

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 28, 2017

“The Power of Love”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 1:6-14 ~ John 17:1-11

I haven't seen many super hero movies, but I loved Paramount Pictures big screen adaptation of Marvel comics legendary “Iron Man.” Starring Robert Downey, Jr. as Tony Stark (aka Iron Man) we witness the story of a billionaire industrialist and genius inventor (isn't it handy when those two things go together) who is kidnapped and forced to build a devastating weapon. Instead ... using his intelligence and ingenuity ... he builds a high-tech suit of armor and escapes captivity. When he uncovers a nefarious plot with global implications, he dons his powerful armor and vows to protect the world as Iron Man. These days it seems that super heroes are a "can't-miss" formula for Hollywood. Superman, Batman, the X-men, you name it. Comic book heroes are sure money at the box office.

I was fascinated by comic books when I was little, probably because my siblings and I weren't allowed to have them. But my best friend who lived across the street had three brothers who had an endless supply. I was drawn to this forbidden fruit like a moth to a flame and I dreamed of having some special power, like one of the Fantastic Four. One of them could stretch his arm half a block around a corner ... or squeeze underneath a locked door. Another was a human torch, and the woman could become invisible ... as women often are to the men around them. I was fascinated by “The Thing,” a five hundred-pound scaly blob of muscle. He could pick up cars with one hand.

I prayed God to give me just one special gift ... maybe x-ray vision or the ability to read minds ... the capacity to fly like Superman or to run fast as the Flash ... and of course I swore to put my talent to good use. Even as an adult I have wished for extraordinary gifts ... the power to make people laugh ... or to make my teenagers clean their room ... or maybe just once to be able to sing Karaoke without making a total fool of myself. That's the appeal of these superheroes for kids and maybe for the rest of us, too. Special powers! If only we had some special powers to give us an edge in this competitive world.

I have good news for you this morning. Power is the promise of our scripture today. *"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,"* Jesus promises. He tells us to pray for it ... watch for it ... and wait for it because the power will come. The Greek word is “d u n a m i s” from which we get our word "dynamite." I've heard Pentecost sermons a-plenty about the "dyno-mite power" of the Spirit. But in Greek usage, the word does not necessarily mean an *explosive* power at all. It simply means the ability to accomplish something. That's what power is, put simply. It's the capacity to do something you want to do. And the amount of power you need depends on what you want to get done.

There are many kinds of power. There is the power of violence ... the power of passion ... the power of office ... the power of money. Words have power. So do actions. Power is essential,

but it is also habit forming. The more we have, the more we want ... and soon we are mainly using our power to increase ... or at least hold on to our power. "Power tends to corrupt," goes John Acton's famous dictum, "and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Usually we think of power as "power over," the ability to coerce others into doing what we want ... to force the world to fit our will. This is the power which Niccolo Machiavelli described so honestly in his medieval masterwork, *The Prince* ... where he argued that it is better for a ruler to be feared than to be loved ... and to be deceitful rather than honest ... if it will accomplish the goal.

Such power is dangerous ... even in religion ... perhaps especially in religion. We can see what such power has come to throughout the centuries. The UCC was born, in part, from a religious tradition that suspected power and trusted only in democracy. Our Congregationalist forebears endured persecution from government and religious authorities in England, so they refused to be subject to anyone, save Christ, when it came to their spiritual freedom.

Power does the most damage when it is sure it is right in the name of God, so we have to be careful that we understand what Jesus means when he promises us the power of his Spirit.

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). It is not actually power Jesus sends us ... but his Holy Spirit ... who has power. Surely, the Spirit that Jesus tells us to pray for ... watch for ... wait for, is not a different Spirit than the Spirit who came in Christ in the first place. In Matthew, Jesus' last words are, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age"* (Matt 28:18-20). "I – am – with – you – always ." Wouldn't that suggest the Spirit who comes upon us ... is the same Jesus who came for us long ago? Isn't the Jesus who gave us the "great commission" the same Jesus who gave us "the greatest commandment" ... that we should love one another as we also we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength?"

