We have looked at quite a variety of Superhero characteristics this summer, and I hope you've gleaned some insight into yourself, and the world. It's been an unusual but hopefully interesting exploration of both comic book superheroes and those from the bible. The Bible is full of everyday superheroes, and we've explored the lives and lessons of several figures, the majority from the Old Testament including Esther, Rahab, Moses, Aaron, Nehemiah, Caleb, Nathan, and David.

The challenges they faced and how they overcame them were not really all that different from those we face today, which is why their stories continue to impart wisdom to us.

Their humanness resonates with us, which is why they provide such great teaching tools. God's intervention in their lives gives us hope and courage for the lives WE live and the challenges WE face.

Today we are going to explore the heroic trait of selflessness, sometimes called sacrifice or altruism.

Earlier this month, the movie Fantastic Four opened in theaters, and is reported to be the lowest grossing Marvel Comic movie to date. Has anyone seen it?

No…. I haven't seen it either; but since it hasn't been doing well, it will probably show up on cable pretty soon.

There was one line from the movie trailer that caught my attention:

One character says, “He’s stronger than any of us.” And another character responds, “He’s not stronger than ALL of us.”

As I read up on the Fantastic Four, I found out that there are both family ties and friendships that bind this team together so strongly that they not only protect one another but they do whatever it takes to protect the whole human race. They are stereotypical Superheroes, a creation of fiction and endless possibility. But somewhere in them is a nugget of reality. Their SELFLESSNESS is very much a Christian characteristic.

“He’s stronger than any of us.” “He’s not stronger than ALL of us.”
I love that they are a team, that they have one another’s back and that work together for the common good! The movie may not be great but the Fantastic Four sound like a team I’d like to know better.

Last week there was an incident on a train in France, you may have heard about. A well-armed gunman boarded a train, but he was swiftly taken down by several men, some with military training and others who were simply driven to respond.

What makes someone respond like these men did, to risk their own lives to save other people? They said they didn’t really think about what they did; they saw the guns and flew into action.

That gun man may have been “stronger” because of the weapons he carried, but even all those weapons were no match for the unarmed team that worked together to save the lives of the people on the train.

The men on the train in France are everyday superheroes. What they did was commit unselfish actions on behalf others, without thinking about themselves or the repercussions of their actions.

They seem to be hard-wired for unselfishness.

This is also a trait epitomized by Ruth. She was dedicated, loyal and loving, completely SELFLESS. We read a bit from the beginning of her story, and some of you are probably familiar with the rest of her story.

Let me just refresh your memory: During a time of famine in Bethlehem, Naomi, her husband and two sons moved from Bethlehem to the country of Moab.

While living there, the sons grew up and married.

I imagine as a young woman, even though she was not raised as a Jew, she learned the ways of her in-laws, and became transformed, or converted, in those years of living with her Jewish family.

Subsequently Naomi’s husband and sons all died, leaving all three women widows. One daughter-in-law follows Naomi’s request that she return to her own family, but Ruth refuses to desert Naomi – “Wherever you go, I will go… Your people shall be my people... Your God shall be my God... Where you die, there I will due and be buried...."

They seem to echo what we know as traditional marriage vows, don’t they? A beautiful testimony to UNSELFISH, SACRIFICIAL LOVE.
This is a turning point in both their lives.

Ruth dedicates her life to Naomi; she puts aside what seems logical.

Back in Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth, with the help of Naomi’s male relatives, created a new life, doing whatever they had to do in order to survive and eventually to thrive in their new lives.

Ruth eventually married one of Naomi’s relatives. And through the birth of a son, Ruth became part of the lineage of Jesse, and David, and Jesus of Nazareth.

Ruth chose love for another above all else, and from that choice was created not only a wonderful life for herself, but the heart that was to beat in Jesus. A heart of selfless, unconditional, non-judgmental, all-forgiving love, even to the ultimate sacrifice of death.

The age-old question people often wonder is: are unselfish people born that way, or are they created by their environment and the people around them? Even in the world of fiction, the question emerges. We wonder “what caused Bruce Wayne to become Batman?” and “what caused Peter Parker to become Spiderman?” And “how and why did JOHNNY and SUE STORM form the heart of the Fantastic Four?”

One of the interesting things I’ve discovered is that in the world of comic book superheroes, their origin story often occurs well into the series. It’s AFTER the superhero, whether real or fiction, does a super deed and becomes known, people want to know “what made them that way?”

That’s probably why the first gospel to be written about Jesus, the Gospel of Mark, doesn’t include a birth story.

