

## Jesus versus the Superhero

*By Jennifer Berry-McNulty\**

My husband is a huge fan of superheroes, and I have a soft spot for them myself, I'll admit. Scott's also an agnostic on his days of wonder and an atheist the rest of the time. I'm strongly considering seminary, so I've been thinking more than normal about Jesus and a life of Christ. In the background there are comic books and superhero movies.

I've heard arguments made that superheroes are modern reflections of Jesus. And there is a case to be made for this. A single man, standing up for justice against overwhelming odds; magical or miraculous acts; many superheroes even seemingly "rise from the dead" if you consider that they have perhaps lost their families or other ties to mainstream society, which allows them to live these extraordinary lives. There are other correlations, but you get the point.

But, on the other hand... on the other hand... Jesus versus the superhero:

Superheroes have it easy. Vaguely explained but limitless supplies of cash. Loose compunctions about violence – the ends ALWAYS justify the means. Easy, black-and-white morality. The bad guy is always deranged and out of control, never simply misguided, off track, or trying as hard as he can but still not quite making it. It's never a big problem if the superhero blows up half the city to get the villain, there are no environmental ramifications, no thought of the "collateral damage" inflicted upon innocent bystanders. The most hideous weapons are only hideous if they are in the wrong hands. As long as the "good guys" have them, everything will work out all right. There is always a happy ending for the superhero.

And, isn't this the Jesus many of us would like to follow? Isn't this, in fact, the Jesus the Jewish people were awaiting? Isn't this the world we would like to inhabit? Be honest. Life would be easier, safer, more navigable in a world where the good guys were loaded with cash and would use it to solve all of our problems, the bad guys were always easy to find, the collateral damage never had a name, a face, a history or a future, and the only diseases had an antidote or cure for the superhero to find just in time.

Some of us are following the superhero, thinking he is Jesus.

Jesus is no superhero. He is infinitely better than that, and immeasurably harder to follow. And for the most part, we like hard work to stay at the box office, not follow us home. I know I do.

Following might be the heart of the matter. You cannot follow a superhero. Just look at the sidekicks. They have no powers, their costumes are hokey, the benefits package is dismal, and they are always in the shadows, left in the dust, unable to keep up. Superheroes aren't designed to be followed, only adored and mimicked. And watch – everyone who mimics a superhero is begging for mockery.

Jesus invites us to come along. He begs us to understand that we can be more than his sidekick, we can be his partner, his equal, and I think, his future. Jesus is not a mere man, or a lowly hero. Jesus is **the way**.

So, what does it mean to transcend the superhero and walk with Jesus in a world filled with quick fixes, shortcuts, tweets, and a headless rush toward our own destruction through disease, social and economic injustice, exploitation of the planet's resources and escalating stakes of violence sponsored by nations?

What if each and every one of us here today vowed to plan three actions every day that would put us on **the way**? What if each and every one of us promised to forget all of the social connotations of the question and ask ourselves every time we faced a decision "what would Jesus do?"

The United Methodist Church has given us three big mouthfuls to chew on: Pandemic Poverty and Disease, Environmental Degradation, and the Proliferation of Weapons and Violence. They seem incomprehensible, insurmountable, even. But we are people of faith, seekers of the way. We know better.

Jesus undoubtedly knew of strife, suffering and injustice throughout the Roman world, but he chose to make his stand at home in Galilee and in Jerusalem. We can do the same. The way is not about where you place your steps on the map, but where you place your steps in your heart. If the steps are in the right direction, it is more important than if they are inches or miles. Let's start with inches and envision what impact it would have if one fifth of the United Methodists represented in this conference took just two of the following actions, doing nothing to hide their activity and nothing to advertise it, either.

The superhero never really knows the poor. They are landscape, backdrop, unfeeling and two dimensional window dressing to the big actions the hero is taking at center stage. Jesus knew the poor. He didn't give money to the poor, no condescending handouts for him. Because the simple act of forking over a few dollars is more about the giver than the receiver. Jesus lived among the poor, feeling their struggles. Would you be willing to live for one week on the budget of a single mother on welfare? Would you be willing to go to the grocery store with her, humbly learning from her thriftiness and painfully hard decisions? Would you ask to trade places with her so that she could have a break from choosing between milk and meat? Toilet paper and shampoo? Seek out affordable organic food for her children, since there is none in her local store? Watch her children so she can get out of the house without going to work?

