

## **Sermon: August 29, 2021**

### **“The Symmetry of Belief”**

Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Townsley

Scripture: Acts 9:1-20, Matthew 5:38-48

For the past three weeks, we’ve been talking about the intersection of bible stories and Superhero films. In this, our fourth week of August at the movies, we’re taking a turn back into the Marvel Cinematic Universe with *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the second Avengers film of the franchise released in 2015. The Avengers are a team of superheroes who grow in number as the series of Marvel films progresses throughout the years. The core of the Avengers includes America’s favorite superhero Captain America (who we will discuss more next week); Iron Man, billionaire genius playboy Tony Stark’s superhero alter ego; Thor, a god-like hero from the planet Asgard; the Black Widow, Russian assassin turned good gal; the Incredible Hulk, scientist guy by day, big green unstoppable monster when he gets angry; and Hawkeye, a supremely gifted archer who teams up with the rest of the gang. There are a few other tangential characters, but those are the fab six, as it were.

In this film, our heroes come up against a monster of Tony Stark’s own creation, an artificial intelligence of a kind, called Ultron, who is bent on world destruction because of what he sees as a failure of humanity to grasp what it means to be human—he believes, essentially, that he must save the world from itself by replacing humans with artificial intelligence. In his quest to “save the world,” the evil Ultron recruits super-gifted twins Wanda and Pietro Maximoff. Wanda, otherwise known as the Scarlet Witch, has powers that include telekinesis, energy manipulation, and the ability to get into

people's heads. Pietro, also called Quicksilver, has powers that are a bit less complex... he can run at lightning speed. This allows him to get a leg up on his opponents, but he is not unstoppable.

Ultron confronts the twins in a church in the middle of Slovakia. In the scene, he says, "This church was built in the middle of the city, so everyone would be equally close to God. I like that, the symmetry, the geometry of belief." Over the course of the film, we find out that the Maximoff's have a history with Tony Stark, whose weapons killed their parents. And so when Ultron says that he's going to take down the Avengers, they're all in. They want Tony Stark (Iron Man) to pay for the harm his creations have caused. Their collusion with Ultron would be enough to make the Maximoff's enemies of the Avengers, but at the beginning of the film, we see them colluding with another bad guy and they have a run-in with the Avengers. And so the Avengers are very aware of what the twins can do.

In time, as Ultron is creating a more powerful body for himself using a special stone, Wanda is able to get a look at what it is Ultron has planned—she realizes that he's going to wipe out humankind (starting with Slovakia) and at this point, she and Pietro, once enemies of the Avengers, realize they're going to have to work with them to take down Ultron.

As I thought about films to choose for our August at the movies, this one popped into my head. First of all, it's a great film, one of my favorites from the Marvel universe, but it also resonated with scripture in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a fervent persecutor of Christians. I think it's highly likely that Saul's work contributed to many deaths of Jesus followers, although we aren't explicitly told that he does any murdering himself in this

text. He's planned to go to Damascus and arrest "any who belonged to 'the Way,' men or women," bound them, and bring them to Jerusalem. But it doesn't work out quite so well for Saul because, on the road to Damascus, he is literally blinded by a vision of Jesus, and sets off to see a man named Ananias who will heal his vision. After this, Saul will become Paul and Paul, as we all know, becomes an apostle—the only one that didn't get to meet Jesus before his crucifixion and resurrection.

Ultron's quote in the film about the symmetry or the geometry of belief strikes me as particularly poignant as we reflect on Paul's story. There's a geometry to his life. Paul will match his former fervor for persecuting Christians with a new fervor for spreading the gospel, especially to the Gentiles. The zeal with which he undertakes his new mission matches (in a much gentler, loving way) that which he used to harm Christians before. The violence of his former life will be matched by his love in his new life as one who belongs to "the Way" of Jesus.

There's a symmetry to his life before and after his conversion. But there's also a symmetry to the Way of Jesus, isn't there? In our gospel text today, Jesus reminds us of our call to love others—and this love, Jesus says, isn't just going to stop with those we like or those who love us back. He wants us to match the love we show to those that are part of "us" with the love we show to those we would consider enemies. Now, before I go any further, I want to clarify that Jesus is not saying here that we should be a doormat for people who would abuse us. As someone who has faced violence in my former home, I would never advocate, for instance, that we put ourselves in unsafe situations simply because we are told to love our enemies. We can

love them, forgive them, not want bad things to befall them, but still get to safety and protect ourselves.

I want that to be clear. Do what is safe for you and those you love. Protect yourself.

And at the same time, Jesus is challenging us here to love not just the lovable people around us, but also those who aren't lovable. Jesus challenges us to live generously and graciously with others. The Way of Jesus isn't just one in which we love the people sitting next to us in the pews or the people we call family (by blood or choice), it's a way of being that pushes us to extend the hand of grace to those we might not be compelled to otherwise. It's a way of being that is mature in its practice. After all, I think we're all a bit unlovable sometimes, but God doesn't stop loving us in those moments, right? God, who knows all the good and the... not so good things about us loves thoroughly and completely. Jesus is saying here, in part, work on loving people like that. And that love isn't just a notion. It's not just an emotional response. It's not just a feeling. It's a verb. It's love as an action. It's going out and feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, providing for the poor, sheltering the homeless, welcoming the refugee, and all the other things that Jesus taught us were most important in how we love.

In our world today, there is so much animosity. We've prioritized freedom to the point that we're willing to disregard the lives of others in order to be able to make our own terrible choices. We've decided that a person's right to behave badly outweighs the right another person has to live and be safe. But we're being challenged in texts like today's to live a different way. The Way of Jesus isn't a ticket to an easier life, it is a challenge to do better. TO

live generously, as *The Message* translation puts it. To be gracious with everyone as God is with us. And we can see through Paul's conversion how radical the call to follow Jesus is because Paul's actions turn from the selfish, violent actions of a man with a vendetta against those he considers enemies or other to the generous and gracious actions of a man who wishes to bring all people over to the goodness of the Way of Jesus.

Late in the film, Wanda is struggling with how to handle the battle being waged around her and how to work with those who used to be her enemies knowing that she's contributed to the horrors that are happening out there by working with Ultron early on. She's paralyzed by her own feelings of guilt and fear. At that moment, Hawkeye says, "Doesn't matter what you did, or what you were." He encourages her to get in the fight, they need her. But he also gives her an out. He acts graciously toward her and Wanda, in return, decides that she has what it takes to help win the day. That what she did wrong in the past doesn't need to determine her future. That these guys who she thought were bad because of Stark's weapons all those years ago, these enemies, were part of the solution after all and she wants in, too. It reminded me a lot of what Paul must have gone through in his own head as he was working out how to move forward in his life after having persecuted so many. But for Paul as for Wanda, the past was in the past, their enemy status didn't matter. It was about living into what was happening in that moment.

You can't go back and get a do over, you just need to keep going. It's a good message for all of us when we know there are places in our pasts where we've fallen short. We can't go back and undo it. So we have to live into the best version of ourselves so that we can act more generously and

graciously in the future. Because for Paul, Wanda, and of course for us, it's not really about what we'd done or who we were, for us, it's about who we become when we follow the Way of Jesus. Because when we leave this place today, we can choose to go right back to who we were when we entered this building or we can choose to let the words and message of Jesus Christ help us live more generously and graciously. Like Wanda and Paul, we have a choice. What's yours? Amen.