

THE MESSAGE for Oct 17, 2010

Matthew 20:17-28

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Kingdom Power

Today we're talking about power, so let's begin with a superhero trivia quiz:

1. Where did Underdog's superpowers come from? **Answer:** The Underdog super energy pill that was in his special ring

(<http://www.andybarlowblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/underdog.jpg>).

2. Which superhero can empathically communicate with all aquatic life, and even swim up Niagara Falls? **Answer:** Aquaman

(<http://slog.thestranger.com/files/2008/05/Aquaman-Posters.jpg>).

3. Which superhero is reported to appear somewhere in every episode of the television show *Seinfeld*? **Answer:** Superman

(<http://members.aye.net/~gharris/Grafix/superman-alex%20ross.jpg>).

4. Which superhero's archenemy is named Oil Can Harry? **Answer:** Mighty Mouse

(<http://www.westchestermagazine.com/images/2009/JANUARY/Culture/Animation---Mighty-Mouse.jpg>).

5. Which superhero's power comes from a ring that must be regularly recharged? **Answer:** The Green Lantern

(<http://therad.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/green-lantern1.jpg>).

We love superheroes, don't we? We love them because they have the power to fight evil and change the world. Isn't that what we all want, the power to fight evil and change the world?

I dare you to believe what I'm about to say: **you are a superhero!** It's your identity and your birthright in Christ Jesus. You and I have the power to fight evil and change the world. I dare you to believe it?

Today's reading from Matthew is all about power. We hear a about a mother who loves her sons and wants them to be superheroes in the Kingdom that Jesus came to establish. I wonder if James and John put her up to this request, or were they standing behind her, mortified by her boldness? Who knows! We do know, like the disciples, this loving mom misunderstood both the nature of God's Kingdom and the nature of real power.

(*Read the text Matthew 20:17-28*)

The disciples saw Jesus' Kingdom as an earthly, political, military kingdom with the power to conquer all their human foes by force. They were thinking in human, earthly terms. When James & John's mother asked Jesus for her sons to sit at the right and left hand, she was asking for them to hold positions of power and authority in Jesus' kingdom. She didn't get it. She didn't understand that Jesus came to establish a different kingdom with a different power.

Real power - real greatness in Jesus' Kingdom is not be "power over" others, but "power under." **Power over** -- is when we force our will or our desires upon others. That kind of power might change people's behavior for a short period of time, but it never really changes people's hearts. That's what needs to change. **Power under** -- is submission to God's will – submission to God's desire to service others. This is the power Jesus lived by as revealed when he washed the disciples' feet and died on the cross for us. That kind of power changes people and it changes the world.

Question: by what power did Jesus change the world? By what power did he defeat sin, death, and the devil?

Matthew wants to make sure we know the answer to that question. Before the conversation between Jesus and James & John's mother, we hear Jesus teach his disciples -- saying, "*See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised.*"

Jesus isn't going to Jerusalem to experience failure and defeat, as it might appear. He is going to Jerusalem to win a great victory over evil and to change the world, by what superhero power? It was "power under" – the power of love in submission to God and service to others. This is kingdom power.

Each one of us is a superhero for God's Kingdom work on earth. Each one of us is called to defeat evil and change the world, and by God's grace, we all have the power to do it. It's a special kind of power, not power over, power under. The power of love lived in submission to God and service to others.

I have two symbols that help me understand this lifestyle. When I think about the issue of submission, this is what comes to my mind. (*Hold up a steering wheel.*)

I have a confession to make: I'm a lousy passenger. I'm much more comfortable in the driver's seat, where I'm in charge.

When we go anywhere in the car – I have to drive. There have been a handful of times in our marriage when Amber has driven – to drop me off across town or here at the church. I have to tell you I do not like sitting in the passenger seat. It's painful... Amber is an excellent driver. It's not her. It's me. I have a tough time letting go of the steering wheel. So I'll put it down (*Put down the steering wheel*).

The deeper truth is that I have a similar struggle with God. I know what the Bible says. I know that God wants nothing more than to direct my every step. I know that St. Paul encourages us to live Spirit-driven lives, but I still struggle to let go. I struggle to trust that God's agenda is really better than my agenda, to trust that being still and listening is better than running around keeping busy doing ministry without a focus.

Richard Foster, in his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, describes submission this way: *"The touchstone for the biblical understanding of submission is Jesus' astonishing statement, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' Almost instinctively we draw back from these words. We are much more comfortable with words like 'self-fulfillment' and 'self-actualization' than we are with the thought of 'self-denial.' Self-denial conjures up in our minds all sorts of images of groveling and self-hatred. ... On the contrary ... self-denial is simply a way of coming to understand that we do not have to have our own way. Our happiness is not dependent upon getting what we want."*

We think it is but it really isn't. I, your pastor, am learning about this the hard way every day. And that's a good thing.

Shel Silverstein has a little poem called "God's Wheel." It goes like this:

*God says to me with a kind of smile,
 "Hey how would you like to be God awhile
 And steer the world?"
 "Okay," says I, "I'll give it a try.
 Where do I set?
 How much do I get?
 What time is lunch?
 When can I quit?"
 "Gimme back that wheel," says God.
 "I don't think you're quite ready yet."*

The truth is I will never, ever be ready to drive the world, let alone be the primary driver of my own life, which I shouldn't be trying to do anyway.

God's agenda -- to defeat evil and change the world -- needs to be my agenda, and your agenda too. That happens as we submit our lives in this place to the teachings and the ways of Christ Jesus our Lord. I love the bumper sticker that reads, "If God is your co-pilot, you're in the wrong seat."

God has to be in the driver's seat of our lives. That's how Jesus lived. That's how Jesus' followers are to live. There's real power in that kind of submission. And so, each day, I'm learning how to let go of the wheel, to be in the right seat, and to let God steer my life.

Here's the second symbol. (*Hold up an apron.*)

Real power in God's Kingdom begins with submission, and leads to selfless service to others. That's what every superhero does. They live for others. They live to serve others using their power to help others.

Friday's in our house is Pancake Day. I make the pancakes. I love making pancakes for my family. The best part is seeing the look on their faces as we sit down and share in a meal of pancakes. When I think of selfless service, I think of an apron. Real leadership, real power, real greatness in God's Kingdom is defined, according to Jesus, by service to others.

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be great must become a servant." And "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done." When we submit ourselves to God, it will always lead us to put on the apron of loving, selfless service to others.

Mother Teresa defeated evil and changed the world when she submitted her life to God and served the poor and dying in Calcutta.

Mahatma Gandhi defeated evil and changed the world when he submitted his life to God and served the oppressed people in India.

Nelson Mandela defeated evil and changed the world when he submitted his life to God and served the broken people of South Africa.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. defeated evil and changed the world when he submitted his life to God and served the oppressed people of color in this nation.

Each one of these individuals is a superhero, and the power they used to defeat evil and change the world is the same power that you and I have been given, a power that together, all of us together are called to use right here right now in place. Just imagine what we could do together to change this world for good by serving others with Kingdom power?

That's what our four young people who are receiving their first communion today did for you. They made the communion bread that we will share in a few minutes. And they enjoyed making it for you so that you will be strengthened in the faith for your service in the world.

You are a superhero because of the power of God at work in you to defeat evil and change the world. Are you willing to believe that it's true? If so, I dare you to live like it! Amen.