



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Come Holy Spirit, come. Amen.

If you've been following popular culture at all, you might have noticed a certain phenomenon in our movie theaters over the last few years. And that is, superhero movies are everywhere. They are easily the most dominant type of movie at the box office these days by a long shot. And it's not just in this country, but it's true around the world.

And given that this has been the case now for going on nearly 20 years, I think it's something worth paying attention to because film critics and historians alike will tell us that when a certain genre becomes so dominant, it's because it's tapping into something. Something about our cultural zeitgeist. They become more than just popular movies. They become a marker of the cultural mood of their times.

In the same way that the early westerns presented a nostalgic and romanticized version of the American Frontier as a response to the unsettling changes brought about by industrialization. Or how the golden age of musicals became a kind of distraction from the grim realities of the Depression and two world wars. Or science fiction movies of the fifties with their pod people and UFOs were just another response to the anxieties of the Cold War, of nuclear war, and the Red Scare.

And so I wonder what will historians one day say about our times? What are Spider-Man and Batman and the Guardians of the Galaxy trying to tell us about our cultural mood today? Professor Joseph Campbell, the renowned scholar of comparative religion and mythology, argues that heroes play a key role in human culture because they inspire us. They guide us. They help us to discover our potential and our purpose. They show us how to use our gifts and to rise above ourselves for a greater good.

Professor Campbell famously observed that despite the incredible diversity of culture and literature and language around the world, we all seem to have one thing, at least, in common. Our heroes often look more or less the same because they all follow the same story and the same basic path. The call to adventure, the acceptance of a quest, finding friends will help them along the way, and mentors who guide them on a journey of sacrifice and rebirth and return. According to Campbell, the hero's journey, as it's commonly called, resonates because it is ultimately a metaphor for the journey of life that we are all on.

Perhaps today's superhero movies, beyond the colorful costumes and the silly names, perhaps they are so ubiquitous today because they are fulfilling a deep need within all of us. Perhaps they are manna for a world famished for hope. And so many of us have become cynical about self-serving leaders, perhaps we yearn for a reminder of what it looks like when the good guys find their courage. In a world that seems condemned to endless division, perhaps we need stories to remind us what it looks like when we come together, when we can unite for a greater good.

Perhaps, behind this billion-dollar global phenomenon of these films is a world crying out for heroes. I bring this up today because I think Pentecost has something to say about heroes. But unlike our fictional ones in the cinemas, we don't need to be bitten by radioactive spiders, or hit with an experimental lab accident to gain our powers. As Paul writes to the churches he planted, we already have everything we need because we are born with it. We are each already a masterpiece in God's eyes, perfectly made just as we are. And each of us is uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit to love and serve the world in exactly the way it needs to be.

And I realize that may sound different from what many of us probably heard for much of our lives. After all, we live in a world that is very good at telling us something very different. A world so wrapped in its own fears that it seems to relish sparking and feeding our own. Sowing doubts about our minds and our bodies, about our gifts, our potential, our worthiness, our value.

And like the Corinthians, these fears can drive us to endless comparison and competition. We can be driven into factions as we claw over one another to gain some semblance of worthiness through some exterior means, like having the best job, attending the top schools, winning the next promotion, owning the latest models, wearing the newest fashions. The list goes on and on. But all of them are, at the end of the day, little more than a collection of false idols and distractions that keep us from the truth that Paul is trying to tell us. That God has already given us everything we need to do the most important thing we will ever do, to love as we are loved.

If last week's ascension was about Jesus rising to Heaven today, it's about the Spirit of God descending upon each of us, to activate gifts within us. And have no doubt, we all have gifts that God can use. Our personalities. Are we extroverted? Are we introverted? Is our superpower the ability to listen? Our life experiences, have we overcome challenges and faced hardships that have given us the compassion and the wisdom to be there for the next person? To minister to them in the only way we know?

