

YOU'RE FANTASTIC

When We Need to be a Superhero

Text: Mark 6:30-34

Finding Ourselves in the Fantastic Four

Of all the comic books turned into motion pictures of late, my favorite one is the Fantastic Four. For those not in the know, it is a tale about some astronauts who, when subjected to some strange space radiation, suddenly acquire some fabulous powers. The group is headed up Reed Richards, "*Mr. Fantastic*." He can not only extend his brilliant mind to solve almost any problem, he can also stretch his body like Silly Putty to meet various needs. Reed's heartthrob Sue is the "*Invisible Woman*," played by the voluptuous Jessica Alba. Sue can make herself completely disappear when that is needed and she can project these fabulous force fields to protect herself and others. Then there's Sue's brother Johnny, the "*Human Torch*." Johnny can burst into flame at will without being consumed. He can fly and start fires with a flick of a finger or a wink of his dashing good looks. He can even set-off, in a good-natured way, the fourth of the Fantastic Four -- big Ben Grimm -- a gravel-voiced, rock-plated tank on two feet that others call the "Thing." Ben's got a soft-heart, but such a tough exterior that he can take phenomenal punishment and just keep getting right back up again.

I guess it doesn't take much imagination to realize that these characters are simply comic book versions of the personas that many of us often idealize or seek to be ourselves, in some sense. Maybe you're one of those people who try to stretch your mind and physical resources to incredibly elastic lengths to meet the needs of others. Perhaps you're a person who lets your own needs go invisible to yourself or others a lot of the time. Or you project protective fields for others or maybe yourself.

Then, again, you might be someone who tries to save the world, or at least your corner of it, with your blazing energy, charm, or speed. You sizzle along, rarely worrying too much about whether you'll burn out. Or just perhaps you're most like the Thing. You're gonna tough it out. You're going to be the strong one who doesn't let the pressure or pain stop you. You'll clobber your way through whatever comes at you, and get right back up when you're knocked down. Can you resonate with any of this? Which one of those four personas would the people who know you best say is most like you?

Where Does the Drive to Be Fantastic Come From?

Like so many of the impulses that move us today, these ones I'm describing aren't all crazy or bad. *Sometimes we feel that we genuinely need to be something of a superhero simply because of the serious needs outside of us.* If we're gifted or talented at all then, frankly, wouldn't we be remiss in our duty or calling if we didn't use our God-given capacities as heroically as we could to meet these needs? After all, Jesus himself says in Luke 12:48, "**From everyone who has been given much, much will be**

demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”

The truth is that there are too many people in this world who are unwilling to stretch themselves very much to help others. There are plenty who refuse to let their own needs go invisible when they ought to be spending their energies protecting others. There are too many in our world whose passion for any cause or concern beyond themselves never burns very brightly. And there are more than enough folks who when necessity demands that they get up again from life's poundings because other people are counting on them, wilt and whimper instead of standing strong. There is not a family, workplace, church, or community that could not use some more heroic people. It would be fantastic.

Learn to Live Out of the Father's Love

But let me qualify that statement in two important ways, and the FIRST one is this: It is fine to pursue the “fantastic” life if we have taken the time to discern what is driving it. The reason I say this is because sometimes we feel this desire to heroically stretch, or surrender our visible needs, or strive passionately, or stand strong -- less because of the deep needs around us than because of the distorted needs within us.

You are probably much healthier than I am in this regard, but I have had to confront something painful about myself and it gets very complicated. All I can tell you is that I've come to see that there is a continuum of motivations that drives me in life. At one end is this desire to be faithful with the gifts God has given me in life. I want to hear God say **“Well done, good and faithful servant,”** whether anyone else in this world recognizes what I bring or not. But at the other end is this desire to have people say: “Oh, you're wonderful, Dan. How do you do what you do? Why, the way you stretch, and serve, and strive, and stand strong, is really quite amazing. You're fantastic.”

There is a body of Christian tradition, dating all the way back to the earliest centuries of the church, that says that genuine spiritual health and transformation lies in ruthlessly naming and exposing to God's light the darkness of what theologians have called “the false self.” The false self is that angry, anxious, or fearful voice within us that asks other human beings to establish for us our identity and core value. Did I do this perfectly enough for you? Am I loving and helpful enough? Am I impressively competent? Have I pleased you with how unique I am? How insightful I am? How loyal and responsible I am? Have you noticed how much fun I am? How powerful and decisive I am? How agreeable and pleasant I am? All of these are various ways of asking the same question of people: “Am I fantastic?”

The restless yearning to have other human beings answer this question for us is one of those demonic influences the Bible warns us about that can make our lives just crazy. In my own case, I've found that there will always be people who answer “NO,” who answer “I DON'T KNOW,” who answer “I DON'T CARE” or SHOW ME MORE,” or the most insidious of all: “SHOW ME AGAIN NEXT TIME.” But if the accolades or appetites of

others are what drive the use of our gifts, we will never be at peace. The false self does not rest. It just occasionally collapses from working so hard to fill its bottomless well of need.

