-eye dog. Major magazines and national television stations sent their reporters. Even the Today Show flew our blind resident with his dog to New York for an interview. It hit local and national news. During this time Christchurch was recognized as the outstanding shelter in Houston for Katrina victims. I was so proud of the way our people worked day and night providing three meals a day for the better part of a month for these people without a home. Walt Disney Studios from Burbank, California called our church office and said, "We understand there are homeless families from Katrina staying at your church. With your permission we would like to send some of our characters from Disney World to cheer them up." We immediately gave them permission. How thrilling it was to see the gigantic white unmarked bus followed by a white, unmarked van pull into our parking lot. They parked, put up theatrical ropes around the bus, a red carpet in front of the door and in a few minutes out walked Mickey, Minnie, Goofy and Pluto. I would have liked to have seen Donald, but I was not complaining--neither were our residents. The kids from Katrina went nuts as the Disney characters paraded around our church grounds. All afternoon Mickey and company posed for pictures and gave out mementos of this once-in-a-lifetime visit. I was touched by one lady who said, "We lost all our pictures in the storm, but these new pictures

with Mickey will make up for that loss.” I politely kept my distance, but finally some of our people came and said, “Pastor, we think Mickey would like to meet you.” Well, the boyhood wonder began to build within and I tried to remain calm as I said, “Okay, let’s go meet him.” Walking down the church hallways, visions of the Mickey Mouse Club from the fifties and early sixties raced through my mind. The numerous cartoon episodes were playing once again on the Main Street of my mind. The homemade Disney Land that a neighborhood friend and I put together on the sand lot in our neighborhood was exploding with make-believe fireworks and imaginary magic once again. When I was introduced to the gang, we got along just fine. One of our church members said, “Mickey, our pastor has loved and admired you for many years.” Mickey seemed impressed. Mickey and Minnie came up to me and since we were getting along so well, I asked them a question. I said, “Mickey, you and Minnie have been an item for over sixty-two years; isn’t it time you got married?” In a few moments, a new memory was made that will never leave my mind. Mickey and Minnie Mouse were standing in front of me and I soon pronounced them, “Mouse and Mouse.” I married Mickey and Minnie Mouse!

Over twenty years ago, our theme for Vacation Bible School was the Magic Kingdom. We had princesses and fantasy characters everywhere. Through the week my wife was dressed up as Minnie Mouse and, you guessed it, I had been chosen to dress as Mickey Mouse. I must admit, I was not reluctant to do this. Toward the end of the week, Mrs. Small introduced me, “Children, this is our pastor and he is Mickey Mouse!” At that moment, I knew my identity with Mickey was not only fun, but (yikes!) it had become real. I am 63 years old and yet I retain association with Mickey!

This will have to be the most unusual Pastor’s Word I have ever written, but I would like to address, how I became Mickey Mouse.

1. I originally wanted to be Mighty Mouse.

My brother and I saw Mighty Mouse every Saturday morning on TV when we were kids. He had super powers and he could fly. Even to this day I recall his theme song, “Mister Trouble never hangs around when he hears this mighty sound, ‘Here I come to save the day!’ That means that Mighty Mouse is on the way!” Like any boy my age who imitated Superman or Mighty Mouse, I would put a bath towel around my neck and unashamedly run through the neighborhood pretending I was flying and beating up villains.

Playing super heroes like Mighty Mouse or Superman could get you into trouble as well as hurt. If you interpreted your sister's dolls as nemesis you must destroy, one does not need a vivid imagination to know the ire and retribution that would fall on you from not only your sister, but from Dad if you even thought of maliciously touching one of those dolls. My brother-in-law had his cape (bath towel) tied about his neck one day as he jumped in front of the car to stop it. The car won. Thankfully, Randy survived and never tried stopping cars again. I remember jumping off our house in a super mood, fortunately at that time we were living in a one-story house. I recall thinking, I must stop this or I'm going to get hurt.

We were not faster than a speeding bullet. We could not jump over buildings in a single bound. Long after Mighty Mouse has faded from many a baby boomer's memory, Mickey is still with us. Mickey was very ordinary (as least as ordinary as an anthropomorphic mouse could be). When we cannot be Mighty, we can always be Mickey! I am reminded that the Bible says, *"...It is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not"* (II Corinthians 8:12). God knows we are far more Mickey than Mighty. We provide the "Mickey" but He gives us the "Mighty," which is, *"...the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power"* (Ephesians 1:19).

2. Mickey Mouse's origin was the epitome of the American Dream.

In Walt Disney's burgeoning career, he was betrayed by his employer and employees in regards to a contract about another cartoon character, but Walt didn't give up. Soon after he launched out on his own, Mickey Mouse made his debut in the 1928 cartoon Steamboat Willie. Mickey is not a difficult drawing, basically made of circles. He is the most recognizable cartoon in the history of animation. It is encouraging to know when you see this happy little mouse, that he came out of adversarial and hard times, not out of prosperity and happiness.

Dreamers did not originate in America. They have always been part and parcel in the history of God's prophets and people. Mickey reminds me to keep dreaming! *"The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream..."* (Jeremiah 23:28).

3. Mickey Mouse brought a smile.

Mickey Mouse has a perpetual smile on his face. How can you look at Mickey and not smile? This little mouse has kept America smiling through some of her most trying times. He first appeared approximately one and a half years before the onslaught of the Great Depression. He was seen all through World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, the Civil Rights movement, 9/11, Desert Storm and Afghanistan. *"A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones"* (Proverbs17: 22).

4. Mickey Mouse was a pastor.

Recently when my grandson, Asher had come to Houston for a visit, he was up before the others in the house one morning. So after he and I had some breakfast, I googled "Mickey Mouse." Wow! I was amazed at how many cartoons were available on the Internet. So we watched one after the other. I saw something that I had never noticed before. Mickey Mouse was a pastor! He was always giving a lesson. He was making peace for everyone (and Donald was quite a high maintenance church member!). He had a great relationship with the one girl of his dreams (Minnie). He not only ministered character, but also modeled it.

I saw it! How had I become Mickey Mouse? Not that I have succeeded, mind you, but I could not be "Mighty," yet I could be "Mickey" serving a mighty Savior! I could dream and try to keep others dreaming. I could keep smiling and attempt to keep other's spirits up in difficult times. And I could be a pastor. When I travel to meetings across the country, kids don't call me Pastor Pope, Preacher Pope, or Brother Pope; they usually greet me with "Hello, Johnny Pope!" Three syllables--just like Mickey Mouse. Having a "Mickey Mouse" ministry is not a mark of triviality; it is a statement of victory!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.