

SUPER POWERS

Sermon For Pentecost 17, Proper 21B: Jas. 5:13-20, Mk 9:38-50

LPC, 9/27/09

I see that there is a Wolverine movie newly out on video. Wolverine is a mutant human from whose hands razors sprout when he fights bad guys.

Super heroes never seem to go out of style. When my kids were small, He-Man was all the rage. He-Man was one of a super race, endowed with special powers by the deity-like being Grayskull. His female counterpart was called She-Ra, also known as the Princess of Power. I like the alliteration of that. She-Ra possessed superhuman strength, speed and agility. She could heal with a touch and communicate with animals. Her signature weapon was the Sword of Protection.

The reason these stories resonate with youngsters of course is that children soon perceive themselves as powerless in the world of adults. By following super heroes, they vicariously feel more powerful.

Contrast this with a phenomenon that tends to characterize the other end of life, old age, or any debilitated state preceding. Psychologists call this phenomenon “learned powerlessness.” It happens to people who have been competent, assertive and independent all their lives, but must, because of diminished abilities, accept being cared for by others. Sometimes people in this situation get unexpectedly comfortable with having others “do” for them. They can get so comfortable that they relinquish control even over things they could still handle, if they tried. They become unnecessarily passive. This can be frustrating to caregivers.

Learned powerlessness is not confined to the elderly and disabled. Learned powerlessness can happen to anyone who receives a lot of care from others. Learned powerlessness can even happen to Christians who are being cared for by a provident and generous God.

Now in many ways most of us could afford to be a lot more dependent upon God than we are. On the other hand, few of us make full use of the power God bestows upon us for the specific purpose of helping God fulfill God’s purpose, which is to redeem the world. When it comes to ministry, some of us assume a false modesty and do not respond to the call to ministry that our baptism represents. “Me? A minister?” we say, “Don’t we have professionals for that?”

James’ letter makes clear that ministry is not just for the professionals:
“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them ... pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

James uses the example of Elijah, a human being like any other, who accomplished great things in his prayer. James has huge confidence in the power of prayer when one member of the community supports another. James clearly feels that anyone who prays for another has super powers.

Likewise Jesus has a different idea of power than that projected by super hero cartoons. Here is Jesus' definition of a super power. If I am thirsty and you give me a glass of water, that is super power.

The combined weight of these lessons says three things about power. First, people have power within the community to support others, to pray for others, to heal others, to guide others, to forgive and be forgiven, to provide each other food and drink, both physical and spiritual. Followers of Jesus have both the responsibility and the power to care for each other. This means everybody, not just the professionals.

Secondly, people are individually and variously gifted, and are to use those gifts for the benefit of the community. The cheerful may praise, the sorrowful may pray, Whatever a person's gifts or condition, even suffering, may be used to build up the body of Christ.

Finally, all our power comes from God. She-Ra may have been given her powers by the Lord Graystoke. We are given ours by God. At baptism and constantly, generously, abundantly, throughout our lives.

The other evening, at a funeral home, I saw that one of the family members had exhausted her handkerchief's capacity for tears and I handed her a tissue. That was exercising my super powers. Really. Jesus has a different definition of super powers than the one you may be used to. We all possess the God-given powers to care, to strengthen, to forgive, to heal. These are the powers that build up the body of Christ. These are the super powers that count.