

The Stuff Superheroes are Made Of

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Who is the most heroic person you know and what makes this person a hero?

Since as far back as we can imagine, our world has looked for superheroes. Humanity has always been drawn to tales and legends, and our minds seem to enjoy heartwarming stories where regardless of how awful our world is there is still hope and good will. It is likely that the earliest North American superhero was Superman. Created in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster of D.C. Comics, Superman's motto was, "Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive... The Man of Steel fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way."

Nearly 85 years later, fans still flock to this character and others like him as a symbol of compassion and responsibility. And yet, we are not drawn to him because he is greedy or wants to rule over the world, but rather because he embodies the goodness of the human spirit and the capacity that lies within each one of us to do the right thing. There are now over 153 superheroes and the list is growing. Children and teens collect superhero comic books, people of all ages are drawn into the latest movies featuring superheroes, and children enjoy dressing up and role-playing as superheroes. Superhero shirts, mugs, and memorabilia are sold in the millions annually, and often superhero movies have ranked in top cinematic sales. As a nation and as individuals we continue to be drawn into sensational stories of epic battles being won in the name of justice.

In the Bible passage that we read together from the Gospel of Mark, James and John also sought to become superheroes, except rather than coming from a desire to help others, they were drawn into fame and reputation.

The story begins with James and John approaching Jesus to ask a simple request: they would each like a place of honour in Christ's Kingdom with Jesus in the middle throne and one on either side of Him.

James and John were known as the "Sons of Thunder" because they were bold and outspoken, and this is a classic example of where they truly lived up to their name. However, there seems to be a problem right from the outset. Ever since Jesus established His band of disciples He had three chosen men whom He was closer to than anyone else: James, John, and Simon Peter. These three had walked with Jesus the longest and experienced the most intimate moments with Jesus - His greatest triumphs and darkest trials. These three were present with Christ when He raised Jarius' daughter from the dead, when the miraculous catch of fish occurred, and at the time of Christ's transfiguration when His glory was fully revealed. These three would also be the ones with Him in His last moments before His death in the Garden of Gethsemane when He agonized over God's will for Him to leave this world, and all three would later come to be prominent leaders of the early church. Yet, in their request, it appears that James and John were only focused on themselves and their

own desires. They had completely forgotten about Peter and have excluded Him. This is lesson number one: sometimes when we become so concerned with the world and with our own selfish agendas we forget about the many who are around us.

Today we remember World Food Day, a day to commit ourselves to more just and equitable actions when it comes to sharing our wealth with those who do not even have the basics they need to survive. It is estimated that between 700-800 million people are suffering from hunger all around the world. According to the United Nations this means that close to eleven percent of the world are currently starving or at risk of starving. In Canada alone, it is estimated that up to 57,000 children face hunger on a regular basis. Many of these children are from single parent families, are Indigenous, or rely on social assistance. Meanwhile we also know that over 2 million tonnes of food are wasted each year in Canada resulting in over \$17 billion dollars. Pre-pandemic all you can eat buffets which often resulted in gluttony and over-indulgence were a popular choice for special occasions and parties and the obesity rates are only increasing with nearly 65% of Canadian adults being overweight and 30% considered critically obese. Meanwhile the dieting industry of fad-diets, pills, and detoxes has increased exponentially.

The reason I share this is not to shame anyone. As you can all see, I am not exactly skinny either. I enjoy all sorts of fast food, sugary treats, and often indulge in decadent desserts. I am not saying this as a way of convincing anyone to stop eating the foods we all enjoy and celebrating special events at restaurants or buffets. Rather I am sharing this to raise an interesting point which many of us have likely considered in the past: how is it that we all have enough food to spare to end world hunger and yet world hunger continues to be a prevalent issue even in our day and age? The answer is likely because of corporate greed. The book is a bit outdated now but one very common text which I engaged with in my economic justice class in seminary called "Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger" by Ronald J. Sider addresses this very issue. In this book Sider suggests we can all do our part by actions such as: gardening, joining a food co-op, lowering our energy consumption, and resisting consumerism.

Interestingly enough, this past week also marked the United Church's annual commitment of 40 Days Towards Anti-Racism. As we consider how we can better include and care about all people especially those who do without we must be willing to ask ourselves "who is not at the table." Who are the people who still remain on the margins and outskirts of our society? Even in Canada, a country that many regard as progressive, polite, and welcoming, there are people who are excluded because of their gender, race, ethnicity, or disability. Just like James and John, many times the people who make the policies consider people like themselves and forget about the Peters in our midst.

