Question of the Week

Who is your favorite flawed hero – in literature, TV or movies – and why?

Intro

We’re continuing our ‘Everyday Superheroes’ theme this week
And I’ve been having fun with this, so thanks for indulging me
Last week we spoke about courage – about having the courage to let God
draw the next panel of your life
This week, we’re talking about the flaws that make us who we are

Prayer

Sermon

I want to put forward a simple idea today…
What if the thing we consider is our greatest flaw is actually our greatest strength?

This is not a new concept, of course – most sermons are not
I imagine you’ve thought about this idea already
When they ask you those questions in an interview – “what’s your greatest strength?” “what’s your greatest weakness?”
You know what you’re going to do.

Don’t you try to come up with a flaw that points to another strength?
Usually it’s a matter of degree…we say something like…
“I’m so meticulous that sometimes it takes me longer than it should to finish a project.”
Classic, right?
But I want us to think beyond that today.
What are some things in yourself that you’ve only EVER thought of as liabilities?
So, consider this: what if God actually intended them to be your superpowers?

One of the themes in the superhero genre is the reluctance of most of the characters to actually BE superheroes.
As kids, we wear the capes and masks and dream of having amazing powers.
But even in the fantasy world of the comics and movies, superpowers can feel more like a curse than a blessing
That’s where we get this concept of an ‘anti-hero’

I can’t think of any character for whom the curse of superpowers is more true than for Dr. Bruce Banner – AKA “The Hulk”¹
The Hulk’s origin story is that Dr. Banner was working on a new type of bomb that produced a lot of gamma radiation
And during the test, Dr. Banner realizes someone has wandered on to the range
So he goes to save them, and in saving them gets exposed to the gamma radiation
After that, whenever he gets agitated or angry, he undergoes a transformation...into a green giant with huge capacity for destruction but very little capacity for thinking

An interesting part of his backstory that evolved with the character is that Dr. Banner was a victim of child abuse...so he associates anger with destructiveness, and fears getting angry
But the irony is, the more afraid of his anger he becomes – the more likely he is to turn

And so every transformation leads to a swath of destruction
And a whole lot of regret

Not to mention the need for new clothes.
The guy goes through a lot of shirts.
But as ridiculous as he is, there is something compelling about the Hulk. Haven’t all of us dreamed, in a moment of anger, of just tearing everything up?

Just to be clear, I don’t think uncontrollable anger can ever be a superpower. In fact, I think rage that’s just below the surface is a major problem in American society. But the Hulk does illustrate the burdens of superpowers and the flaws of superheroes.

If you want to look at flawed heroes in Christian history, no one fits the description better than Simon Peter. Simon Peter, who denied three times even knowing Jesus². Simon Peter, who tried to walk on water but who needed Jesus to throw him a lifeline.

Simon Peter is almost always described using one or more of these words:
- Impulsive
- Unstable
- Insecure
- Hotheaded
- Reckless

He’s the guy, remember, who pulls out a sword when they come to arrest Jesus in the garden – but who only manages to cut off the ear of one of the soldiers³.

He’s also the guy, remember, who when Jesus is washing feet in the Upper Room, tells Jesus, “you’ll never wash my feet!”⁴

He’s also the guy, remember, who responds to Jesus’ prediction of his death on a cross by saying – “you can’t let this happen!” For that, Jesus calls Peter ‘Satan’⁵.

At this point, we could say that another word that gets used to describe Peter is ‘outspoken,’ but what that almost always means is ‘putting his foot in his mouth.’ I doubt I’m the only one who struggles with that.

In this story, one detail I don’t think I’d ever really noticed before is that Peter ASKS Jesus to call him out of the boat: “If it’s you, Lord,” he says, “command me to come to you on the water.”
No one else could command Peter to do something that crazy. But Peter trusted Jesus that much…if Jesus called him, he’d do it.

So this is the point at which we call ‘impulsiveness’ and ‘recklessness’ by another name: faith. Preachers and Bible commentators bust on Peter for allowing the fear of the wind and waves to sink him. We’re told over and over, “Don’t be like Peter, he took his eyes off Jesus and look what happened.” What I want to say is: “What’s wrong with Peter? At least he was willing to get out of the boat!”

The things that people criticize about Peter – his impulsiveness, his recklessness – are precisely the things that set him apart. It’s what gets him out of the boat when all the rest of us stay safely inside. So are they really his fatal flaws? Or are they his superpowers?

I don’t know if you’ve ever fully grasped the irony of Peter’s name. The name his parents gave him was Simon, which means ‘hear, listen, obey.’ But the name Jesus gave him was ‘Peter,’ the Rock. It’s part of every tradition around him, that Jesus and all his friends called Simon ‘the Rock’.

And according to John’s gospel, this happened from the very first moment Jesus met him. Jesus never called him Simon⁶. He called him ‘the Rock’ – even though he was, like we said:

  - Impulsive
  - Unstable
  - Insecure
  - Hotheaded
  - Reckless

That tells me one of two things:

  - EITHER Jesus gave him the name to poke fun at him
  - OR Jesus already knew that Peter’s fatal flaw would become his superpower
Which seems more likely to you?

Peter was a flawed person, a flawed disciple
Just as all of us are flawed people, flawed disciples
But it didn’t dissuade Jesus from using him in a powerful way
‘Upon this rock I will build my church’ – remember?
And Jesus did

So this week, I want to encourage you to work through this one
Maybe in a journal
Maybe with some people you know and trust
Maybe with your family around the dinner table tonight

What do you consider some of your greatest character flaws?
Not self-destructive tendencies or things that hurt others
But things in you that you just wish were...different
That when you look at others, you say, “why can’t I be more like that?”

And ask: are any of these flaws hiding what God has given you as a superpower?
Because it’s true, superpowers can be burdensome – remember the Hulk
Most people don’t wish for what they’ve got

But God sees things in us that we don’t see in ourselves
Jesus sees in us our hidden superpower
Beneath all our self-consciousness and shame
And just like he called Simon ‘the Rock’ long before he deserved the name,
  he calls us too
To use our superpowers to transform the world around us, in his name

Amen.

Question:

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ
Actually, his full name is Robert Bruce Banner. Learn lots you didn’t know about the Hulk here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hulk_(comics)

2 All four gospels refer to Peter’s denials: Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 18.
3 John 18:10.
5 Matthew 16:23, Mark 8:33.
6 John 1:42.