

THE FANTASTIC *PLASTIC MAN*

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Grace Church in New York
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To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. (1 Corinthians 9:22)

When I was growing up my little brother was a great fan of superheroes and comic books, so I, through him, came to know many members of the Justice League of America. Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, Captain America – they were all there. One lesser known light amongst the constellation of crime fighters was Plastic Man. Plastic Man's super powers involved being able to mold himself into any shape he wanted. He could also stretch himself seemingly without end so that he could reach out and grab the bad guys long after they thought they were in the clear. My brother, in addition to possessing hundreds of comic books and action figures, also had a collection of LP records with stories and songs about the superheroes on them. I can still hum the tune of Plastic Man's song, and I remember some of the words: *He's a real good guy in a bright red suit, and he always wears goggles and a belt that's a beaut ... Plastic Man, Plastic Man, the one, the original elastic man. Oh, he's in great shape for the shape he's in, the fantastic Plastic Man.*

The truth was, neither the catchy jingle nor the high rhetoric of the lyrics could make Plastic Man one of our favorites. When it was time to get down on our knees and seriously play with the figures, seldom did anyone choose Plastic Man. We would also get caught up in great debates as to which superhero was best, and which superpower we'd like to have in real life. The answer that I always defended was Superman, of course. Superman could do it all, and he didn't need a bat mobile or spider webs to do it. Superman could knock out all the others, any day of the week. That's why he was President of the Justice League of America. Yes, the Hulk and the Thing were plenty strong, but they were also plenty ugly. And Superman always had Lois Lane to adore him. On and on the debates would go, but no one ever rose to defend Plastic Man.

Today I rise to defend Plastic Man. In fact, let me give you the theme of the sermon that follows right here and now. God is like Plastic Man. That's the theme, based on today's readings from the Gospel of Mark (1:29-39) and the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians (9:16-23). Before we unpack the idea we need to pay attention to some things you may have noticed in the reading from Mark. You may have noticed the motif of the search. The restive crowds were searching for Jesus because they'd heard how he was able to cast out demons and heal the sick. They'd heard how Jesus was able to meet their greatest, most immediate needs, and thus they pursued him relentlessly. They pressed around the house of Simon Peter and Andrew, and when Jesus withdrew to a lonely place to pray they sent out search parties to track him down and find him. So the crowds were on an urgent spiritual search. They were seekers, and we are told these days that to be a seeker is a good thing. My guess is that in many mainline Protestant pulpits across America, preachers who are also considering this passage from Mark will be extolling the virtues of the spiritual quest. I won't disagree with them. Being a seeker can open you to new possibilities, and inspire you to ask challenging questions. Being a seeker may have brought you here this morning – to church, of all places! It is good to be a seeker. Indeed, the prophet Isaiah declared, *Seek the Lord while he wills to be found.*

The problem with being a spiritual seeker is that eventually the search goes bust. What often happens is that inevitably, unwittingly we choose as our guide and compass in the spiritual quest that which is our greatest need. Your greatest need may be for healing, or the for the love of a soul mate, or for children, or for security and prosperity, or for the assurance of eternal life. Such needs can be so intense that we wind up seeking not the true and living God, but anyone who can promise to meet them. Our needs become idols of a sort, and God becomes a means to the end of their satisfaction. What happens when we make God merely a means to the end of something else? God withdraws. God withdraws when we seek the gifts and not the Giver. We can see shadows of this beginning in Mark. Jesus withdrew from the crowds when he discerned that for them, the healings and miracles were becoming the focus. Jesus had a message to proclaim. He intended the healings and miracles to illustrate, to illuminate, to demonstrate the message. But the crowds had reached the point where they could hear nothing of the message beyond the illustration. What then is the message? What is the good news that Jesus had to proclaim, and that calls us together still? It is not the rigors and the nobility of the spiritual quest. It is not that we need to go out and find God. Rather, it is that God has found us. God has searched us out and known us. The kingdom of God is at hand.

It's time now to return to the theme of the sermon: God is like Plastic Man. God finds us not with the overwhelming might of Superman, or the blinding speed of the Flash, but with the adaptability and long reach of the fantastic Plastic Man. God finds us through Jesus, and about Jesus, St. Paul would write that *though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8)*. St. Paul would also write that *for our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21)*. The verse is difficult to our hearing, but there it is: in Jesus, God formed himself even to our sinful likeness in order to find us.

