

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Drenched in Super Powers”
Philippians 4: 1-7
October 15, 2017

In today’s Scripture lesson, Paul is writing from prison to the Christians in the town of Philippi. Some have called the Philippians “Paul’s favorite church.” Paul isn’t here to corroborate that judgment, but it is clear to any reader that Paul loves those to whom he is writing very much.

Today’s Scripture lesson contains a portion of what Paul writes to the Philippians as he closes his letter.

Today we are observing Children’s Sabbath, established by the Children’s Defense Fund more than 25 years ago, by celebrating the staff, teachers, children, and families of the Davidson College Presbyterian Church Preschool.

If you have the blessing of working in a church that has a preschool, you know that October is the month when the atmosphere crackles with the anticipation of Halloween. So I did a little pre-Halloween research in the course of working on this sermon. I went to the experts, Kristin and the teachers, to ask, “Who are the super heroes that preschoolers are into these days?”

Here they are: Captain America, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Superman, Ironman, Batman!

I can’t think of a better way to spend my last day on the job than to see them all and to hear their excited voices tell me how they imagine the costumes and imaginary capes that they are wearing give them super powers to go out and do great things in the world.

Perhaps you remember how Lena Waithe picked up on the super powers theme in her memorable acceptance speech when she and Aziz Ansari received an Emmy for comedy writing for the show *Master of None*: I give a shout-out to my LGBTQIA family. I see each and every one of you. The things that make us different—those are our super powers. Every day when you walk out the door, you put on your imaginary cape and you go out there and you conquer the world because the world would not be as beautiful as it is if we weren’t in it. And for everybody who showed us so much love, thank you for embracing a little Indian boy from South Carolina and a little poor black girl from the south side of Chicago. We appreciate it more than you could ever know.” (1)

Did you hear the way in which Lena Waithe was echoing Paul’s words in Philippians 4?

Here is what Paul says to the Philippians: I see each and every one of you. I see you, Euodia. I see you, Syntyche. I see you, Clement. I see you, all my co-workers. The things that make you different—your gentleness, your standing firm against worry in the face of death and suffering, the way you pray and especially the way in which you have prayed for me, the sense of peace that emanates from you—those are your super powers. You are drenched in super powers by virtue of your baptism. So put on

the cape of your baptism and claim those super powers and go out in the world and use them because the world would not be as beautiful as it is without you in it. And for all you Philippians who embraced a little Jewish boy from Tarsus, I appreciate it more than you could ever know.”

(I’ll bet that you have never thought of Paul making an Emmy acceptance speech!)

Well-known scholar of world religions Huston Smith has written about the early Christians such as the Philippians and how the quality of their lives proved to be the linchpin of Christianity beginning to take hold as a world religion.

“The people who heard Jesus’ disciples proclaiming the Good News were as impressed by what they saw as by what they heard. They saw lives that had been transformed—men and women who were ordinary in every way except for the fact that they seemed to have found the secret of living. They evinced a tranquility, simplicity, and cheerfulness that their hearers had nowhere else encountered. Here were people who seemed to be making a success of the enterprise everyone would like to succeed at—life itself.” (3)

Specifically, according to Huston Smith, there seemed to be two qualities in which these Christians’ lives abounded.

The first was mutual regard...equality. There was a total absence of social barriers. Christianity was a discipleship of equals. Here were men and women who not only said that everyone was equal in the sight of God, but who lived as though they meant it.. The conventional barriers of race, gender, and status meant nothing to them, for in Christ there was neither Jew nor gentile, male nor female, slave nor free. As a consequence, their fellowship was marked by a sense of genuine equality. (4)

We see this reflected in today’s Scripture lesson in Paul’s words about and to Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, and the rest of his co-workers.