Think about the heroes on the train in France. Before they saved a trainload of passengers, they were just businessmen, tourists, servicemen on leave. As they’ve talked to the press, we’ve learned more about them. One of those heroes has asked to remain anonymous, and for me, he is the one who may be the most altruistic of all of them. Humility is one important characteristic of PURE unselfish behavior.

So, what do you think?

Are selfishness and selfLESSness learned or genetic traits?

SHOW OF HANDS
There have been many, many studies and volumes of research on the topic of are we born selfish or unselfish, and while professionals still are divided, I believe God created us with free will.

And if we have free will, then we all can choose, what's best for me, or what's best for the ones I love. And we also can choose who we include in the category of “the ones I love.”

Think about Ruth, born into a different culture, but she learned how to be unselfish, how to model the love of God, in spite of her early years. The family of Naomi taught Ruth about love and loyalty and sacrifice.

We know that the people around us can influence our way of thinking and behaving, our way of responding and reacting.

But did you also know that we how we act and respond can be influenced by video games?

What studies have shown is that it's in the DOING of a behavior, even in the VIRTUAL world, that a behavior is really learned.

DOING the behavior, is a HUGE part of learning both negative and positive behaviors, both selfish and unselfish characteristics.

There can be little doubt in anyone’s mind that the increase in video game play and the increase of violence in those games is having an impact on the level of violence we are seeing in society.

BUT I’m here to tell you that there is a glimmer of hope out there for video games.

I read an interesting report from Stanford University about ALTRUISM and EMPATHY.

I'll post the link with the text version on my message on the website.


Stanford University conducted an experiment with 30 women and 30 men in a virtual simulator. Each person entered the simulator individually and was given instructions. The mission was to find a diabetic child who needed a shot of insulin.

Some of the people were given instructions to fly like Superman in search of the child, while others were a passenger in a search helicopter.

The game was designed so everyone found the child within two minutes. Everyone rescued the child.
But the REAL experiment happened AFTER the virtual game, when the individuals were interviewed. The interviewer “ACCIDENTALLY” knocked a cup containing 15 pens off her desk.

Who do you think bent over to pick up the pens most quickly?

The people who rescued the child as Superman, began picking up pens within 3 seconds. The Helicopter passengers, on an average, began picking up the pens 6 seconds after they fell, which was 1 second AFTER the INTERVIEWER began picking them up herself.

The Superman group not only pitched in first, they picked up 15% more pens than the Helicopter group. Six members of the Helicopter passengers didn’t pick up ANY pens at all.

According to the researchers, the study shows that heroic behavior in a virtual environment can transfer to empathy and altruistic behavior in the real world.

Not only that, but clinical psychologist, Robin Rosenberg, has found that the stories about comic book Superheroes have helped many REAL people understand how they too can choose altruism and heroism over the pursuit of wealth and power. People draw inspiration from other people’s stories, whether they are fictional or real. So comic books and video games DO have some redeeming qualities beyond pure entertainment!

So I think we can agree on three things:

First, SELFLESSNESS is greatly influenced by others.

What we see others doing and what we experience as benefits, teaches us how and why we should choose to act in caring and compassionate ways for others. As we mature, and we learn from mentors and elders, we begin to realize that we are not the center of the universe, or at least that’s the hope.

Second, I think we can agree that unselfish behavior is best learned by doing it, and repeatedly doing it, until you do it without even thinking. Becoming unselfish, truly unselfish, is something that can become an immediate response or reaction, just like the actions we saw on that train in France. It takes time and it takes training, so it’s no surprise that at least two of the heroes on the train had military experience.

And third, Selflessness is about loving others more than we love ourselves.

Selflessness is not about personal gain or even personal satisfaction. It’s all about others.
Isn't that what the life and death of Jesus was all about?

Many of us wouldn't react quite the way those men on the train did, but there are other less dramatic moments of selfless heroism that come our way.

We can make Lifestyle choices that protect the environment. We can intentionally support businesses that treat their employees justly and respectfully, even if it costs a little more. We give of our time here at church or in other volunteer roles. Those are all ways that we exhibit altruism.

Marketing geniuses have realized people want to make a difference in the world, which why companies are following Toms Shoes in saying "for every one you buy, we give one to someone in need."

Many of us can relate to the actions of Ruth, can't we? The selfless love of parents, grandparents and children are repeated generation after generation. We don't even think of it as the act of a superhero, do we? And yet in the selfless act of caring for aging parents, we, too, are behaving as God would have us do.

In the coming week, I challenge you to think about the choices you make and the lives that those choices effect.

Selflessness is a learned behavior, and we are never too old to learn it.