What is more, God sent prophets before Jesus and Apostles after him to bear the message that God has found us. Listen to the shape-shifting of St. Paul himself in the portion of today's Epistle: *to the Jews I became as a Jew ... to those under the law I became as one under the law ... to those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... to the weak I became weak ... I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings*. St. Paul claimed to have in himself the mind of Christ – “the one, the original elastic man.” Filled as he was by the Spirit of Christ, Paul was willing to wear any bright red suit that might be necessary in order to save people.

I recall a time in a previous parish of mine when I simply wasn't able to do what I'm sure Paul would have done. A parishioner named Dolly wanted us to start a contemporary worship service in order to reach a new population of people. Although I knew the gist of what she meant, I remember being frustrated and a bit out of sorts by the whole concept. To call one service contemporary implied that all the others were happening either in the past or the future, but not in the present. Nevertheless, I was all for having a go at being all things to all people, so with our limited resources we designed a decidedly alternative worship experience and put it out there. Afterwards Dolly declared that it was a start, but the next step would be for me to wear some of the vestments that she herself had made. When she showed me a chasuble and stole that I can only describe as “retro hippy,” I knew that we had arrived at the limits of my elasticity. St. Paul, I am sure, being the caped crusader for Jesus that he was, would have just put the vestments on and said, “Now Dolly, let us speak of your sins.” That's what it would take to reach Dolly: someone with the spiritual gifts of St. Paul or the super powers of Plastic Man. But it wasn't going to be me. After me would have to come one more flexible than I.

I could not be what Dolly wanted or needed me to be in a priest. We all have our limits, and I suppose knowing those limits and respecting them is a mark of wisdom. But remember: God is like Plastic Man. God, like Plastic Man, has a reach without limits. God's reach is ever extending to those who are not yet within his embrace. Witness in the Gospel of Mark how Jesus wouldn't settle for long in any one place, but moved on the next towns. Why? *"To proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do,"* he said. We can think of Jesus' whole life and ministry as God's reach extending into time and space, across the dusty roads of Palestine, and all the way to Calvary Hill, where Jesus stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the cross so that all might come within his saving embrace. And then, as we recite in the Creed, *he descended into hell*, to gather up those there too. And on the third day he rose again to show us that nothing in all of creation can put us out of God's reach. God's extended reach would cause the Psalmist (139) to sing, *Lord, you have searched me out and known me ... you press upon me behind and before and lay your hand upon me ... where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence ... If I climb up to heaven you are there; if I make the grave my bed you are there also.*

I once knew a man who made his bed not quite in the grave, but close to it. He was a respected doctor in the community and member of the church. His wife was also a doctor, they had two beautiful children, and they lived in a house that was the envy of the neighborhood. The secret was that over time the man had gradually succumbed to a temptation that was morally and legally wrong. Eventually he crossed the line completely and was involved in ongoing criminal behavior. One day with no warning the police arrived at his practice and led him away in handcuffs. He was charged, held without bail, and that night found himself in a jail cell. The full enormity of what he had done and what he had to lose crushed in upon him, and he trembled. Sleep was impossible. The man described to me later how at one point, deep in that dark night, it was as if God stretched forth his right hand to help him. He explained that he literally felt a hand on his shoulders to steady his trembling. He knew then that though he would have to pay for his crime, and though he faced a long process of rehabilitation, he and those he hurt would come out on the other side of it as whole and well persons. God had found him, even there, where he had made his bed at the doorstep of hell. God was able to reach him with the power of Grace.

Here's a homework assignment for you. As part of the capital campaign that we are essentially launching today – a campaign entitled "The Power of Grace" – I will be asking a handful of parishioners to write out, in one-hundred words or less, how God has reached them. Then, on a Sunday in April, these brave souls are going to read their statements as part of the sermon. Of course you can decline if I come calling. You can tell me that you would no more do that sort of thing than I would put on Dolly's vestments. Even still, even if you never share what you write with anyone else, it would be an excellent spiritual exercise to set down as succinctly as possible how you have known the power and the presence of God in your life. How has God stretched forth his right hand to help and defend you? How has God reached out, taken hold of you, and brought you back from the brink?

If you have trouble getting started, remember this: God is like Plastic Man. God can assume any shape or form that suits his saving purposes. And God has a reach that stretches from heaven to earth to hell and back again.