

I've had a little running tiff with my children about superhero movies. I get it's entertainment, not reality. They're right ... when watching a witty raccoon with an attitude and a tree-person who just says "I am Groot" (in various inflections), it's clearly humor, not to be taken seriously! Still, I struggle with glorification of violence as the way to save the world, and how it shapes norms of society. Plots ever remain the same. Great danger, evil person or mysterious force threatens life as we know it in the city, nation, world, universe, scope ever expanding to keep our interest. A beam of light over Gotham and Batman comes. Push a button and Luke or Rey's light sabre flashes, hums and sizzles. Light ... in weapons, to accent actions, to set the scene. Black Panther's Wakanda and Wonder Woman land (can't remember the name) dwell in a bubble of abundant life—colorful light, no threat, while just beyond a forcefield rage stormy seas, and smoke of battle. When our superhero comes, will she or he persist and win, and we all survive?

To talk with my children, I watched the latest major movie, Infinity War. Okay, there's an intriguing twist. Spoiler alert! Big bad guy collects six tiny all-powerful stones of different color light. When put together in a special gauntlet, he could snap his fingers and wipe out half of all life in the universe. All the Marvel superheroes gather in an epic struggle—must be 15 or 20 or more. And they all start dying. Then, snap. At least half are gone—evaporated. Now that's not supposed to happen! Or maybe is it somehow? Is sacrificing life for a greater cause the only way to stop big-bad-evil-dude?

Jesus' parable could be a superhero story, with a little twist on the motif. Well, it's a big difference, really, in the way power works and true promise of salvation. A super-widow, one of the most vulnerable and powerless people in society takes on a powerful judge. He's supposed to be fair and maintain justice and foster peace for all. Even more, as a Jew, the judge keeps God's covenant order of life together, faithful to the way God intends. He is to be God's presence and power, pursuing the fullness of peace, except he lives opposite of the Great Commandment of Love – doesn't care for God or other people; only himself.

Now, friends, it's a parable not an allegory. It's about life in and for all of us, not one character equating a particular person. You see, at best in superhero movies and our real experiences, we recognize life is rarely simple. Good and evil aren't so absolutely clear-cut. The struggle for what's right and good and fair begins inside us all, at least as much as in powers we face in the world around us. Our world abounds with goodness, as God made it. So many resources to nourish life. So much beauty and possibility for people to flourish. Yet our world doesn't always function as God wants it. Some people and creatures don't flourish the way God desires for all life. I suppose the question of living faith is: what do we do about it?

That's what we're thinking about through worship this September. How can we and all of life flourish as God wants? What are moral, ethical foundations? We begin with dignity embodied in every person, upheld, challenged, nurtured in community. No matter how much money, how perfect decisions, how twisted perspectives may seem, we all have value because God created and love us. No throw-aways. And with dignity, each person bears responsibility to help all creation flourish. We live most responsibly when grateful, generous, sacrificial love moves us to see with compassion, enter into a situation, offer practical care, and deal with causes of harm. That's true in our most intimate and personal relations. And today we consider how

it applies to widest scopes of society. See truly, care deeply, choose intelligently, act courageously pursuing the loving order of fairness and goodness for all people and creation.

It's what we call justice. Now friends, the term "social justice" can get associated with particular agendas. And while those agendas seek justice in one way, divine justice is not limited to any specific position. Pursuing justice simply means to seek the world the way God wants it to be. For instance, many of us have been moved by the recent camping in Bronson Park to raise awareness for people who don't have safe and stable housing. It's an example of shining some light and inspiring action on a real need. And it's all a complicated web of social consequences, jobs, mental illness, choices made, consequences beyond personal control. Certainly not the fault of city leaders, who may not quite be superheroes, but who care deeply and work diligently. I'm grateful and hopeful we can continue to move from a big tiff into more productive conversation. And so, we could talk about so many other struggles in our time. Economic or education policies. A growing chasm and concentration in wealth. Climate change. Abortion. Me too. Israel-Palestine, Syria, Uganda, Russia ... what concerns capture your heart today?

Obviously today we won't resolve all issues. I want to know how we can keep faith—keep going, keep working, keep loving, keep serving and persevering. Faith, of course, is not absolute certainty about what will happen. Faith is relationship with God. Faithfulness is staying close with God so that we are empowered to keep pursuing God's vision for life at best, even when all other evidence seems contrary. In living faithfulness, we reflect light of God's love through us into society, to shape public life, to help all living things flourish as God created them to do.

That's how Moses tries to encourage the Hebrew people to live. It's his farewell address. He's about to die as they're about to enter the promised land. He's given

the Ten Commandments and over 600 others. They're laws to order community goodness, not to judge individual perfection or condemnation. Moses urges people to follow this way of God. It's not too hard or baffling, not far away beyond reach, not in heaven after life. God's word of love, promise, grace, peace reigns above all powers of death, to heal, to nurture, to order life here and now in our very hearts, mouths, and hands. Friends, whatever we believe about God actually cursing or causing ill to happen, point is: we have a choice. Commit our way to God, not just for personal gain, rather so that we and future generations may live abundantly.

Not too hard? Maybe not as an ideal, but making it real ... well, seemed pretty hard for the woman facing the judge. I imagine she's walked through darkened streets at night. Who knows her specific complaint? Vulnerable and powerless people always get taken advantage in many ways. Except she's not powerless!

Her body bows with weary years, yet she stands dignified with face defiant.

