

February 3, 2019 – 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

If you could have any superpower, what would it be? I know, it's kind of a silly question. But at the same time, I think it's something many of us have daydreamed about at one time or another.

Maybe you'd like to have superspeed, to be able to run around and get a million things done in the blink of an eye. Maybe you'd like to have invisibility, so that you could go places and do things without anyone knowing. Maybe you'd like to be able to fly like Superman and go anywhere in the world. There are a ton of options. Each has its own pros and cons.

And, of course, right along side the question of what power you would have would be, "What would you do with it?" Would you become a superhero or not? Would you keep it a secret or let the whole world know? Would you be selfish with your power or would you use it to help others?

By and large, I think we'd all hope to be superheroes. Or, at least, use our powers for some sort of greater good. But our sinful nature says we'd probably end up serving our own interests with it. Maybe becoming far more villainous than we'd like to admit.

I bring all this up because when people talk about spiritual gifts, they often look at them like superpowers. And that's not far from the truth. When we see Jesus doing what he did in our Gospel lesson today – healing the sick and casting out demons – it's hard not to look at him like a superhero.

And St Paul described the gifts of healing and performing miracles as spiritual gifts that God might give to any Christian. And so while we can only dream about having a superpower like in comic books and movies, it's not crazy to ask yourself, "What spiritual gifts have I been given?"

St Paul talks about this at some length in the book of 1 Corinthians. And we've been reading it in our Epistle lessons for the past few weeks. Because, like us, the church in Corinth was curious about spiritual gifts.

They had seen and heard about the Apostles doing amazing things. Things just like what Jesus did. Healing the sick and raising the dead and doing all sorts of miracles. And so they're wondering, is this what we can expect? Is this what it means to be a Christian?

And Paul tells them honestly, yes, there are spiritual gifts. Yes, they do sometimes include some pretty amazing things. Healing and miracles and such.

But they also include some fairly ordinary things. Wisdom to do what's right in a particular situation. The knowledge of God's Word and the ability to apply it at the right time. Faith in the midst of trial and doubt. The ability to discern between good and evil in a confusing world.

These are all spiritual gifts too. And there's nothing particularly impressive about them. But they are all gifts from God. And they should be used and valued for what they provide.

And Paul continues by pointing out that just because a spiritual gift appears more impressive, doesn't mean it's more important. And it certainly doesn't mean that it makes that person more important.

Every spiritual gift comes from God. And every gift is given for the good of His Church. And every gift is meant to be used with every other gift.

Together, we are all one body. We all have many talents and many gifts. Some of us are hands, some are feet, some are legs, arms, heart, lungs, stomach. Some of us are parts we don't even talk about in public. But we are all important. We are all necessary. Because we all make up the one body of Christ. To do his work on earth.

And if we were perfectly righteous, perfectly sinless, this would all work perfectly. We would each know exactly what gift God had given us. We would each joyful perform that task for the good of His Church.

None of us would ever try to overstep our bounds. None of us would ever feel envy or resentment or bitterness toward one another. We would work together like the hands and feet, arms and legs of Christ himself on earth.

But that's not what happens. Because, like I said before, the question isn't just, "What superpower would you choose?" The bigger question – the more important question, really – is, "What would you do with that superpower?"

Because we all want to be superheroes, but in our sinfulness it is much easier to become supervillains. It is much easier to let selfishness and self-interest take control of our thoughts and words and deeds. Especially when we can't ever be superheroes alone. When we will only ever be superheroes when we work together as one body. As one church.

Which is why St Paul doesn't stop there. He doesn't just say, "Here are some amazing spiritual gifts that you may or may not receive." And, "Here are some amazing ways that you can work together to be the body of Christ."

He says at the beginning of our lesson today, "I will show you a still more excellent way." You think that's good? You think that's amazing? Here's the most amazing thing of all.

Even if I have every spiritual gift. Even if I can speak every language in heaven and earth, and have prophetic powers, and have all knowledge and all understanding, and faith to move mountains, and a passion for God's work that overwhelms me until I give away everything I own and die for the sake of Christ. Even if I have all of that, it all means nothing if I don't have... love.

Without love, I am nothing. Without love, the things I do are meaningless. They're worthless. None of it matters if I don't have love.

Why? Because love is what makes us superheroes and not supervillains. Love is what takes the selfishness out of our thoughts and words and deeds, and allows us to think of others. Love is what made Jesus our Savior.

Because Jesus could have come with all the power in the world and lived a perfect, sinless life. And it wouldn't have mattered if he hadn't done it out of love. Love is what led Jesus on the cross. Love is what raised him from the dead.

And when we read something like this passage, we realize just how impossible that perfect love is for anyone but the Son of God. Because we are not always patient or kind. We envy. We boast. We're arrogant and rude. We insist on our own way. We are irritable and resentful.

We will readily rejoice at wrongdoing if it helps us. And we will hate the truth if it hurts us. We do not bear all things for the sake of our neighbor. We do not believe all things that God tells us. We do not hope all things that Christ promises to us. And we do not endure all things with patience and joy.

And for all that, we will end. We will die. The wages of sin is death. We die because we do not show love in all things.

But we will live again because Jesus did show love in all things. He was that perfect love that St Paul describes. He had every gift of the spirit and he used them selflessly because he used them out of love.

He was the embodiment of love itself. And he did not need to end. He did not need to die. But he did. Out of love. That we might not end. That we might not die eternally. But live again.

And so that we might know his love for us. So that we might put aside this childish pursuit of power that always corrupts. Always leaves us selfishly wanting more.

And instead grow up into the men and women of God who realize that there is no greater spiritual gift than love. The most amazing, impressive, heroic superpower that any Christian can ever wield is loving God and loving your neighbor, with the love that Christ loved us.

Because that love saved the world from death and hell. That love he felt for us was greater than any love any human being ever felt or would ever feel. That love is a more excellent way than all the spiritual gifts in all the body of Christ.

Faith, hope, and love will abide for all eternity. But the greatest of these. The greatest of all spiritual gifts. The greatest of all superpowers we could ever dream of... is love. Amen.