



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Who Is Your Hero?” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

November 3, 2019; All Saints Sunday

Reading: Luke 19:1-10; *Wangari’s Trees of Peace* by Jeanette Winter

Heroes. When you read the title of my message, what came to your mind? For some, I bet it was a superhero or two, especially with the popularity of superhero films and the likelihood you saw more than a couple when you opened the door to trick-or-treaters. So, which is your favourite?

(Await responses from both children and adults.)

Have you ever noticed that superheroes fall into one of three categories? First, ordinary people who happen to have the cash (or know someone who does) to buy or invent the hardware they need. These are, of course, heroes like Batman, Ironman, perhaps at a stretch Black Panther. They have got determination and often a complicated backstory. Next, the extraordinary. They’re super-human in some way, having ability because they’re from another planet (Superman), a mythical place (Wonder Woman), or even the realm of the gods (Thor). They’re great to have on your side but difficult to identify with. Then there are those who acquired an ability, perhaps by accident. We are talking Spiderman, Incredible Hulk, The Flash, etc. There are a lot of this genre of superhero.

Perhaps there should be a personality test based on superheroes. Who we admire says a lot, I’m sure. The same can be said for how we interpret bible stories. So how does biblical interpretation connect to superheroes? Don’t worry. I’ll get there, I promise. Did you notice in our drama what Zacchaeus said when people grumbled about Jesus wanting to stay at his home? I give half of my income to the poor, and when I discover I’ve cheated someone (or more likely when as chief tax collector one of my employees has cheated someone) I offer back four times as much. Notice the present tense. Even though this is how the Greek reads, translations are often in the future tense. “I will give half of my wealth away. I will pay back four times as much.” Why is that? Likely it fits better with the theology of the translator. Placing Zacchaeus’ actions in the future means he had a conversion. Zacchaeus is “found” by Jesus. If, however, he did these things, the crowd is the one converted, whom Jesus “finds” as he helps them to see how they misjudged Zacchaeus.

So, where do superheroes fit? If Zacchaeus had a conversion, meeting Jesus changed him, like a radioactive spider bite. If Zacchaeus helped others before he met Jesus, he’s like Batman, already a hero. How we interpret this story says a lot about our theology. If we need to be changed by Jesus in order to do what is right, we don’t have the capacity on our own. We’re how the crowd sees Zacchaeus – sinners needing redemption. To mix superhero genres, Jesus is Superman, from a distant, transcendent place, here to rescue us. He’s come to help but we can never be like him.

There is a challenge here. In many ways it makes the world a fallen place and leaves us unable to make real change. We’re condemned unless Jesus swoops in to catch us, or perhaps we get bitten by a spider or drink a formula. But is that how things are? What if Jesus’ mission was to show us that

we're already like him but haven't come into our own yet? This takes incarnational theology more seriously. The divine and human are one. To draw on another superhero type, maybe we're all X-men with latent abilities. Jesus is like Professor Xavier, powerful, awakened to his personal gifts and ready to help others come to the same awareness. He points to Zacchaeus' giftedness and names his household as blessed. He helps the crowd see how their assumptions are hurtful and divisive. In this context, we don't need to wait to be rescued. We all can be heroes.

This is why we celebrate All Saints Day each year. It is a reminder of who we all are. If we recall Paul's letters, we're all saints, giving thanks for the great cloud of witnesses who've gone before us. Now, like superheroes, there are individual saints in the tradition. More than people that were declared to be in heaven, they are models of holiness. Given that, who are your heroes, these real people who showed us an example of loving kindness, compassion, seeking restorative justice?

(Await responses from both children and adults.)

Our favourites say something about us, where our interests and gifts lie. The people who are most compelling for me are those who lived one way and then after a pivotal life experience, changed how they lived. Like Francis of Assisi or Oscar Romero. It's likely because of my own story of leaving Ontario to work with Indigenous people. Each saint is someone who made a difference and we are called to do the same. Like Wangari Maathai, who in founding the Green Belt Movement was clearly before her time as she linked environmental and social justice, not just focused on reforestation but on women's rights as well. Last week I called us to ponder ways we participate in injustice. It's hard to face but we can't get stuck. We need to figure out our gift and apply it to the change we seek in the world. So, what response do you think the world needs?

(Await responses from both children and adults.)

We respond as individuals but not only as such. We also seek to nurture the antidote to injustice by creating places where we experience the more loving world we feel called to cultivate. In this way church is like the Justice League, or perhaps the Xavier School for Gifted Children. Uplifted by Jesus through the Spirit, we come to understand our gifts and how to use them. Saints are here in spirit too, ordinary people who lived lives of love, no matter who they were, where they were from, what faith tradition they followed, sharing their witness and cheering us on.

As we continue to celebrate, may we do so knowing that we all can be heroes. We don't need to wait. We just need to respond where we see a need and so nurture the world we yearn for. Amen.