

Recognize the Real Hero

2 Kings 5: 1-14

Matthew 9: 1-11

It's quite common for movie studios to make super-hero movies and numerous sequels. A halfway decent story with the requisite computer-generated graphics will make a lot of money by embracing the super-hero genre. The top two grossing movies for 2019 are *Avengers: Endgame* and *Captain Marvel*. International gross for *Avengers: Endgame* is over \$2.5 billion, and for *Captain Marvel*, it's over \$1 billion. The rest of the pack has grossed a small fraction of what these movies have raked in.

I have not seen either movie, and likely won't unless it's free and there is nothing else more compelling to watch. I can guess the basic plot. The world is threatened by a monstrous power which everyday humanity is powerless to overcome. Super-heroes enter to wage combat against the enemy of all things good and blessed. Most of the world seems to get destroyed by their combat, but that is the price of super-hero salvation. The super-hero seems to be beaten and all appears desperately lost. Then, miraculously, the super-hero is transfigured in some way, overcoming the detestable enemy, and saving all of humanity and the planet. Cheers and applause for the super-hero! Now please remove your trash on your way out, placing it in the convenient receptacles by the exit door. Drive safely.

These are the super-hero movies that people clearly flock to and enjoy greatly. I don't really know why (obviously). Perhaps it's an escape from the reality that can be found pounding us every day. There are forces and powers operating in the world that people have no real control over. The list of issues and concerns are huge, starting with global warming and the imminent climate catastrophe for which the signs are unmistakable, if you care to pay attention, if you heed the increasingly desperate calls of the scientific community. Unaffordable health care, student debt, unaffordable housing, income and wealth inequality, and many others could be added to the list. Nothing is really being done about any of it; lots of talk from some quarters, silence, denial, and reassurance from others. People have good reason to feel like they're being dragged down day by day as the undertow of unaddressed problems works to bring them down.

People crave a super-hero who will break through the unsolvable with super-human power that we, the weak and beset, cannot obtain on our own. That's the problem with super-heroes and their movie plots. Common people have no power and can only be saved by a super-hero. People are made passive, blinded into weakness, and reduced to indistinct and even invisible carnage as the super-hero engages the struggle for helpless people like us.

Yet there are real heroes who do amazing things, seemingly impossible things who we can hear about all the time. My favorite heroes are teachers whose deep commitment to their students and to their learning keeps their heads above water when politicians tell them how to do their job, tell them they aren't doing their job, when they don't have a clue about the job, the conditions, or anything else. Teachers are treated as political footballs, their hands tied by a ridiculous testing regime whose goalposts move

nearly every year, with funding ever decreasing, often stuck in decrepit buildings, and paid far less than what they should expect. Despite all those obstacles, many teachers who will not give up, even though plenty have left the field because the whole situation was simply unbearable. That's heroism, and often thanklessly received.

The real hero is the one deeply committed to empowering others in their tasks. The real hero brings people together, discounting negatives and working to advance positives. The real hero can recognize the value in others and cuts through barriers instead of erecting them, wanting to gain the harvest rather than deny the possibilities. The real hero goes above and beyond expectation in their own way to bring new life out of deadliness, to bring light to turn aside dark shadows, to discover treasure among the outcasts.

Real heroes come to us in scripture, and we see how they work in a couple of stories.

Our scriptures start in 2nd Kings with Naaman's story, the Syrian general, a war hero with a skin disease or kind of leprosy. The story should be familiar since I believe I've preached about it in Fairfield like 5 times.

His Israelite servant girl suggests a prophet in Samaria for healing. The general gets a letter from his king to the king of Israel. There is comedic confusion as the king of Israel denies he is God, denies any power to be helpful, and thinks it's all a plot to humiliate him. The king of Israel is just a bit insecure, I'd say.

The prophet Elisha gets word of Naaman's dilemma and offers his assistance. Naaman journeys to Samaria, together with his massive entourage – clearly, **he is important**. We know the entourage conveys riches and wealth, but it also is an expedition of a war hero. He comes to conquer and commands respect.

The problem comes with Elisha who never shows himself. The prophet merely sends a messenger out to the great hero general. That's pretty insulting. The messenger tells this war hero to dip in a muddy stream for his healing. Thoroughly incensed by this rude treatment and this ridiculous instruction, Naaman storms off in a fit of anger.

His servants remind the general how he was prepared to do something difficult to be healed; to do something so simple should at least be tried, right? Following his healing, Naaman proclaims his faith in the God of Israel.

Naaman, the character of the superhero, came to receive tribute, honor, and praise like a conqueror. He came to receive. Instead, the great hero is humbled and is given new life. The superhero is the one who gets saved in God's word because God does the saving, not the strong, not the brave, and not the powerful. First, they have to get over themselves before they can recognize what God seeks to do both for them and with them.