There is another way, however. We can live out of the motivation that comes from the other side of the continuum. The true self, the basis for real spiritual health and truly heroic action in the world, can be found if we will let into us the affirmation of God our Father -- spoken to us as he spoke to Jesus at the time of his baptism: **“You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”**¹ Do you know that about yourself? Can you hear God saying this to you today? How can you more deeply?

Identity Tests

In Mark chapter 6, the gospel writer helps us start to see just how important this is as we watch Jesus undergoing an identity test. Jesus goes to minister to the people of his own home town (Nazareth) but is publicly rejected by them. If Jesus had been living out of the false self side of the motivation continuum, that experience alone would have been an absolutely devastating one. Yet we get no sense from the text that Jesus felt anything more than humble sadness for the blindness of those who'd missed the truly fantastic gift right in front of them. How did Jesus keep his identity and motivation rooted not in the acclamation of the crowd but in the affirmation of the Father's love?

Shortly after this, Jesus sends his twelve closest disciples out to face an identity test of their own, as they go minister to the needs of people around them. Returning breathless from this experience, verse 30 recounts: **“The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.”** The underlying impression here is that, unlike Jesus in Nazareth, the disciples have actually met with rave reviews from the people to whom they've gone. People have said, in effect, “You're fantastic! Keep ministering to us.” This impression is confirmed two verses later when we read in verse 33: **“Many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.”**

We get a picture here of not only how steady the demand there always will be for crowd-pleasing superheroes, but also of how easy it is to get sucked into playing primarily for that crowd. It's not that we're meant to go around suspicious of the people around us or resistant to them. The very next verse makes clear that Jesus never stopped loving the people around him. Verse 34 reads: **“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.”**

Learn to Live Within Limits

But it is what happens in the middle of this story that I really want to invite you and me to pay especially close attention to. I said a little earlier that two things are particularly required to live a life that is truly heroic in the best sense. The first is to keep asking ourselves what is driving our efforts in relation to other people? Are we motivated by

the love of God for us and for other people or is it really about propping up our false self by getting others to say “You’re Fantastic!” But the SECOND requirement for a healthier life is equally important. It is crucial we learn to live within limits.

I have been a student of Jesus now for some three decades and I continue to be amazed at how He of all people did this. He accomplished things that were truly fantastic. Yet he did so without taking on the methodology of the famous four we’ve talked about today. On the contrary, Jesus took care NOT to get stretched out of shape by others’ expectations. He made his need for food, for drink, for rest, or for personal response from others very visible and clear. There was a radiant power to the presence of Jesus, but it showed itself more frequently in a deliberate rather than a dashing pace and he took great care not to burn himself out. Jesus certainly proved himself a Rock, not by faking perpetual strength, but rather by regularly drawing upon the strength of his heavenly Father in prayer.

And so, in the middle of this highly demanding moment recorded in Mark chapter 6 -- when the crowd was pressing in all around and the disciples were tempted to just keep on working harder in order to please their human audience, Jesus reminds his disciples of their limits. Verse 31 reads: **“Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’ So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.”**

I’m not sure I’ve ever been busier than I am right now. This past week was an absolute whirlwind, starting at 5:30 most days and going late into the night. I can’t tell you how many meals I missed and how few times I even went to the bathroom. Frankly, the week ahead looks worse. Our Board of Trustees meets on Tuesday, there’s a big staff retreat on Thursday. A friend from Scotland arrives on Thursday night. My parents are coming to visit on Friday. I leave for Africa on Sunday. I’ve got about 16 hours of lectures to prepare in the next week, back to back meetings most days, and the email inbox is overflowing. And so yesterday, I got up shortly before 5:00 a.m. to get a jump on all this. I want everyone in my life to feel that what I produce is fantastic.

I did think it a bit strange when I felt this prompting to go back to bed about 7:00 a.m. And stranger still when it seemed O.K. to stay in bed on a Saturday till 3:00 in the afternoon. I don’t know how long it’s been since napping, reading a fun book, and rubbing the dog’s belly seemed like things core to my mission, but I had this sense they were. I ate pizza by candlelight with the family. I finished this message. I feel somehow more ready to enter this week ahead in a healthier way.

How about you? Do you want a genuinely heroic life or merely a harried and haunted one? Here are three steps you can take to prepare for one more like Jesus and his first disciples. First, find **“a quiet place,”** a silent place this week and take in the tremendous love the Father has for you. Secondly, carve out some **“solitary place”** in the next few days and sort through what is really driving your behavior. And finally, set some limits so that you genuinely have **“a chance to eat”** and to **“get some rest.”**

What Jesus is trying to say to you and to ME is that doing these things are not *stoppers* to the fantastic life; they are the *secret* to it. Answer Christ's call: come with him to a silent place, a solitary place, and get some rest.

¹ Matthew 3:17