Our passions. Who does our heart break for? What are the causes that get us out of bed in the morning? Our money, our things, our homes. What do we own that

we can put into the flow of life to bring life to others? Our skills, our training, our natural talents. How can we give away the things that we are good at? How can we serve others with the ways that we have been trained?

It's been said that the purpose of life is to discover our gifts and the meaning of life is to give them away. That is perhaps Pentecost in a nutshell, the Holy Spirit, God's breath, and life coming upon each of us to give us direction and purpose. To help us see the gifts that are right under our nose and to activate them to give us the strength and the courage and the imagination to use them so that together we would become the body of Christ and give hope to a world so desperately needs it.

And if that sounds like, you know, wishful thinking, if that seems like a bit pie in the sky, recall what Jesus told us just a couple of weeks ago. In His farewell, addressed to the disciples in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells them, have no fear. Although I am leaving you, you will never be alone. And in fact, with the help of the Holy Spirit, you will go on to do things greater than even I. And while I have no doubt what the disciples might have been thinking when they heard that, history has shown us that Jesus could not have been more right.

The various gospels record Jesus healing, perhaps a couple of dozen people. But Christians following in His way, empowered by the Holy Spirit, have healed countless millions by founding hospitals around the world. The gospel tells us that Jesus miraculously fed some 9,000 or 10,000 people, but Christians following His lead have fed hundreds of millions, if not billions, through countless humanitarian missions and nonprofits like Feeding America and Bread for the World.

And these weren't superheroes. They were everyday heroes, loving and serving from the gifts they've been given, doing the next right thing for the people that God had put right in front of them. And if such examples seem, you know, too big, too out of reach, don't be discouraged because in God's economy, it has never been about great accomplishments, but it has always been about great love.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a 19th century nun, founded what she called the Little Way. The little way after she came to understand that God didn't expect her to do things beyond her capacity, but instead to offer every moment of her life to God, no matter how small it is, no matter how trivial it might seem. For Saint Thérèse following Jesus wasn't about extraordinary feats, but it was always about the ordinary things done with extraordinary love.

My godfather was such a person. Having left Catholic Seminary because they wouldn't accept him for who he was, God picked up the ball that his church had dropped and put Rob to use, expanding a fledgling homeless nonprofit to

become a multi-million dollar multi-service program that would become a model for other cities, offering shelter for the homeless, helping veterans back to work, building affordable housing for seniors on fixed incomes.

But as extraordinary as those things were, they came about because of Rob's focus on the ordinary. He was the type of person who took the time to see the image of God in everyone. Everyone who walked through those doors, he learned their names, he got to know their stories. He saw their worth that the world had forgotten, and he helped them to rediscover a human dignity that no program on its own could have ever restored, and it was contagious. Rob's version of the Little Way inspired others to get involved. It drew others to him to give, to underwrite, to partner with in ways that surprised even him and expanded the ministry in ways he had never dreamed.

Rob's little way got my attention as well. He would become a mentor to me on my journey, encouraging me to my own call to adventure. He saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself. He was there at my baptism and stood beside me at my confirmation, encouraging me to follow the same path that he had been denied himself. Have you had such a person in your life? Maybe you are that person for someone else right now. It's been said that it's not about the duration of our lives, but about the donation of our lives that counts.

Rob died this week too soon, but the donation he made with the time he was given, like all such people, will never be fully measured. He was in every way that matters, a hero who left the world a better place and inspired those who knew him to do likewise. And the church has names for such heroes. We call them saints, and they are all around us, not just in stained glass windows. But they're our grandmothers, our teachers, the ones who never gave up on us. They're our sponsors, our troop leaders, our mentors, they're the ones who bring us food when we're grieving. They're the ones who pray for us when we need it most.

Whenever we do the little things with great love. Whenever we take this time to see the potential in one another, to appreciate and point out and lift up their gifts, to encourage them to find their purpose, and then to invite them in to offer their hand and invite them to take their place in the body of Christ. When we do that we become a contagious force for healing and for mercy, and for love that can literally save this world. When we do that, we become the heroes this world has been waiting for.

Amen.