

Sermon Transcript

What Would Be Your Superpower?

Luke 24:48-49 and Acts 14:8-18 | Ninth Sunday After Pentecost | July 21, 2024 | John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to you my friends in faith,

There's nothing more relatable to a crowd of people than superheroes.

If you ask my boys, they'll tell you all about Spiderman.

Across generations, Batman has been represented by some unique actors over the years (**picture**).

DC vs Marvel characters dominate our movie choices.

Deacon Nina and I attended an event to provide resources for unsheltered people in Washington County and even the organizers couldn't resist inviting some special guests to greet people (**picture**)

I could have passed out post-it notes again this week (**picture**) asking what superpower you'd want, but when I thought about that for myself, I was puzzled, what would I even want?

Our love of superheroes might be due to our fascination of superhuman abilities.

Since the beginning encounters in Genesis, (**art**) humanity has always had a curiosity about having more. More knowledge, strength... more power, to be like God.

But it's not just about knowing the difference between good and evil. The desire is there because we often lift up superheroes as making the world better. We want superpowers to help someone in a crisis or to prevent danger from happening.

The greatest compliment that the residents of Lystra can make when they witness this miraculous healing is to assume it's their gods, come to earth.

This isn't a surprising connection. It's not a sign of idolatry, it could be seen as a statement of faith.

Matthew Skinner actually sees this scene playing out as a comedy. He says there's confusion everywhere. Paul and Barnabas don't speak their language and are unaware of what's going on around them until the priest shows up with oxen for a barbecue. Paul's short speech is a basic, desperate attempt to stop an ill-conceived sacrifice. It simply asserts that the one true God can be glimpsed through the natural world if we perceive it correctly.

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This group is so unfamiliar with Jesus Christ, the living God, that Zeus and Hermes are their only frames of reference. It's who they worship. It's a logical conclusion.

And it leads to an obvious preachable moment for Paul... Hermes, the messenger God after all.

What I find as a fascinating insight is that they quickly correct the assumption they're gods. Would WE be so fast to correct someone who overstates our title or position?

But the story doesn't end with Paul and Barnabas correcting that mistake and everyone becoming new converts to the early church.

As soon as they leave, leaders from the synagogue in Antioch, show up and correct the teachings. They win over the crowds too! They're so persuasive in their argument that the people turn on Paul SO much that he's gone from being called a god, with sacrifices offered to him, to getting stoned to death. Well, NEAR death.

Just when we want to wonder how quickly a crowd can turn on someone, it doesn't stretch our minds too much to remember what happened to Jesus arriving to a parade one day, but hanging on a cross a blink of an eye later.

Paul and Barnabas didn't even get the chance to go deeper into the story of Jesus and the love of neighbor that he taught.

They never got the chance because the people from Lystra don't even have a basic frame of reference to start from.

Skinner has a helpful observation. "If you've ever tried to explain Christian faith to someone who has had absolutely no previous exposure to it, you know how difficult the task can be. And how absurd your explanations can sound. Where do you begin? Nothing about coming to understand the Christian message or embracing it is especially easy."

Skinner says that our conversations about God are often near the topic of meaning.

"How do we make sense of our place in the world, what a well-lived life looks like, and what makes life truly joyful?" (SKINNER quote)

I've grappled with this in relation to how God is calling our church in the bigger picture.

We have a long history at Faith in exploring ways to help people who are homeless—even learning the term unsheltered and discovering that the key foundational element to most unsheltered persons is a catastrophic loss of belonging.

Something happened.

Forest Lake has a unique relationship within the county. (**map**) Here's Washington County. It's like Elastigirl stretched it out and said, here ya go!

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The county stretches from Forest Lake and Scandia, all the way down to Cottage Grove near Hastings. If you were gonna hop in your car and drive from here to the Walmart in Cottage Grove, it would take 45 minutes.

And we're in the same county.

Now, imagine you are living in your car or have no transportation. A few bad things have created a crisis—loss of job or relationship—and now you're unsheltered and need help. In order to meet with someone, you're directed to the Washington County Government Center.

In Stillwater.

That's also at least 35-40 minutes away, if you have a way to get there.

Most people up here don't.

On Thursday, Jenny Mason from Washington County invited me and Deacon Nina to attend the PIT Stop meeting at First Presbyterian in Stillwater.

What's a PIT Stop? Every January, the state does a Point in Time count—that's where the acronym PIT comes from. How many people are unsheltered at that specific point in time. The county does its best through their agencies and teams to invite people to that event to be counted so the appropriate resources are available and accounted for.

The idea was formed a few years ago to host an event, similar to the Point in Time count, where resources could also be provided and an invitation to those in the community who are most in need could come and get a hand. It's not an official PIT count—it's just a helpful PIT stop—provided midyear.

Jenny told me that the majority of people who attended the PIT stop—and by her count, that was over 600 people—aren't homeless, but facing deep poverty.

The PIT stop had 20 vendors, which also included 6 county teams, four managed care organizations to provide health care guidance, the local police department, and a bunch of local churches, food shelves and non-profit organizations... and two women dressed as superheroes.

As we entered the church, we were amazed by the amount of people who were there to help, as well as the line that had formed outside waiting to come in.

Once inside, there were personal care items, back to school supplies, a warm breakfast and lunch, and a \$25 gift card for everyone in need. As Jenny told me, nobody was turned away—which meant over 600 gift cards with \$25 each was a \$10,000 investment from the local community to provide.

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Jenny told me “People generally come because they know about the gift cards, but they spend 1-2 hours at the event because they feel welcomed, they can sit down for a nice meal, they can talk to workers face to face and not have to use their phone minutes, they can get food and other resources, they can talk with a Legal Aid lawyer, they can even get buttons sewn back on a beloved sweater or a zipper repaired on a jacket.

This event is about being neighbors, welcoming our neighbors, seeing and interacting with our neighbors. Each time we do this event, I see more people who speak other languages, who are trying to make a go of it in a new land, trying to give their children a better life.

After witnessing this event with our own eyes, it was clear that something like this needs to be available for our community. Members of Washington and Chisago County would jump at the chance to provide resources and connections to services up here in Forest Lake. We know that there are people in need—we can see it, even if we try to hope it’s not really there.

There are neighbors that need us to respond.

This is the same calling that took Paul and Barnabas out of the comforts of their homes and sent them into the world to proclaim the gospel.

Hosting a PIT count or a PIT stop at Faith in the future is our way of proclaiming the good news—that we see and value our neighbors. It’s our way of responding with abundance, and also inviting the circle to grow bigger—it’s about more than Faith, it’s about other churches, organizations, and food shelves coming together to show Forest Lake that we are here for them.

The Spirit calls leaders to be servants. To reject the need to be lifted on a pedestal, like Paul quickly shuts down the effort to call him a god. Instead, we humbly engage in this ministry to provide however God calls us to participate. That is truly heroic.

Serving others with the love and compassion shown to us through our lord and savior Jesus Christ? May that be our superpower. Amen.