Weathered hands that plowed fields and plucked olive groves, strong hands that ground grain and swept floors, tender hands that cradled children and held her husband's dying hand ... she raises those hands. One grips a lantern beaming through dark midnight like noonday. The other raps persistently, echoing with her determined voice throughout the judge's house. "Grant me justice!" Actually, it's almost cartoonish – one of the most powerful men in society opening the door in his night robe, cowering before an aged woman sporting boxing gloves. (That's the literal image conveyed by the words.) And the punch line: I will grant her justice! So that she won't give me a black eye!

Now early Christians hearing Luke tell this story knew something about unfair treatment, persecution, corrupt people in offices of power, and injustices of the legal system. Many Christians had been crucified. Amid constant threat they trusted God. They prayed and stayed connected with our Holy One of justice and mercy, who especially cares for underprivileged and oppressed and suffering people, like

Israelites enslaved in Egypt, orphans, widows, foreign refugees. Yes, first hearers of Luke could feel the widow's fierce resolve and find courage to cry out in their own way. Don't lose heart, Jesus urges. Stay confident and committed. When the reign of God comes your faith will radiate like the dawn. You see, friends, the Bible doesn't tell us Jesus is our superhero. He's more like the ultimate anti-hero, come to empower others to arise, to shine, to radiate the light of life. And the great promise of Easter at the heart of our faith, is that God's resurrection power will be real in your life and mine, redeeming all creation. So may it be, friends, as we seek God's way amid concerns of our society. Sometimes that's speaking truth to people in positions of power. And that effort expands to everything in our society—laws, business practices, cultural norms.

What's your super hero power? A quick check with Google reveals a long list of websites with tests to find out our super hero kindred spirit and superpower. No, I haven't done it yet. Though I think a few of us found a new superpower yesterday pounding nails into boards, building a loving habitat in which a family can flourish, and a neighborhood thrive. Each nail seems insignificant on its own. Sometimes our daily efforts can seem like mere drops in the ocean of social needs and problems, a sip at best for someone dying of thirst. Yet, if you're arms, wrists, legs ache today, do not despair! There will be a house (as we sang in worship last week and Dave Johnson planted the tune in our minds yesterday)—there will be a house where love can dwell and all can safely live ... and there will be a world where goods are shared and misery relieved, one human family preparing for God's glorious reign of peace. A few nails can hold things together for someone who's life is falling apart. A single sip or gulp is heaven for someone dying of thirst. It's amazing how bright a single candle seems when we're in the midst of darkness.

And so, working groups of many citizens and civic leaders will continue to meet to address solutions to homelessness in our city. As one person wrote to all other

elders preparing for our Session meeting this week: “Housing is an extremely complicated issue and there are many reasons people do not live in safe, affordable housing on a sustained basis. I've been praying for the people without housing, community activists supporting them, organizations that serve people who are without homes and the community leadership seeking solutions.” Jesus urges us to pray always and not to lose heart!

I paused to chat with another woman of our congregation in a hallway after Bible study this past Thursday. At a milestone moment, she reflected on challenges of her life, including cancer. “Where would I be without faith and without people of faith to share the journey?” she asked. “In the pit, I suppose.” That passing conversation struck me powerfully as I thought about this text. Again, how the greatest problems of our culture are really about individual people’s lives. And just as we love and support those we know intimately, so God calls us to enact that love publicly, systemically, institutionally.

Will the Son of Humanity find faith when he comes? Friends, faith is not figuring everything out in a list of principles, truth absolutely dogmatically clear, and then just hanging on for dear life. Living faith, we walk through our world together, encountering new challenges every day. We stay in relationship with God and others. We gain new insights and with integrity, adjust our moral perspectives, norms, and actions, as we serve beyond our selves to support fullness of life for others who are in some kind of pit.

J. Herbert Nelson, the Stated Clerk of our General Assembly, spoke at our Presbytery meeting on Friday. He told about how people like you and me gave \$50,000 to be used for cash bail in St. Louis where our Assembly met last summer. The system keeps people in jail for weeks or months because they can’t pay small amounts of bail for minor offenses. Maybe Jesus’ widow was among hundreds of

commissioners who marched from the assembly hall to the City Justice Center. Nelson said he'd just come from New York City, meeting with high city officials and leaders. They'd heard about our church's witness in St. Louis. And they've decided to infuse the system in their city with \$50 million dollars. They were impressed by our Presbyterian policies. They joked we Presbyterians have policy out the wazoo! Hunger, earth care, peacemaking and many more—all programs our congregation has joined in prioritizing. For hours, one group after another talked with our church leaders about our church's witness on some great struggles of our time. Oh, there are plenty of imperfections in our church and our world, Nelson said. Still we are shining like light in the darkness bringing life for people who don't have it—the light of God in Jesus Christ through which all things came into being and that no darkness shall overcome.

You know, just before we entered this morning, Chrissy and Rick were bantering about being an acolyte. “I don't have trouble on the way in,” Rick joked, “it's remembering to come back up at the end to bring it out!” Chrissy replied something like: “Well, if you don't, I think Christ might get stuck in here for the week!” We seek to reflect Christ's light in God's world. That's what we say. Dear friends, in God's grace, we're all superheroes in some way. Find your superpower—your passion, the cause that captures your heart, in God's grace. May Christ be our light, to shine in us and through our hearts, beaming through any darkness of violence, hunger, homelessness, any place people long for more abundant life to flourish. Many the gifts, many the people reflecting the light of Christ through our loving witness into all of public life!

Thanks be to God. Amen.