

## Not-So-Super Heroes

### **John 14:8-17**

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

When the world was first introduced to superheroes, the only place you could find them was in comic books. But looking around today, they have found their way into a multitude of media. Books, TV, radio, and especially recently, movies. In just the last few years, we’ve seen movies of The Fantastic Four, Spiderman, Wolverine, and The Incredibles. There were probably others, too, but I just don’t get out to the theater very much.

The point is, right now, heroes are cool. Now if I were to ask each of you to name one or more personal heroes you’ve had in your life, I’m guessing that none of you would write down any of the Marvel Comic characters. Oh sure, you may be a fan of Batman, but I’m guessing he’s not your personal hero. Most of us don’t choose fictional characters when naming our heroes.

In January 2009, a poll was conducted to see who Americans would name as their heroes. The respondents weren’t given a list of names to choose from; they were simply asked to name their greatest hero. Topping the list? President Barack Obama. Coming in second? Jesus Christ. You’d recognize all the other names on the list – it’s a who’s who of people who have strongly impacted American history.

What’s more interesting to me is the reasons people gave for why a person is considered heroic. Their list of reasons included: doing what’s right regardless of personal consequences;

not giving up until the goal is accomplished; doing more than what other people expect of them; overcoming adversity; and staying level-headed in a crisis. Those all seem to fit Jesus, so no wonder he was ranked so high on the list.

But I'm wondering, if we came up with a list of common traits not for real-life heroes, but for superheroes, would Jesus fit into that list too? I know, maybe this is just one of my bizarre, off-the-map kind of thoughts. But stick with me for a moment.

The most obvious trait that superheroes share is that of extraordinary powers and abilities: super strength, flight, hurling lightning bolts... Some superheroes possess no superhuman powers but have mastered skills, such as martial arts, to a highly remarkable degree. What about Jesus? I'm not sure what you call his superpower, but he did perform miracles. He fed thousands of people with just a few fish and loaves of bread. He healed the blind and lame. He even raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus had extraordinary powers and abilities.

Next, superheroes have a strong moral code, including a willingness to risk their own safety in the service of good without expectation of reward. Their code often includes a refusal to kill, even in defense of their own life. No one exemplifies this code better than Jesus. Remember when he is arrested, and Peter cuts off the ear of one of the men in attendance? Jesus rebukes him for that behavior, then heals the man!

We should also take a look at the fact that superheroes often have a secret identity, usually to protect their friends and family from becoming targets of their enemies. Nevertheless, in true dramatic style, the hero usually confides in one or two people who are sworn to secrecy. For Jesus, this trait sort of fits, but it isn't perfect. Jesus' semi-secret identity is that of the Son of God. In some Biblical stories, this seems to be public information. But in other stories, Jesus commands the disciples to tell no one about his identity.

Finally, of course, all superheroes have a fantastic superhero costume. Usually with some kind of mask and cape. Ooh. Jesus strikes out on this one. But apart from that, who knew Jesus seriously had so much in common with our favorite superheroes? I didn't even go into detail about him standing up for the little guy (prostitutes and tax collectors) or about being a hero as a vocation instead of a paid job. It turns out, Jesus is both a real-life hero and a superhero.

While that's kind of neat, it puts you and I in a challenging position. Let me read to you part of our Scripture reading from this morning. Jesus tells his disciples, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." If Jesus is a superhero, and he tells us that we will do greater works than him, what does that mean for us? It means we have it in us to do amazing things. Of course, not by ourselves. Jesus isn't suggesting that we can do more than the Son of God. He goes on to tell the disciples that he will send them an Advocate, the Spirit of Truth – whom we know as the Holy Spirit. And with the Holy Spirit working in and through us, Jesus expects great things from us.

Norman Borlaug had a Ph.D. in plant pathology and genetics. He then took a job doing agricultural research in Mexico. At the time, Mexico was importing wheat in order to feed all of its citizens. Borlaug developed new varieties of wheat that were far more productive than earlier types. By combining these new disease-resistant, high-yield wheat plants with modern farming techniques, Borlaug was able to help turn Mexico from a wheat-importing country to an exporter of wheat. He also applied these principles in Pakistan and India, doubling their wheat production. Later in his life, Borlaug carried this project to areas in Asia and Africa as well. Borlaug is credited with personally saving over one billion people from starvation.

Or how about Jorge Munoz, a school bus driver from Queens, New York. He has spent the last few years tirelessly cooking, packing and giving free, hot meals to hungry people every

day under a subway stop – some 70,000 in total. Munoz says he spends more than half of his \$700-a-week salary buying food from local grocery stores. He comes home from work, takes a quick coffee break, then heads out to collect food donations from the community and shop for more groceries. He heads home to meet a team, consisting of his mother, sister, 5-year-old nephew and a friend. Together, they are a well-oiled machine, as they multiply whatever they're having for dinner into 130 home cooked meals, carefully packed with love and care in his tiny kitchen, in his tiny New York apartment. His stove isn't fully operating anymore because it's been overused to cook food in bulk. Because the stove is broken, he carries huge restaurant sized vats of food up to his sister's apartment to cook – just so he can make his daily deadline.

When I stand up here and say we need to follow Jesus by living like Jesus, that's only mildly challenging. Because after all, who really expects to live up to the Son of God? We're all going to try, at some level, but since none of us expect to perform miracles, the pressure's off. At least a little bit. But when I stand up here and tell stories of people who have gone above and beyond, who have challenged themselves to see just how much of a difference one person can make, suddenly the pressure's back on. No one can realistically expect you to be Jesus. But what excuse can you give for not doing more when there are people like this in the world?

It's not just Martin Luther King, jr. and Mother Theresa who were willing to give of themselves in such drastic ways. There are other people doing their own ministry in complete anonymity. And they make us stop to question what we are doing. Are we really living up to the call of Jesus to do works even greater than he did? It's a scary thing to think about. Because if we decide we don't want to try harder, we wonder if we're letting God down. But if we decide to try harder, that often means big sacrifices and changes in our lives and our lifestyles. Stopping to think about this is supposed to make you uncomfortable.

You may have noticed, but as a preacher and pastor, I'm not usually in the business of making people feel comfortable. I like to ask good questions and make you wrestle with the possible answers. And while I'm not going to rescue you by giving you an answer this morning, I am going to help you start to process this.

This summer, both our camp curriculum at Pine Lake and Lake Lucerne, and our VBS curriculum here at Crossroads are based on the idea of superheroes. At camp, the kids will learn about other real-life heroes making a difference in the world. But they will also learn that we can get started being heroes ourselves with simple actions. You don't have to start by ending hunger. To start, all you have to do is be a friend. That's manageable, right? Be a hero; be a friend. Because sometimes, that's honestly enough to make a difference in your corner of the world.

But once you've mastered that step, you might want to expand your repertoire a bit. In the movie *Robots*, which is not a superhero movie, the main character is inspired by a great businessman to be an inventor. The businessman's motto is, "See a need; fill a need." It's a great strategy for business, especially for selling things. But it's also a good strategy for ministry. You want to be a hero? See a need; fill a need. And you don't have to start with the greatest need out there. Just keep plugging away at it, and you may be surprised where it will take you. Especially with the Holy Spirit working in you and through you. Amen and amen.