

Fourth Sunday after the Pentecost
July 7, 2019
Northfield, MA

Scripture: Isaiah 66:10-14
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

I confess that I haven't seen any of the recent superhero movies. Justice League, Spiderman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Avengers, Black Panther... I haven't gone. It's not that I dislike superheroes. They have an appealing fantasy aspect. I watched Superman in the late 1970s and as a child I read Superman and Batman comic books. I watched various superhero television series: Batman, Superman, and the Green Hornet.

I go to the movies often enough, though, and I've seen the trailers. Though the superheroes are all different because of their particular super powers (a database of super powers and abilities lists 231 powers and abilities¹), the plots seem to share the same basic premise, the conflict between good and evil. The superhero uses his or her power to vanquish evil's stand in, who has powers of his or her own. Generally, the end is a loud, almost cataclysmic, violent final confrontation in which evil is destroyed and good triumphs.

This story from Luke was far different. Jesus sent 70 people into the towns to serve the people they would meet and to proclaim to them, "the kingdom of God has come near to you." He sent them forth with nothing more than who they were to meet the people where they were.

Let's pause and think for a moment. They left with nothing more than the clothes they wore to engage with people they didn't know, including some who might be hostile. That's pretty daunting. They returned feeling joyful and filled with accomplishment because they vanquished Satan.

¹ <https://www.superherodb.com/powers/>
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Imagine making a movie focusing on one pair of the seventy. They don't have any obvious power, such as enormous physical strength or shape shifting or invisibility or flying. As a film, it could be kind of boring. I can see a fan of super hero movies saying, "Really? Eating with people and not even being picky about what is put in front of them? And the words, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you,' are not even some powerful incantation."

I'll admit that if a movie were made about this gospel lesson, I'd more likely see it over the current crop of superhero movies. Not because it's religious or even based on a Biblical story. I'd choose it because it's not loud, it's not violent, and it's got people eating dinner. Mind you that my favorite movie is **My Dinner with Andre**, which came out in the 1981 and is a movie in which Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory talk over dinner for almost two hours. That's it. Nothing else, although, there is a waiter who serves food. But enough of the movies.

The seventy went into the towns and villages. Though only traveling with the clothes on their backs, they had inside of them the Holy Spirit, Jesus' wisdom, and love. Love as in *agape*, God's love. Love, the greatest transforming power we know. The abiding love that God has for us and that we have for each other. That's all they had, and they vanquished evil.

Yet, evil was not defeated for all time. Evil is not a one-time occurrence. Evil is a constant. Evil has two forms, qualitative and moral. A qualitative evil is something bad in nature or a condition. A qualitative evil as misfortune leading to a loss of prestige or status or physical condition. A moral evil is faithlessness to covenantal relationships. It's disobedience to God or disobedience to the teachings of Jesus, the opposite of righteousness.

Following Jesus' teachings leads to the peace we will find in God's kingdom, as in the wholeness of life, as in *shalom*. Shalom grows out of justice predicated and built upon love.

Love is not an emotion, but actions: compassion, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation. Love as Paul described (1 Cor. 13:4-7): “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Jesus’ wisdom, reflected in his teachings, overturns our typical measures and perspectives of this world. That wisdom combined with love vanquishes evil. Just as Jesus taught the seventy about real life, those lessons apply to us as well. We infuse our lives with gratitude, even for the tiniest grace. We live with humility, acknowledging that real power comes from servanthood not domination. We live with generosity, remembering that we don’t define wealth by how much we have, but how much we give away. Though we may be righteous, we reject self-righteousness because, ultimately, we submit to God.

We live in an ongoing struggle between good and evil. We live in that tension all the time. Remember what we say in the Lord’s prayer, “Deliver us from evil.”

Rather than going through a litany of moral evils, let’s take one, the divisions we have in our national life between race, gender, sexual identity, generations, and politics. These divisions tear our nation’s fabric, taking what ideally should be a multi-colored cloth and tearing it and poking holes in it little by little so that there is nothing left to hold it together.

I’m not saying that the media is evil or that social media is evil, but they have exposed our divisions. An example would be the migrant situation at our southern border. I don’t think anyone would dispute that the conditions under which these migrants are held are inhumane. We expose our divisions when we begin to unpack culpability and then seek to blame one side or the

other. And though I don't believe we should be silent, we have to be realistic and acknowledge that all our anger and frustrations have limited effect when we direct them at each other or political leadership, which seems to happen with social media.

We can set aside our differences when we look much closer to home. Migrants are the poorest of the poor. Migrants work on many of our farms in western Massachusetts or in low-paying minimally skilled jobs in our cities and towns. What can we do to serve the migrants who typically labor in the shadows of our community? Sitting with them and listening to their stories, we will learn not only how we can help them, but also learn about them and their struggles. Importantly, though, we will listen to the migrant's story regardless of his or her immigration status because we are meeting them where they are in that moment. By listening to their stories, especially when they labor typically out of sight, they will experience the peace that comes from the kingdom of God in that moment because we took time to be compassionate and kind and to love them. In that moment their immigration status is irrelevant because we won't see them as undocumented or legal or even as an immigrant, but as a person who carries the weight of the world. Indeed, we might even stop seeing that person as an immigrant and see our sister or brother, a child of God, like us.

To be bearers of God's peace we need nothing more than the Holy Spirit, Jesus' teachings, and love. We don't need super powers because they are powers enough – powers that can make God's kingdom real in this world. Vanquishing evil doesn't take a violent, cataclysmic confrontation. Rather, it takes quiet moments of conversation, moments when we break bread, moments when we see each other as sisters and brothers, God's children.

One final thought. In that list of 231 super powers... you won't find love.