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Mark 6:1-13

## Parables and Pop Culture: Comic Book Superheroes

6:1 He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him.

6:2 On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!

6:3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

6:4 Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

6:5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

6:6 And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

6:7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.

6:8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts;

6:9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

6:10 He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.

6:11 If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

6:12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent.

6:13 They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

A little quiz. Who can tell me where this quote comes from?

*Live as one of them... to discover where your strength and your power are needed. Always hold in your heart the pride of your special heritage. They can be a great people, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you... my only son.*

I have many friends who read comic books, and I asked them about any faith or spiritual lessons they have found within them. They sent me tons of information, way more than can be discussed today.

They pointed out that the Superman story is similar to Jesus (see the quote above, from the 1977 movie!).

There's even a website that talks about the faith background of different superheroes. Did you know that Clark Kent was raised Methodist and that there is a Jewish superhero? (The Thing from the Fantastic Four)

We could have a whole series on comic book heroes, but it's beyond my ability and probably beyond your interest, unless there are closet comic book nerds among us.

But there's no doubt that superheroes have captured the imagination of many of us, not just the comic book geeks I have as friends. This summer alone we have a new Spider Man, Guardians of the Galaxy 2, and Wonder Woman, which will be next week's focus. Many people who saw Wonder Woman came out of the theater saying "You know... I don't really like superhero movies, but I liked this one."

Often these movies have a focus on the character's origin... When this trend began, I thought it seemed redundant. We know the story of Superman, or Spider Man. Why are we treading on this territory again?

And yet... that's the intriguing part of the story, isn't it? Who is this guy? (or gal) The hero becomes the hunted as people search for clues, try to figure out, who is Superman? Even if the superhero doesn't have a *secret* identity, we still find

ourselves fascinated by who they are. How they got to be who they are. We're captivated by their internal struggle: are they going to put on the power that they have been given, are they going to fulfill their destiny, be who they were created to be?

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Today's scripture comes from the gospel of Mark, and this section of the gospel—not just today's story, but the chapters around it—are very focused on who Jesus is. He's been called the Son of the the Most High God, and a prophet; he's been healing; and in two chapters Jesus will ask his friends, "Who do you say I am?" He's not just testing them. One scholar argues that in this time, place and culture, who a person is was very tied up in how they were perceived by those around there. Viewed from Mediterranean understanding of personality, it is *Jesus* who does not fully know who he is, and it is the disciples from whom he must get this information.

Today's story finds Jesus at a similar intersection between who he has been and who he is created to be. And there's no simple answer there. He seems to expect the rejection—and the rejection is great (in Luke's version of this story, they want to throw him off a cliff!) He is able to heal a few people, but Mark says, "he could do no deed of power there."

I don't know exactly what's going on there—whether he couldn't do much because they didn't allow him to, or because he was unable to do those deeds because his powers were somehow curtailed among those who've known him his whole life. Maybe his hometown was filled with Kryptonite, who knows! Whatever the case, in today's story, he's just a hometown boy, the one people saw grow up from a baby, who knew him when he was just this high, who remember how he gave his parents the slip and worried his mother sick in order to go listen in the temple. And that identity complicates things for him.

Professor Andy Root at Luther Seminary in Minnesota has said that the driving question for young adults is “Who am I?” And they don’t look to the past as much as the future to determine that.

These young people that Andy Root is talking about make up the demographic that church is losing, incidentally. But they are also the people who read comic books and go see the comic book movies.

And yet our sacred story, the scriptural story, is all about matters of identity: who God is, who we are, who we’ve been and who we’re called to be in the future. As Elastigirl tells her children in *The Incredibles* as they come to terms with their superpowers: “Your identity is your most valuable possession. Protect it.”

The thing is, as followers of Jesus, we can’t understand ourselves, our identity, apart from God. John Calvin himself wrote that without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God. They aren’t the same, but many ties between them.

Anthony Smith is a four year old with a genetic condition, that among other things, required him to wear a hearing aid, which his parents called his blue ear. He didn’t want to wear it because, as he told his mother, “Superheroes don’t wear blue ears.” Well, in this social media world, the story got back to some artists who work at Marvel Comics, and they decided to create a superhero just for Anthony, called Blue Ear.

Blue Ear, the story goes, was a superhero recruited to be part of a “top super secret government agency called Inter-C.O.M.” His hearing device lets him hear “an ant hiccup on the other side of the country,” one artist explained. The folks at Marvel sent Smith an image of Blue Ear using his device to hear people who needed help.

“The Blue Ear, along with the other superheroes of Inter-C.O.M., who are all special needs children, have banded together to use their newfound powers to

fight crime and teach the world that no matter who you are, everyone has a hero inside of them!" one artists said in an interview.

And Anthony began wearing his hearing aid again.

These comic book artists gave Anthony Smith a larger story to hitch his identity to, and that made all the difference. And we'll talk more about that theme next week with Wonder Woman. But as Christians, Jesus does the same. You are part of this, he says:

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

It has all the makings of a superhero origin story. But no capes! No elaborate costumes! Travel light. Don't stay anyplace too long.

But we know where our powers come from. But just as important is *how* those early disciples are deployed. We go two by two – our story is a buddy movie!

This week I heard Cory Booker give a speech at an event highlighting the ongoing health care debate in the senate. And he shared that oft-quoted proverb, that if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

As we prepare to celebrate our country's birthday, it's a tenuous time for our country. There's so much division and so much concern over where we're headed and who we are—what our American identity is right now. And it's very easy for us to lose heart.

But Jesus reminds us, we are not Batman, working alone. We are the X-Men, or the Avengers. We go together. And together, empowered by the Spirit of Christ, we can do great things.