**Coronado Community Church**

“Superhero Spirit”

Matthew 10:24-39

A sermon by Pastor Eric Smith

June 25, 2023

When I was a kid I read comic books. Comic books are still around and they have evolved. The Marvel Group took action-packed comic books and made them into action-packed big screen movies. Now the company is known as The Marvel Universe; it is a very successful and interconnected franchise of superhero films and television series.

They captivate audiences with storytelling that has connections between the films, with thrilling action, and memorable characters… superheroes. They are significant 21st century entertainments.

Even if you are not a fan, you’ve heard of the Marvel superheroes… the Avengers… Iron Man… Spider Man… the Black Widow. They joined the more familiar superheroes like Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman from DC Comics.

Superheroes live in, or come to us from, mythological worlds that are both similar and very different from our daily lives. They are like the Greek Gods’ of classic mythology… a mixed bag of personalities with powers who relate to humanity in sometimes patronizing, sometimes noble, and sometimes not-so-noble ways. People from ancient times to the present have found them fascinating.

One commonality among the noble superheroes is that someplace in their story they embraced their inner hero. Heroes are brave… some say fearless… but what seems more accurate to say is that they overcame their fear.

We have a superhero who didn’t come from Marvel or DC comics. That would be Jesus.

Jesus has miracles and miraculous stories. We might say that Jesus has superpowers. No matter how you relate to his miracles, whether you literally believe them or intellectually account for them, Jesus has superpowers.

Let’s see how this relates to our scripture reading from Matthew.

The passage has two themes. The first is about fear.

Fear is a response to physical and emotional danger; it has roots in our evolution. If people didn’t feel fear, we couldn’t protect ourselves from legitimate threats, which in the ancestors world frequently resulted in life-or-death consequences. You see a saber tooth tiger… better run.

In the modern world, we often fear situations where the stakes are much lower, but our bodies and brains still treat the threat as lethal.

Last week we were captivated by the drama of the submersible that went to observe the Titanic. Did you follow the reports? They were optimistic at the outset, but as hours turned into days hope faded. We listened as newscasters portrayed *the fear* those folks must have experienced as their oxygen supply diminished.

Then we found out that the submersible had imploded early on. It is a terrible tragedy. Yet there was some relief for us when we found out that when the submersible imploded, the victims wouldn’t have feared nor suffered because it happened so quickly.

It is accepted that the ultimate fear for any of us is death. What I have noticed is that, as we age, we pretty well accept that we’re going to die. Term limits. It’s just about how far in the future that will be. What is of greater concern to us is the process… dying gracefully and peacefully is what we hope for, or we have fear that peacefully and gracefully might not be the case.

What I have seen is that people who do not fear it, or the process, (generally speaking) die peacefully and gracefully. Not always – sometimes there are outside factors… but mostly. Jesus didn’t fear death – that’s our model.

Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh wrote…

*Fear keeps us focused on the past or worried about the future. If we can acknowledge our fear, we can realize that right now we are okay. Right now, today, we are still alive, and our bodies are working marvelously. Our eyes can still see the beautiful sky. Our ears can still hear the voices of our loved ones.*

Jesus wanted his followers to understand this.

Fear keeps us disconnected from healthy living. When we are experiencing fear we have stopped trusting God.

The word, *Talmud,* is Hebrew for "learning.” *The* Talmud is a lengthy collection of writings from Judaism. The writings are a commentaries, interpretations, and wisdom inspired by Jewish law and tradition. A complete set of these writings has 73 volumes (depending on the font size). It was compiled between the third and sixth centuries. It is a collection of ancient wisdom.

In one story we find a man named Akiba and his unnamed rabbi. Here’s the story…

When Akiba was on his deathbed, he bemoaned to his rabbi that he felt he was a failure. His rabbi moved closer and asked why, and Akiba confessed that he had not lived a life like Moses.

The poor man began to cry, admitting that *he feared* God’s judgement.

At this, his rabbi leaned into his ear and whispered gently, *God will not judge Akiba for not being Moses. God will judge Akiba for not being Akiba.*

Fear prevents you from being who you are. Jesus wanted his disciples to avoid that. God wants you to avoid that, too.

