

Films & Faith
Sunday, August 19, 2018
“Choosing Responsibility”
Film: “Black Panther” (2018)

Scriptures: Leviticus 19:9-13, Matthew 5:14-16

A Films & Faith Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Focus: Being true to God’s purpose for our lives means choosing responsibility for others. Just as T’Challa discovers that Wakanda must be a partner in the world, Christ’s disciples are called to be salt and light, choosing faithful holiness as God’s partners.

If you had been ambling around my neighborhood when I was five or six years old, there is a chance you might have heard a conversation like this:

ME: “I’m going to be Batman today!”

MY FRIEND: “No, I’m going to be Batman.”

ME: “Nuh-uh. You can’t be Batman, you were Batman yesterday. You can be Robin.”

MY FRIEND: I don’t wanna be Robin. I wanna be Batman!

(Pause as I process this information)

ME: “Fine. You be Batman. I’ve changed my mind. I’ll be Superman, ‘cuz he can fly and Batman can’t! So there!”

My plan was to change the conversation. Robbie, my friend, was placed in a quandary—he both wanted to be Batman and also wanted to be able to fly. Reality hits hard! But that didn’t leave him without options. Instead, Robby consulted the higher pantheon of superpowers in our neighborhood – our mothers. He took his appeal straight to my mother, who really did have the power to control the universe.

ROBBY: “Mrs. Keating! Mrs. Keating! Chris says he’s Superman and he can fly. That’s not fair!”

No matter how old we are, we yearn for superpowers. It's just that over 50 the superpower you want most is the ability to get out of bed without hearing your knees pop.

The truth is we don't have to be superheroes to have superpowers. Superpowers are more than the power to fly or to stop run away trains, or amazing superhuman strength and agility. When we call men and women to serve in the ministries of the church as elders, deacons, or ministers, we lay hands on them and remind them that they not given superhuman powers, but have instead the powers of energy, intelligence, imagination and love.

It's amazing to consider how the world could be changed with those sorts of super powers.

It is that sort of imagination which makes "Black Panther" are stunning movie. There are dozens of themes in Marvel Studio's movie "Black Panther" which are deserving of conversation. But what stood out to me was the invitation to re-imagine the world. "Black Panther" is a breakthrough movie. It is more than a typical Hollywood superhero pic. Instead it invites us into a a world of imaginative possibilities—and then asks us, "What are a people called to be?"

But even more importantly, the movie looks at the world through the eyes of people who have for centuries were denied power. By imagining a fictional and highly developed African nation, "Black Panther" invites us to imagine what that continent might have been if it had not seen generations of its people sold into slavery.

One critic, a Lutheran pastor, offered this insight:

"The Black Panther comics gave 11-year-old me a chance to dream about a hero who can be an authentically African or black person and have something incredible to offer the world. In the comics and in the film, that's what Wakanda is: a gift to the entire world; a country that shares its resources with people the world over. The impact this will have on a generation of kids watching today—seeing an almost-entirely-black cast

stand up against evil with pride and passion, despite what has happened to [African-descent](#) people the world over—can't be overstated.”¹

There's no escaping the political realities this movie confronts, but instead of creating characters who are one dimensional, “Black Panther” invites us to consider the complexities of its story. It is not just another action movie, but instead a story which calls us to imagine a very basic question about life in community.

Leviticus also calls us to explore questions about life in community. We tend to think of this book as one of the “bad neighborhoods” of the Bible. We run through it with our doors locked and our windows closed. There are strange-sounding laws that frankly don't make sense to us in the modern world, and even harder to understand concepts like “holiness” and “purity.”

For most of us, holiness sounds either terrifying, boring, or impossible. Or even all three. But since many of the verses often quoted in Leviticus are often taken out of context or poorly interpreted, I believe “holiness” is misunderstood. Holiness means becoming filled with awe and wonder at what God can do.²

It's expressed right here in Leviticus:

“Be holy, as God is holy.” “Love God, love your neighbor. Protect the immigrant, the foreigner, the poor. Don't carry grudges. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Holiness,” writes Walter Kaiser, “cannot be regarded as an optional luxury of a believer's life-style.” Be holy, says Leviticus, not in abstract ways but in personal and immensely practical ways:

*When you reap the harvest, leave something for the poor.
When you speak, tell the truth. Don't cheat your neighbor.
Pay fair wages. Care for the immigrant, the disabled, the poor.*

¹ See (<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2018/02/black-panther-wakanda-forever/>)¹

² See Walter Brueggemann, “Holiness,” *Reverberations of Faith*, p. 100.

Those are our super powers, and as Jesus says in Matthew, it is our responsibility to choose to let those super powers shine in a struggling world.

These are also the themes which “Black Panther” explores so well. What does it mean to be a technologically advanced nation, one that has a secret super power that has brought healing and hope to its people? To the rest of the world, the fictional country of “Wakanda” looks like nothing more than an impoverished African nation. But thanks to a secret metal that the Wakadans have used for generations, they are a people of amazing possibilities.

Wakanda’s tribes have super-human powers, strength, highly developed science and technology far surpassing the rest of the world.

Wakanda has a treasure—but has kept it’s super power secret. secret.

Culturally, our media has not done a good job of developing positive story lines for black characters. “Black Panther” is a step toward correcting this image by showing us how a nation can function, how it can overcome what King T’challa calls the “illusions of division.” It shows us what it means to use our powers to build bridges which connect people, much in the same way Leviticus calls us to be holy.

Most of us, I think, imagine what we might do if we were given super powers, in the same way we imagine what we would do if we ever won the lottery.

We think, “If only I could cure childhood diseases, and close down all the children’s hospitals.” Or, “If only I could eradicate poverty.” Or, “If only our nation could find ways of overcoming its deepest divisions.” Or, “Could the world come together to create a safer, less polluted environment.”

But because the problems of our world are often such a tangled knot, we feel as that way because the world’s problems are immense. At times it feels as though only a super hero could save us. I felt that way this week,

listening to the news reports of the child sex abuse scandal in the Catholic church. We know that this is not just a “Catholic” problem, either. Over the past year, many allegations have emerged about the leaders and pastors of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, one of the largest mega churches in the nation.

Can you imagine what sort of super power is needed to solve these problems?

I think we can. I think we do have powers that can bring justice, that can listen to the voices of those who suffer. I think we can care for the poor, the hungry, and the fragile. I think we can stop the suffering of children. It happens bit by bit as each of us discover our super powers in Christ, allowing our lights to shine, and allowing God’s love to move through us. That, I believe, is what it means to become holy as God is holy. Amen.