

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

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Fr. Bill McGinty

“Who Wants to Be a Superhero?”

I have always loved politics, and for as long as I can remember. Elections, speeches, the business of government, I have tried to read it all in every newspaper, documentary and media coverage.

Yet, every now and then something happens in the week that I don't enjoy and it leaves me with a sense of powerlessness. It happened in the last week with Russia's invasion of its neighbor, Georgia.

There were many times in the course of the cold War and the reign of the former Soviet Union, that I was left to feel that way just watching the 6 o'clock news.

This led me to think about the nature of powerlessness, especially in the face of intrinsic evil. You find yourself fantasizing that “if only you were a superhero, you really could put the bully nations of this world in their place.”

The problem for us guys is, which superhero to be, that would fit the occasion and the circumstances. You have to remember that at 5'6" and 200 plus pounds a cape and tights will only stretch so far, even in my imagination. And the trouble with superheroes is that all of them have problems. Spiderman is too urban and can never hold down a permanent job. Green Lantern loses power in his ring at the most critical moments. The Incredible Hulk has problems with basic English. Wonderwoman has an invisible plane. How does she even find it in the car park? Batman has deep dark psychological problems related to being a vigilante and standing for hours on top of tall buildings.

That basically leaves good old Superman, who has just about all the powers you would need to put the Russians in their place, disarm the arm race, get rid of the nukes and reverse global warming.

Oh I know he has problems with Kryptonite and hangs out with Lois Lane and despite all his powers can't stop her smoking, but I think by and large if I had to save the world, I would choose Superman.

Yet deep in my heart I know that resorting to superheroes is not the answer either. Someone will always find a superhero big, better and more powerful than yours.

In struggling against insurmountable odds and overcoming evil, there was no one who could do it better than the characters James Stewart played in old western movies such as “Bend Sinister”, “The Man from Laramie”, and “The Naked Spur.” He always played

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the character who was never the fastest or the strongest, but succeeded through having an indomitable spirit, sheer guts and never knew when he was beaten.

I think we all identified with James Steward's characters in a way we never could with superheroes because he was just more like us.

The same cannot be said for Joseph in the 1st reading today from Genesis. Yes, he survived the deadly attack of his brothers' was sold as a slave in Egypt; foolishly fought off the advances of Potiphar's wife, ending up in jail. Despite all this, Joseph is the kind of hero that you would like to see trip and fall down the steps of the Royal Palace, as he has a propensity to strut and Lord it over his brothers.

Paul in today's second reading from Romans II is also once again on the defensive. He protests that he too is an Israelite and a descendant of Abraham and even belongs to the tribe of Benjamin.

Now Paul is a genuine superhero more in the style of James Steward than Superman. He loves to show off his knowledge of the Old Testament and the law, but every now and then he gets mad that people say he's not a real Apostle.

Yet, for Paul, Jesus the Christ is his hero. It is not the miracles of Jesus that so impresses Paul, as much he knows that Jesus just does not have those flaws that he recognizes in himself.

Sometimes Paul writes about this. He would like to have the respect and esteem that the other Apostles are held in, but despite his missionary efforts it never quite comes his way. At times, it makes him angry; he fights a constant battle with himself. He knows that Christ calls him to surrender to pain, suffering, criticism and scorn. Paul just finds it hard to do. Time after time he gets mad and hits back against insult and abuse.

Yet, Paul knows that it is not Christ's way and he strives against his own nature to be more like Christ his master. It is the struggle of his life, whether to be the crusading righter of every wrong, or whether to embrace the way of suffering and the cross.

So often in our lives as Christians we are faced with the same dilemmas on a daily basis. Faced with injustice, evil and even hatred, criticism and cynicism in our lives, we too are tempted to go the way of the superhero striking back and not the way of Christ, the way of love and peace. In the Christian life it is probably one of the most difficult questions to resolve.

In the history of the first five thousand years of the Christian church what to do with trouble makers was one of the biggest questions they faced. We would like to think that the Bishops and Councils of the church always took the Christian way, but they did not.

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When Arius and his two companions caused riots in Alexandria, teaching that Jesus was not truly God, he was exiled for 10 years. He was exiled at the council of Nicea by Athanasius who sent all three north to a country we now call Georgia. Like being sent to Shohola when you don't like trees.

Athanasius was playing the superhero, because he knew that the Emperor Constantine was watching from the wings. Christ's teaching and style is easy to copy till the day dawned when it is your co-worker, who is undermining you with the boss. A little remark here, a suggestion there, and you begin to wonder why the boss no longer seeks your advice or gives you the trust and the assignments he used to do.

Tempted as we are to often retaliate, Jesus' Gospel today reminds us that his way is not the easy way. "Evil begins in the human heart," he tells his disciples. We may want to hit back in kind, but we have to remember that to do so, is to invite the same evil to take up residence in our heart also.

So at the conclusion of today's readings we have to ask ourselves the very serious question: "Do you still really want to don the tights, cape and mask and be a Superhero" or are you prepared to deal with life's blows operating on the grace that flows down the hill that Jesus has asked you to climb?"

There is a little add on to today's Gospel. It is the story of the Canaanite woman who verbally crosses swords with Jesus. She won't go away. She clearly knows who Jesus is and what he is capable of. Her persistence pays off and her daughter is healed. She has made a nonsense and fool of herself, but she doesn't care. She knows who Jesus is.

When we want to play the Superhero in our own life, the danger is that we have forgot, who Jesus is and what he and his way are capable of.

We cannot afford to do that in our Christian life. Christ has to be central to all that we do, all that we aspire to.

There is a connection here with shared ministry and working the ministries of this church as a team. This is Christ's work that we are involved with. It is not the work for anyone who is looking for a power trip, the Medal of Honor or to form their own dynasty. This is the work of the Body of Christ, it is exemplified by the likes of Betty Stark who lived and died in it without adulation or reward.

We have no graveyards for Superheroes, just a simple cross that says you passed this way. It is the only badge of honor any of us should expect or seek. May its meaning be indelible and significant in all our lives.

Amen+

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