Jesus leaves, but we stay. As it turns out, this is the ultimate "left behind" story ... but according to Jesus ... being left behind is neither a sign of imperfect faith nor a chance to prove yourself worthy. Rather, being left behind is an honor ... an invitation to participate in the glory of the Father ... a commissioning, in fact, into the work of the Son. Eternal life, glory, relationship with God ... in John's Gospel these aren't things waiting out there somewhere ... but instead are all around us. Where, we may naturally ask? In doing what Jesus does. Healing, feeding, caring, listening, sharing, making manifest the grace and mercy of the God "who so loved the world" (3:16).

Clearly this links up with a lot of the tasks often associated with the church ... caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, and so forth. And that is worth celebrating. But can we stop and realize that all of the ordinary tasks of everyday life ... work, play, family life, civic involvement, volunteer opportunities ... that all of these ordinary and mundane things, are also work that honors the Father? ... *because they are*. Any honest work can, indeed, help care for this world and people that God loves so much ... and thereby participate in the glory Jesus talks about.

We have been given the power to do all of this! If you want to know how power should be used, read the gospels. Bethlehem showed us a better way long ago, but we have refused it. Look at the way Jesus used his power. We know he had incredible power ... the power to turn water into wine ... the power to heal the sick ... the power to raise the dead ... the power to call down legions of angels. But we must always remember that he also had the power to withhold his anger ... the power to withstand the cross ... the power to forgive. Jesus did not use his power as "power over." He used it as "power with." He used his power to empower others to be what God had created them to be. This is the incredible special power Jesus offers us by his Spirit. It is the ultimate power of all powers ... the power to love.

Who can have power over you if you are not afraid to die ... because Christ promises you resurrection? Who can have power over you if you trust in God to provide what you need ... and see the rest of your possessions as stuff to be used in helping others? Who can have power over you if you turn the other cheek ... and forgive those who have wounded you? You are no longer a victim ... no longer a beggar ... no longer striving after power ... if you already have the power to love.

And believe me, it takes power to love ... because people are not easy to love. If you think it's easy to forgive ... if you think it's simple to offer hospitality to the stranger ... if you think it's effortless to help those who are helpless ... then you haven't really tried it. If you think it's a snap to withhold yourself ... to overcome your own selfishness ... to put others before you ... then you're not really doing it. Loving one another is one of the hardest things to do. Loving the stranger is extremely difficult, too. Loving our enemies is downright impossible. We cannot do it ... we cannot love ... unless the Spirit of Christ comes upon us. God help us, we have no other way to gain such amazing power.

In Christ, the power to bless is greater than the power to curse. In Christ, the power to give life is greater than the power to take life. In Christ, the power of love is greater than the power of hate. It is the power of the cross ... the power of the resurrection. And all of us should strive to achieve this Christ-kind of power ... not the power that the world so greedily grasps.

If it's your goal to have wealth as this world measures it ... to control the fates of others and to have others fear you ... then don't submit to Christ ... don't ask Jesus to help you. There's no use in trying to bargain about that sort of nonsense here, because he's not the source of such power. The power Christ promises is the power to be his witness in the world. As Dennis Bratcher puts it, *"The mission of the church here is nothing less than to go into the world as God's people, and proclaim a subversive, transforming message about a suffering God who calls anyone without discrimination to respond."* It's subversive, because it runs counter to the chapter and verse our culture reads us about power. It's transforming, because it is the power to be saved from all the abuses of power in the world.

Would you like God to give you a special power today most people don't have? Would you like to be a superhero of sorts? Then submit to the Savior ... seek the Spirit of Christ. Pray for it and watch for it and wait for it, and he will give you the power to love.

Some Christians believe this life is simply practice for the next one. Others believe it is some kind of trial ... something to be endured until a future glory. Still others think of this life as a test ... a time and place to prove ourselves worthy of heaven. Not us! Yes, there are trials. Yes,

things can be difficult, confusing, sometimes down right discouraging. But in this passage we have the two-fold promise that 1) God is with us to help us not merely persevere but also to flourish (that's what the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, is!) and 2) that God intends us to be committed to this world, this people, this place, here and now. Glory, eternity, relationship with God ... these things are always in the present tense in John's Gospel, and we are commissioned and blessed to participate in this work and to share this amazing power and promise ... the power of love!

May we pray?

Pour out your Spirit upon your church, O Christ. Let each of us be filled by your presence. Then we will know your power and we will be your people and the world will see you in us ... and meet you in us ... and be loved by you in our love. Amen.