What would it take for each of us to realize first hand that poverty is not simply a lack of money or luxury, but a prison? Right now there are people in our own communities that are living with "food insecurity." It is easy to give to a food pantry, though not enough of us do even that, but what if each of us emptied our own cupboards, gave the food to others and spent the next week living on saltines, ramen noodles, food you can buy for under a dollar, and possibly not enough of that? How would this change our perspective

on hunger, poverty, and the terrible dividing line established by class in our “free” society?

At what point could we grow to realize that being poor means not being able to take ANYTHING for granted? That poverty means uncertainty, insecurity, envy, anger, sleeplessness, helplessness, and shame. And, most of all, could we realize Jesus chose to live a life of poverty, welcomed it, and found freedom, not oppression? I would like to find the strength of Jesus to lean into the wind of having nothing and find that I could fly. I would like to find a way for all of us to find that way.

The superhero stops the evil genius with the horrible biological agent, but has no patience for developing a cure. There must be fanfare, hype, a last minute dash for the superhero. Jesus wades into the murky water of the worst diseases of his time. He didn't toss extra bandages to the lepers. He sat among them, shared food with them, healed them – if not in body, in mind. Where can we put Jesus' lessons into practice in our world?

There is a movement to remove stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. People wear a t-shirt that says “I have AIDS” or “I am HIV +.” Would you wear one? Spend a day with someone living with the virus, learn about their medicines, fears, hopes? Would you lobby for research money saying “We need a cure” rather than saying “they need a cure?” Can we find new ways to make the problems of widespread diseases that largely afflict “others” relevant and urgent for those of us in the first world?

The superhero would implode the polluters plant, probably spilling toxic waste in the river. Jesus didn't live in a time when the planet itself was threatened. But that doesn't mean Christians are exempt from healing the wounds people have inflicted on Mother Earth. We cannot control the pollution levels of foreign governments. But we can control our own. How many of us would forcefully ask our employers to support telecommuting to save gas usage? Gather together our neighbors and get a group rate on solar panels? Write to our congress people and volunteer to pay more in taxes to support businesses that are pursuing renewable energy?

Could the United Methodist Church “go green for God?” What would that look like? What if our conference transformed itself into the greenest church community anywhere on earth – green roofs, wind farms, solar panels, water reclamation, hybrid or electric cars for our pastors as part of their compensation? We could do it. We could start today, in fact. We could be living proof that a life lived in accord with God's creation is possible in a modern world. And giving communities energy sources that not only cost them less but sometimes make them money leads to economic empowerment, too. Think of the missions we could support with the money we saved by standing up and protecting God's world.

The superhero would destroy the gun with a bigger gun. Jesus remained peaceful in the face of the utmost torture. How loudly will we condemn the wars fought in our collective name? Are we, as a church, willing to stand up to the NRA? Refuse to buy stock in any company that creates weapons? Could we fund artists who would turn firearms into

artwork, and would we put that artwork in front of our churches? Are you willing to sponsor a gun buy-back at your police station and volunteer at it?

More globally, are we willing to acknowledge that our need for resources drives our nation's military action? And are we willing to forgo our own self-interest to do what is right? Where do we choose to invest our church endowments, and what does that say about our walk with Jesus?

None of these issues exist in isolation. Most, probably all, of us lack the energy or wherewithal to stand up for justice on all fronts. But each and every one of us has the obligation as a follower of Jesus and **the way** to stand up *some* where, no matter how uncomfortable or scary it may be to us. The superhero can blow up the problem. Christians are charged with taking the time to love injustice out of existence.

To accomplish this, as individuals we must ask ourselves how we can increase our own sense of urgency, our own passion to DO – because **the way** is a life of action, not a life of Sunday morning contemplation. How many times did Jesus traverse the lands of Galilee? How many miles are we willing to log in our faith journey?

At the same time, there is strength in numbers. Collectively, as the United Methodist Church, we have an opportunity to find those urgent issues of our day we can rally around. The superhero level problems we can agree to love out of existence as one church united. And are we willing to be as daring as Jesus – to walk **the way** even if those issues challenge our own members as Jesus challenged his own community?

The superhero always has a fast, showy, explosive solution. But the real solution to our biggest problems is the question “what would Jesus do?” And even when we don't like it, we usually know the answer. So I say to the superhero: you can keep your cape. We've got a better way.

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