Back to our story, Jesus humours James and John by asking what their request is despite that fact that Christ knows all things even before we speak them. James and John see Jesus's mission and vision as political. They want to be His chief advisors and they want a place of prominence whereby everyone around them knows just how important they really are. This is so different to how Christians should actually act

and behave for in Luke 14:10 we are actually told that when we enter a banquet we should be willing to take the lowest seat. It is better to consider ourselves less than and to be invited up to take a seat of honour, rather than to assume a place of honour and be told that we have to back down. In James 2 we also read that we should treat everyone the same way: we shouldn't give the position of honour to someone just because they are considered mighty in the world's eyes by showing favouritism to the rich over the poor. To Christ we are all equal and we all must take the form of servants. Sadly, James and John did not seem to fully grasp this.

Rather than simply rebuking James and John, Jesus used this as a teachable moment. He asked these two brothers a question: would they be willing to suffer the way He knew He would? James and John seem to be rather idealistic as they choose to agree. We know that later on in their lives both of these men would suffer immensely for the Gospel. Jesus hints at this reality, though the two do not yet realize it.

Later when the other ten disciples heard about this request, they became furious with James and John. I can imagine them asking questions and making statements like "so you think you're so special, eh?" "So you think you're better than the rest of us?" I always found this text quite upsetting as well. How could James and John consider themselves more important than their other friends who were also part of God's mission, and yet what we see here is not that uncommon to what we experience in our world today.

There are some churches who preach about a Prosperity Gospel. These churches which are especially common in the States tell their congregants that God wants us to be rich and happy. That God wants us to get a bigger house or drive a nicer car. Many of these churches tie how spiritual a person is with how much wealth they have accrued. There is absolutely nothing wrong with treating ourselves from time to time. We all work hard to make a living and we all deserve to pamper ourselves once in a while. There is no shame in taking a special vacation, buying ourselves something new which we really need, or having a new experience like going to the opera. However, the Prosperity Gospel is so outside of what God's actual will for us is. The Bible tells us to pray only for our daily bread. To be grateful for the provisions which God has afforded to us. The Bible also reminds us that if we are in the financial position to do so that we ought to be generous. When God gifts us with wealth and resources it is not to lord it over others or to make ourselves appear better than those who do not have, but to use it to help increase the Kingdom of God sharing of our time, talents, and treasures. When we give back to God and others we reap a harvest of righteousness. We receive rewards not just for this world but for the life to come.

It isn't just about the Prosperity Gospel though, every year the reality of Black Friday gets to me. First started in the States, this tradition has now spread to Canada. How is it that we go from celebrating Thanksgiving and remembering to be grateful for the harvest, to worrying about what we do not have and seeking to buy things which we may or may not need. In some states it is estimated that Americans spend over \$100,000 in merchandise. Again many people in our world seek to acquire things they don't need to impress people they don't know or care about all that much.

The trouble with James and John is that their priorities were all skewed. Jesus reminds them that they were actually similar to the Roman emperors who sought to oppress, overpower, and tyrannize the marginalized at that time. Roman imperials often sought to maintain their dominance through control and coercion, but Christ called His disciples to have a different mindset. Rather than living life out of self-interest and self-protection, Christ called His followers to pursue justice and break boundaries. Jesus Himself lived a life of servant leadership from the cradle right up to the grave. His death exemplifying a martyr's tragic protest against an unjust system.

It is easy to fault James and John for their careless question but it does cause us to pause and ask ourselves a few questions. When we pray how often do we pray about our own needs and desires and how often do we actually pray for the needs of those around us? Again, there is nothing wrong with asking God for things which we need. Christ wants us to come to Him, speak to Him, and trust Him to provide for the areas we are lacking in. However, as Christians we also must get outside of ourselves and think about what others around us need. Often this means that we ought to "pray with our feet." Not just saying the words, but praying through our acts of service, through our advocacy, and through demanding justice.

How often do we try to fit Jesus into our own plans rather than seeing how we might fit into His? Do we ask God in prayer what He would have us do or do we tell Him what we would have Him do? C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Great Divorce*, "In the end there are only two kinds of people in this world: those who say to God 'Thy will be done' and those who in the end God says to them 'Thy will be done.'"

It seems to be our human condition to want to be approved of and rewarded. Who among us doesn't like to be told we have done a good job, that we are valued, and that we are appreciated. Who among us isn't thankful for a raise, a promotion, or an award? There is nothing wrong with being honoured for a job well done. My primary love language is words of affirmations. I really value being told verbally or in writing that I have done something well. However, this Bible passage warns that if we see the Kingdom of God only in terms of power and status than we have gotten it all wrong. The Kingdom of God is not about how we can benefit from those around us, but how we can benefit those around us. Jesus said in Matthew 25:14 that if we have done something to the "least of these" to those whom society deems as unimportant and not valuable, then we have done it to God Himself.

Spiderman once reminded us that there is a superhero inside each one of us that keeps us honest and noble. These superheroes remind us that we can be even better versions of ourselves. Yet our inner superhero is only found when we consider how we can use it to help others. We are all given superpowers (also known as Spiritual Gifts) by God to make this world more enjoyable and liveable for others around us. May we seek to be a superhero to our world, our society, and our city in this coming week. May it be so. Amen.

