

Be the church: fight for the powerless

Acts 4:5-12

April 26, 2015

Sometimes, if I just feel like “vegging out” and watching some TV, one of my favorite shows to watch is “Leverage.” It was cancelled three years ago, but you can still find reruns on cable. Anybody else know that show?

The show chronicles the exploits of the “Leverage” team: Hardison, the tech wiz; Eliot, the enforcer; Parker, the acrobatic thief with relationship issues; Sophie, the consummate con artist; and Nathan Ford, the mastermind of the team and an alcoholic with relationship issues of his own. Each episode finds them planning and executing elaborate cons on behalf of ordinary people who have been exploited or swindled or abused by powerful and wealthy and politically connected and seemingly untouchable villains.

Or if you don’t know “Leverage,” do you remember the “A Team?” Hannibal and Face and BA and Murdock?

Or if you don’t remember anything about either of these TV series, you surely remember something of the saga of Robin Hood and his band of Merry Men? Robin Hood and Little John and Friar Tuck and Will Scarlett and Maid Marian?

My question is this: what do Robin Hood and his merry band, the “A Team,” the “Leverage” con artists, and the church all have in common? Each is a company of quirky misfits, of team members both specially skilled and particularly flawed, working together under the guidance of a charismatic leader to fight for powerless people.

Am I right? Isn’t this who we are? Quirky misfits, each with our own skills and flaws, following our leader, Jesus, and taking the side of powerless people?

Be the church! Fight for the powerless! We are in the same business as these other fabled champions of powerless people, but how are we different? How is the church different?

We are different because we aren’t the heroes. At the end of the day, it is not we who get the credit, not we who deserve the honor and glory. Peter said:

Why do you stare at us? Do you think it was by means of our own power or godliness that we made this man walk?

No, the honor and glory, and credit, belong to God alone.

And we are different because our fight is not about the enemy. Robin Hood and his band rob the rich to give to the poor, but you don't see or hear much of the poor in the fables. It is the Sheriff of Nottingham and his soldiers that get all the attention.

It's the same in the TV shows. You meet the helpless clients at the beginning of the episode, but usually don't see them again until just before the credits roll, expressing their effusive praise and eternal gratitude. It's all about the fight, all about getting the better of the bad guys. It's as much about putting down and humiliating the haughty oppressor as it is about helping the humble victim. That's where the drama is.

But for us, it's not about the enemy, but the victim, not about the fight, but about compassion.

Annas and Caiaphas and John and Alexander were obsessed with questions of power: "How did you do this? What power do you have?" They were so preoccupied with perceived threats to their power and position of influence that they neglected the wonder of what was right there in front of their eyes: a lame man had been healed!

Who is our enemy? Not the oppressor, but oppression itself. Not the sinner, but sin itself. Not this one or that one, but the fear and insecurity and lack of faith that drive us apart and set us against each other.

And we are different because the end is different. In these other stories, in the end the poor are showered with gifts, the injured ones are vindicated, the swindled ones get their stuff back, but, in many ways, the helpless ones are still helpless, wholly dependent and entirely indebted to the "A Team" or to Nathan Ford and his crew or to Robin Hood and his men for their good fortune. They are still what they were.

But the church is about transformation. The lame man called out to Peter and John, asking them for whatever money they could spare and they gave him none. They gave him nothing of what he asked for, but everything he needed. They set him free.

What if they gave him all the money they had, all the money they could raise? What if they guaranteed him food enough for every day that he lived? He would be left still helpless, still powerless, still what he was. Instead, they lifted him up, literally and figuratively. God lifted him up, God set him free, and he stood, on his own.

Be the church! Fight for the powerless. We are in the same business, but we don't fight in the same way. Were you listening carefully to the words of the last hymn as we sang it? I think it must be the most uncomfortable hymn I have ever sung! Let's listen again ...

Spirit of Jesus, if I love my neighbor,

The hymn begins innocently enough. This is what I am called to do, to love my neighbor.

out of my knowledge, leisure, power or wealth,

Yes, of course! I use what I have. I give out of my abundance. I use the knowledge and power and wealth with which God has blessed me to bless others.

*OPEN MY MIND to understand the anger of helplessness
that hates my power to help.*

The anger of helplessness? Maybe you know what it feels like to be entirely helpless, entirely dependent, humiliated in your powerlessness, grateful for help, but resentful too of the one who stands above you as your benefactor. Or if you don't know what it feels like, can you imagine it? The hymn is not suggesting that anger or hate are good things. It is just asking us to understand.

And if, when I have answered need with kindness,

Yes, may it be so! May I answer need with kindness!

my neighbor rises, wakened from despair,

That's what we want, isn't it? To end despair? To help our neighbors rise?

*OPEN MY HEART to hear the cry for justice
that struggles for the changes that I fear.*

It's not just about charity, but about transformation. But transformation means things change! And if things change, we will have to change, too.

"No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." If we mean it, our congregation will not look the same, never be the same.

And if we are serious about confronting the injustice of poverty, it will have to be about more than handing out food boxes and giving money to aid programs. It will have to be about addressing root causes, about changing a system that perpetuates poverty and exacerbates the gulf between rich and poor. But if the system changes, our place in it will change. We can't have our cake and give it away, too. It's not just about redistribution of resources, it's about redistribution of power, and that's threatening. Unless we know there is nothing that can threaten us: "There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours though Christ Jesus our Lord!"

If I am hugging safety or possessions,

Hugging? Out of love? Out of fear? Both?

uncurl my spirit, as your love prevails,

Your love, O God, is my only needful and most precious possession! Your love, O God, is my only and best place of safety!

to JOIN MY NEIGHBORS, work for liberation,

Not just helping, but joining. Not giving a handout, but a hand up. Not a benefactor, but a partner, working together for liberation, which will happen only when the powerful and the powerless stand toe-to-toe, eye-to-eye, side by side.

and find my freedom at the mark of nails.

Oh, my ... How did Jesus "fight" for the powerless? By becoming utterly powerless himself!

Be the church! Follow Jesus! Fight for the powerless! Not by being strong enough, but by being willing to be weak enough.