

# Sermon for Sunday, July 8, 2018 - "Real Power"

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
July 8, 2018  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

I really love superhero movies. It started with Superman when I was a kid.

My favorite uncle and I had a standing date to see every single Superman movie that came out. He didn't yet have kids and I realize now that he might have needed an excuse to go see a comic book movie, but I was always on cloud nine during those dates. Good vs. evil, a smart woman reporter and my cool Uncle Mike? I was all in.

My current favorites are Black Panther and Wonder Woman. She's so powerful and good and there's some great Lutheran theology at the end, really - check it out.

Superhero movies are a lot of fun. And sometimes I wish they were true. When people act like monsters and evil seems to lurk around every corner, when goodness looks to be on life support, could someone please swoop in and save the day?

If not a superhero, then how about Jesus? Could he make everything better - and quickly, please?

As he heads into his hometown in our story today, Jesus looks a lot like a superhero. He's calmed a storm, freed a man plagued by two thousand demons, healed a woman who was hemorrhaging for 12 years and restored a little girl to life. He looks unstoppable.

Yet the people in his hometown reject Jesus. The folks who've known him since birth aren't open to experiencing Jesus' healing and power among them. Instead they snipe and critique and take offense and make catty comments about his unusual birth (saying he's the son of Mary while pointedly leaving out any reference to a father).

Because of their disbelief, he can do no deed of power there.

I don't understand this. It troubles me. I want Jesus to be all-powerful, all the time, to work hope and healing no matter what.

Yet, Jesus isn't some super-charged action figure. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, he makes clear that his purpose is not to swoop in, do powerful things and make everything right. Rather, Jesus' purpose is to announce that the Kingdom of God has come near and to empower us all to participate in that kingdom. It seems Jesus doesn't want us to just be passive recipients of his deeds of power; he wants to make us partners in his work of enacting God's kingdom.

God's kingdom is not about the supernatural, though sometimes it's portrayed that way. It is about our creator's intentions being realized. God longs for all of creation to know well-being and peace, to live in harmony with God and all that God has made. Instead, we are driven by forces within and around us that lead us away from what God desires. The evil isn't just lurking in a dark corner, it is within each of us.

Jesus' work is to draw us into God's kingdom so that we will be healed and set free, so that we will live in God's ways and help to bring about God's well-being for all.

Sometimes this work of Jesus looks miraculous and dramatic: the Apostle Paul hears Jesus speaking to him on the road and stops murdering Christians, the blind see, the dead are raised - stories fit for the big screen. Most often, Jesus' work is more slow and subtle as he opens our unbelieving hearts and minds to new possibilities.

Jesus relentlessly persists in this work, even when we aren't willing to join it. When Jesus encounters rejection in his hometown, he doesn't plot revenge, he changes course. He focuses on training and sending his disciples. In his instructions to them, we, too, are guided about how to live as participants of God's kingdom.

Not surprisingly, we aren't to act as if we are heroes who stand in judgment above the world and use power to fix everyone else. Instead, we are to be vulnerable and dependent upon others. We are to enter people's hearts and lives. We are to take nothing to protect our hearts from them; but, rather, walk with them, learn and be loved and receive from them.

When we do this, others can join in the work of God's kingdom as they show care and welcome. When we do this, we and those who welcome us experience healing and freedom.

Last week, the youth who gathered in Houston for the ELCA National Youth Gathering heard so many stories about how healing and well-being happens when people are welcomed.

Pastor Will Starkweather stood in front of 31,000 people and said, "I was a freshman in high school when I started cutting ... The pain wasn't something I enjoyed, but it was something I could control when everything else was out of control ... So whenever fear or stress or anger or sadness threatened to overwhelm me, I turned to self-harm.

"It wasn't until I was a sophomore in college that I first sought help," he continued. "I figured I should talk to my pastor... I shared with him the hurt and the shame and the fear that I'd been carrying for all these years. And with four words he broke me: 'You're going to hell.' Four words, but they confirmed everything I'd ever been afraid of. I was broken and there was no hope of fixing me. So, I walked away from the church."

Yet by the grace of God, after being absolutely rejected by a person who should have loved him, Will took the risk of going to a new church and sharing his story again.

He told the gathering, "I sat down with Pastor Karla and for the second time I shared this story. And I was terrified about what she was going to say when I finished. Pr. Karla listened and then she also said four words: 'There's grace for that.' There's grace for that. Those words changed my life ... Having my brokenness met by grace made recovery a possibility. And this year, on Easter morning, I celebrated 10 years safe from self-harm ... We are all recovering from something, and there is grace for that."

Time and again at the Youth Gathering, previously rejected people stood on the stage and shared how their lives were changed as their brokenness, fear and shame were met by welcome and acceptance and radical hospitality from participants in God's kingdom.

That welcome brought hope and healing and made it possible for these people to stand in front of so many people and share their stories. And every single person was met with thunderous applause, standing ovations, the love and welcome of God embodied by our youth.

Beloved, our participation in God's kingdom - our welcome of others, our radical acceptance - matters.

We don't get a superhero, we don't get superpowers. We do get Jesus. We get Jesus who welcomes us and sends us out with power: the power of vulnerability, the power of grace, the power of welcome, the power of love. These are endlessly powerful gifts. They really do change things.

As we give and receive these gifts, we live as participants in God's kingdom. We are healed and healing flows through us to others. We don't have to wait for a hero to fix everything. We don't have to try to protect ourselves from the pain of the world. We are sent out to participate in the healing of creation by taking risks, extending welcome and following Jesus.

Let's take a moment for prayer.