We may miss how radical a thing it was that two women, Euodia and Syntyche, are leaders in the church on an equal footing with Paul. Many scholars read this section as Paul trying to settle a squabble between two women in the church, but David Fredrickson who teaches New Testament at Luther Seminary disputes this interpretation. He says that there is absolutely no evidence that there was any conflict in the Philippian church, that the exhortation to the women to be “of the same mind” is found earlier in the letter and there it is addressed to the whole church and thus is better translated in both places to “imagine the world in the same way,” and that the help to which he is referring is his wish that the church give Euodia and Syntyche some financial support for their ministry. Fredericksen is blunt in saying that he detects a whiff of sexism on the part of interpreters who pin a catfight on these two women and thus fail to notice that Paul highlights their status as leaders in the church by associating them with Clement, with himself, and the rest of his co-workers—co-workers who clearly are not subordinates. (5)

I can’t help reading Paul’s words about Euodia and Syntyche through the lens of my own experience of 38 years of ministry.

For several years, I was a participant in a coaching group with other lead pastors of multi-staff churches. During one session, the question was asked, “What keeps you going on those days in ministry when you are ready to throw in the towel and call it quits?”

We do have those days, you know, just as you have them on your job. And sometimes the urge to throw in the towel is pretty darn intense! It was an easy question for me to answer, however. On my darkest days in ministry, it has been the children who have kept me in it. When I was a little girl growing up in the 1950's in South Carolina, women couldn't be ministers in the Presbyterian Church. And because I never saw a woman minister, it was sometimes hard to see that God might be calling me to put on the cape of my baptism and claim the gifts that God had given me and use those gifts to change the world. I don't want that world back for any little boy or for any little girl. One of the things that has kept me in ministry all these years is that I love looking out into the faces of the children in the four congregations which I have had the privilege of serving and thinking and sometimes getting to say, as I am about to, "I see each and every one of you and the things that make you different are your super powers and every day, put on your imaginary cape made of the power of love because the world won't be as beautiful as it might be if you hold back and keep all those gifts that God gave you to yourself."

The second distinctive quality in the early Christians' life that set them apart, according to Huston Smith, was their happiness, their joy. Outsiders found this baffling. These scattered Christians were not numerous. They were not wealthy or powerful, and they were in constant danger of being killed. Yet they had laid hold of an inner peace that was visible. Huston Smith goes so far as to call it *radiance*, a radiance that is born from the conviction that locked in every human being is a store of love that partakes of the divine—the *imago dei*, the image of God that is within us.

Huston Smith tells of an actual incident which may help to bring home this conviction.

"He was a diffident freshman in a small midwestern college when one morning the instructor (who was his role model and whom he idolized) opened the class by saying, 'Last evening as I was reading the papers you turned in last week I came upon several of the most significant sentences that I can recall ever having read.' As he proceeded to read them the student could hardly believe his ears. His heart leapt into his throat, for he was hearing his own words being read back to him. He recorded the incident in his journal: 'I don't remember another thing that occurred during that hour, but I shall never forget my feelings when the bell brought me back to my senses. It was noon, and when I stepped outdoors October was never so beautiful. If anyone had asked me for anything, maybe even to lay down my life, I would have given it gladly, for I wanted nothing for myself. I ached only to give to a world that had given so much to me.'

If a young man found himself thus changed by the interest a human being had shown in him, perhaps we can understand the way the early Christians were changed by feeling certain that they were totally loved by the ultimate power in the universe." (6)

Friends, this love of God, the love that we have come to know in Jesus Christ and through the gift of God's own Holy Spirit that we get to breathe in and breathe out every single day, is the ultimate super power.

And to bring it back around to Children's Sabbath and the oh-so-important ministry of the Davidson College Presbyterian Church Preschool...

I mentioned early in the sermon that I had done some research on who the popular super heroes are among the preschool set these days. But here is the one that touched me deep down in the depths of my heart.

Hattie Kissel, who is not only a teacher in our preschool but a member here at DCPC too, responded: The super heroes in our class are firefighters and police. They just cannot stop dressing up and saving people.

I think Paul would respond to that by saying, YES! That is what I meant when I said, “the Lord is near!”

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2L70nxsrsPM>
2. Jan Edmiston, “Recognizing Our Own Super Powers,” www.achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com, September 19, 2017.
3. Huston Smith, “Reasons for joy,” *The Christian Century*, October 4, 2005, 10.
4. *Ibid.*
5. David E. Fredricksen, www.workingpreacher.org, October 12, 2008.
6. Smith, 10-11.