

LARGER THAN LIFE

Do you know who these people are?

Steve Austin	6,000,000 Man
Arthur Curry	Aquaman
Bruce Wayne	Batman
Steven Rogers	Captain America
Billy Batson	Captain Marvel
Selina Kyle	Catwoman
Philip Urich	Green Goblin
Alan Scott	Green Lantern
Robert Bruce Banner	Incredible Hulk
Dick Grayson	Robin
Peter Parker	Spiderman
Clark Kent	Superman
Harvey Dent	Two Face

Superheroes. They're fun to think about, but they're also **fiction**. But there are some people who seem almost larger than life – who have accomplished so much that they are almost intimidating figures. So large that we just can't feel completely comfortable thinking of ourselves in the same sentence.

Steve Jobs. He revolutionized the personal computer, created the iPhone, the iPad, was on the ground floor of Pixar. What a giant!

Or, in this month, how about someone like Martin Luther. Wow! Such courage to stand up to the Emperor and the Pope. Such fortitude to write so many documents and hymns.

Abraham Lincoln. Winston Churchill. William Shakespeare. Thomas Jefferson. Albert Einstein. Johann Sebastian Bach. Their names rise up to the top.

But it's not just them who are larger than life. Maybe even some acquaintances of ours are intimidating figures. That High School Classmate who is a huge success. That family member for whom everything seems to have gone right. That friend whose marriage seems better – the buddy whose house is grander – the coworker who gets promoted before everyone else.

Today, in our text, it's the Apostle Paul.. He, too, sounds, (to us a Mary Poppins-ism) "practically perfect in every way" when he writes:

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.

Wow. Sounds like a Superhero Christian, don't you think? And to add insult to injury, even as he writes these words, the Apostle Paul is likely imprisoned in Ephesus, his very life in on the line, his freedoms curtailed, separated from his friends, his churches, whatever family he may have had. And yet he writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always – I say it again rejoice."

Again, such faith sounds larger than life. It sounds way beyond reach. So much so, in fact, that most of us, in comparison, don't feel like St. Paul, SUPER CHRISTIAN, but rather like LOSERCHRISTIAN – cause we feel weak, imperfect, and sometimes even betray our Lord, fail our Lord, embarrass our Lord

"I don't measure up." "I don't measure up because I can't forgive that person who wronged me. "I don't measure up, because I can't get over this grief and pain." "I don't measure up because I don't feel like getting up for church this morning." "I don't measure up because I can't endure this difficult marriage. I can't control my temper. I can't give up this habit." "I don't measure up because I don't tell others about my faith. I don't pray for my enemies. I can't get by on this salary with this house with these others depending on me."

Superhero? Hardly. We get out the tape measure and we see dead ends, impossibilities, doubts, fears, struggle and sins. And, in our frustration, we grow anxious -- we get depressed, sad. We want to change "I don't measure up." into "faithful, bold, confident, courageous." But we feel powerless to do so.

But wait a minute -- I think we're forgetting something -- something very critical. Let's not idolize or glamorize the Apostle Paul. He would never have wanted his words to be interpreted that way. For listen to his words in his earlier letter, Corinthians:

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am,

Or also, in 1 Timothy:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners -- of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His unlimited patience.

Oh, yes, we should remember the St. Paul who wrote over half the New Testament -- who traveled thousands of miles to spread the Gospel and who likely gave his life as a martyr for the sake of Christ.

But we also should remember what it was that made Paul who He was -- that gave him the strength to carry out his ministry -- motivated and enabled him to live with confidence. It was not some personal strength of character or human force of will. It was not some gimmick or fad or fashion that we can somehow imitate or copy. No, -- and he would be the first to tell you "no."

It was the Son of God who knocked him off that high horse on his way gather Christians for punishment in Damascus, -- the Son of God who shone the bright rays of His glory square in Paul's face and declared, "Saul, (that's what he was known as before his conversion) Saul, why are you persecuting me?" The Son of God who reached out to that persecutor, lifted him away of his misguided vengeance, and transformed him into a bold and fearless disciple. The Son of God, who literally pulled the blinders off His eyes, sent him His Holy Spirit in baptism, and declared him to be His chosen instrument to carry His name before the Gentiles.

Without that Son of God and His power, Paul would have continued to struggle and falter. Without that Son of God and His love, Paul would have continued to be cold and heartless. Without that Son of God and His peace, Paul would have continued to be anxious and restless. Without that Son of God and His grace, Paul would have continued to be a sinner, a doubter, an enemy of the Lord Jesus.

Think he never struggled? Remember his own words from Romans chapter seven.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do. And I know that nothing good lives in me, this is, in my sinful nature, for I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death!

But Jesus Christ came to this "wretched man" and declared, in spite of his past, in spite of his sin, in spite of his persecution, "Come unto Me -- Come unto Me, and I will give you rest.

Follow Me -- and I will give you peace. Trust me -- and I will give you life.” And Paul did indeed come to trust and believe. For by the power of the Spirit He came to know *that that* same Savior who appeared to Him on the road, was indeed the Son of God who loved so much that He walked in Paul’s shoes when He took on human flesh, carried Paul’s sin when He hung on the tree, bore Paul’s punishment when He gave up His life, and raised up Paul’s spirit when He rose from the grave.

That, my friends, is why Paul sounds like a Superhero. Because when he speaks he is no longer talking about himself and his abilities -- himself and his qualifications. No. He is talking about His Savior, whose open hand continues to bring daily strength and daily peace and daily hope and daily forgiveness even amid burdens and struggles and doubts and sins.

Notice how closely Paul connects his confidence in Philippians to the Savior? He declares, in our text, “I can to all things,” but finishes the phrase with “through Christ, who strengthens me.” He declares, “Rejoice, rejoice” but grounds it in Christ by saying “rejoice in the Lord!” And he encourages the Philippians to find peace and hope not by digging deep within themselves, but instead he writes: “but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Have you ever been in a place with horrible cell service? A place where you can’t seem to connect to the core and your phone is scratchy and garbled and maybe drops the call? Concordia students, I know that you have experienced this!! In order to have good cell service we need to be connected to a tower. Otherwise we’re all out here on our own.

Feeling depleted – like LOSERCHRISTIAN? Well, my friends, St. Paul teaches us today that we are like that phone. The living God is the tower, and He has an endless supply of power and strength to help us endure -- to lead us forward -- to keep us faithful -- to fire us up. He can turn us from People who don’t measure up to the Best Version of ourselves. But we need to stay connected. We cannot let ourselves stray too far away from our tower. And that happens when the Holy Spirit moves in our hearts through Word and Sacrament – when we are moved by Him lay down our burdens and needs unto our Father through prayer, when we are recharged by Him through worship and fellowship.

In short, we need to stay connected -- connected to the Lord Jesus Christ, who not only offered His hand to St. Paul, but also offers it to each and every one of us – every day. And as He so moves us, then the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will indeed keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.