Another story…

There was a woman who lived in England during the early years of the 20th century.

She met a handsome young man and they were married in 1937. They soon became the parents of two happy sons. Then the war came and the husband entered the R.A.F. … flying many dangerous missions.

Once when he was at home on furlough, he stayed with their two sons while his wife went out shopping. A surprise air raid sounded and Nazi planes appeared, dropping bombs that destroyed their home … and killed the young father and their two little boys.

The woman was inconsolable in her grief and tragic loss. Somehow she managed to keep going, calling on God in prayer and asking Him, *Why?* Throughout the war she worked and volunteered with children in order to fill her empty life with meaning.

After the war was over she met another man. They dated… and romance blossomed. But the woman was deeply unsettled with ambivalent feelings. Part of her wanted to love the man, but part of her was determined never to love anyone again in order to avoid the pain of loss. He asked her to marry him, and her fear increased.

The woman went to her pastor and sought his counsel about her inner conflict. She told him how she wanted to love again and the terror she felt at giving herself to someone she might lose. She said she had decided to refuse the marriage proposal.

The pastor listened and then told her*; take the risk… You must… for you will gain so much more than you might lose. You are full of love – the love in which you held your deceased husband and sons. Give yourself to this man, have more children – take the risk.*

The woman asked God to help her move beyond her fear, and to give her the courage to take the risk… and God did! The couple married and shared a beautiful life together.

In her later years, the woman would often say to her husband, her family and her friends, *Think what I would have missed had I let my fear control me. I am so grateful I said “Yes!” to God and “Yes” to love.*

Remember … do not be afraid.

The second theme of the scripture is loyalty.

*Loyalty* is a very personal and powerful kind of faithfulness. It is the highest of spiritual values. A superpower. And Jesus wanted that for his followers.

When the CCC was established *loyalty* was the defining value.

Back then… in the spring before the CCC was established, Bishop Sano asked me (and my friend Dr. Joey McDonald) to join him for breakfast during the upcoming Holy week… Maundy Thursday. I knew he wanted to speak to me, and I knew he was not going to be telling me what a good job I had been doing. I had publicly spoken against the manner in which the Methodist Conference, led by the Bishop, was dealing with Tom Warmer.

As Maundy Thursday approached I spent some time thinking about why I had taken the position that I did. I didn’t think for long… it was loyalty. Many of you understand that exactly.

Loyalty is the superpower that brought the CCC into existence. It is a very personal and powerful kind of faithfulness. Jesus wanted his followers to know it and to practice it.

Now… a different take on it…

Back before the days of scanners, a college student walked into a photography studio with a framed picture of his girlfriend. He wanted the picture duplicated. This involved removing it from the frame. In doing this, the studio owner noticed the inscription on the back of the photograph:

*My dearest Jim, I love you with all my heart. I love you more and more each day. I will love you forever and ever. I am yours for all eternity.*

It was signed, *Diane,* and her signature was followed by a PS: *if we ever break up I want this picture back.*

All of us seek meaning in our lives. Another description of it, that some of us use, is spirituality. We think, if I just get it right I will be whole and fulfilled and discover ultimate meaning.

What Jesus taught us (although he didn’t use these words) is that if we take on the values and the practices that he said were important… superpower comes as a by-product. Letting go of our fear and holding dear to our loyalty.

The Superheroes of the 21st century are as mythological as Mt Olympus’s god’s of two thousand years ago. Except for one… the one we learn from and follow.

One last story…

Studdert Kennedy was a great English clergyman. He was a chaplain in the first World War. He told of listening to two frightened soldiers during a heavy bombardment on their trench. In occasional pauses between the immense crashings and howlings he heard a sergeant cursing vividly and he heard a man next to him who was despairing and shivering and praying aloud for safety.

He said that he found the fearful praying the more disgusting of the two, a disgust compounded by the realization that a great deal of prayer, in peace as in war, was in fact of that order.

Studdert Kennedy asked himself,

*What, then, was prayer that was not fearful, contemptible, selfish or useless?*

And he concluded that, in that situation, true prayer is that which asks not for permission to survive but for courage to endure.