The servant of God and God's Kingdom calls them and seeks to transform them into servants of the kingdom of God. The servant of God doesn't simply save them; he empowers them.

Matthew 11 begins with the healing of a paralyzed man who lies on a mat. Notice that Jesus doesn't "heal" the man at first. Rather, Jesus announces the forgiveness of his sins. This provokes the teachers of the Law, the gatekeepers, who call Jesus out for blasphemy, for claiming to forgive sins which he has no authority – from them anyway – to do. "There are rules, you know! You can't flout the rules! You have to obey the rules!"

Jesus doesn't appear surprised by their objection. He declares that they have "evil in their hearts," that they prefer a system of sinfulness to a system of forgiveness, to demand judgment and penalty rather than offer grace and renewal.

They have declared that Jesus is unable to forgive sins. Jesus throws down the rhetorical gauntlet: *Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?* Obvious answer – *get up and walk* – which Jesus commands the man to do, and he does.

This is only one instance when Jesus perceives an unjust, unforgiving system masquerading as a reflection of God's will and way. Jesus confronts it head-on and turns it inside-out, much to the delight and admiration of the crowd.

This isn't just a miraculous healing story; to regard it as such would miss the whole point. Jesus is empowering and making new while the authorities, the pretenders to religiosity and righteousness are oppressing, denying, and forbidding. Jesus empowers and makes new, for the Kingdom empowers and makes new.

We see this also in the brief story of Jesus' calling of Matthew, the tax collector, the ostensible namesake of this gospel. The tax collector, the servant of the oppressor, the scheming, dishonest, exploiter of the people, is the rich and despised scoundrel if there ever was one. The tax collector is in his own category of loathing, as in "tax collectors and sinners," the twin groups of those loathsome to God and alienated from salvation.

What does the righteous super-hero do in this society? The superhero would round up these sinner types and punish them, separating them from the good and righteous, the religiously proper folk who do the right things. However, the servant of the Kingdom, the Savior Jesus, has a wholly different mission.

Jesus calls the tax collector from his duties, summoning this traditionally despised individual, a greedy traitor who serves the unclean imperial power and oppresses the people. Jesus wants *this guy* to join him on his journey. Matthew obeys, accepting the opportunity to advance the Kingdom of God, to serve with the Lord, and to know the power of the spirit of truth, peace, and new life. Super-heroes don't befriend the enemy and seek to make them their partners. Super-heroes don't empower others or

bring new life to those who have been outcast and despised. Jesus does this **all the time**.

Matthew the tax collector invites Jesus to have dinner with him and his friends, other tax collectors and other sinner, an interesting fellowship for dinner. Jesus has no qualms about dining with this rabble. On the other hand, he does get criticized and challenged by the Pharisees who complain to the disciples – ‘why does your teacher eat with untouchables, with outcasts, with that scum?’ Jesus makes clear how his mission is not as the super-hero that they would prefer, the one who punishes and casts out the sinners, preserving the righteous while purifying and sanctifying the way of life as they believe it should be. Jesus has a different mission, quite unlike their preference. It is not about condemnation, punishment, and purification, but rather about grace, renewal, and empowerment.

Jesus says: *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*

Apart from the obvious, that Jesus has come for the people of God, the people of God’s greatest priority, there is a subtle question underlying his statement, whether it’s intentional or not. Do those who are so righteous even understand the nature of sinfulness in the eyes of God? Do they believe it is people who they – the religious authorities and social elites – have decided are sinners? The sinners are tax collectors, prostitutes, Gentiles including Samaritans, the weak and sick, the beggars and the demon-possessed, and a host of others. What if those who think they are righteous, religious, pious, prayerful, observant, and good citizens are not also sinners? What if they are far from fulfilling God’s will, having embraced religion and ritual without paying any attention to justice, grace, and peace, without welcoming all, loving all, and caring for all as sisters and brothers?

If that underlies Jesus’ statement, then Jesus has not come to call the righteous because the righteous are *so very* righteous that they don’t even know their own sinfulness. One could point it out to them, teaching them and counseling the ways of the Kingdom, but they would deny it all. That’s exactly what we see happening in Jesus’ encounters with the righteous religious. He didn’t come to call the righteous; they’re already so “righteous” that they dismiss everything Jesus does and says.

Jesus broke bread with sinners, tax collectors, and outcasts from good, righteous, religious folks, Jesus’ mission is to save and to heal, to bring new life and reveal the power of the faithful within the Kingdom of God. That’s the work of the real hero, the one who saves and heals, who welcomes and empowers, who brings new life. So it is that Jesus calls us and empowers us to be heroes in his Kingdom work. Put on your cape; it’s time to fly into action.