



Somebody Save Me: Passion, Salvation, and the Smallville Effect¹ • Kenda Creasy Dean

For those of you with better things to do at 8:00 p.m. each Wednesday, here is a prime time update: the latest installment in the Superman saga is *Smallville*, the WB network's top-rated show about Clark Kent's high school years.² Forget leaping tall buildings in a single bound; Clark's real problem is adolescence, and what it means for his relationships with his friends, his parents, and his still-emerging identity. In *Smallville*, we do not yet know who Clark is to become (the producers' credo is "No tights, no flights"). We only know that, like all adolescents, Clark is disturbed by changes in his body and in his feelings, which he can neither stop nor explain. He has become, as Augustine put it, a mystery to himself.³ In the show's opening season, Clark's parents (played by Annette O'Toole, Lana Lang in 1983's *Superman III*, and John Schneider, a.k.a. "Bo Duke" from *Dukes of Hazzard*) watch for the first time as Clark summons superhuman strength to save a classmate from a burning car. After learning that the boy will be all right—and that he does not remember anything—Clark confronts his father:

Clark: "You better talk to Mom. I think I really freaked her out this time."

Jonathan: "You also made her really proud, Clark."

Clark: "Dad, something else happened. (Pause) When I woke up this morning...I was kind of...floating."

Jonathan: "Floating."

Clark: "Dad, what's happening to me?"

Jonathan: "I honestly don't know, Son. When you start breaking the law of gravity, we're definitely in uncharted territory."

Clark: "I just wish it would stop."

Jonathan: "Clark, look. I'm your father. I'm supposed to have all the answers, and it kills me that I don't. You've gotta have faith, and we'll work this out together."

Clark: "I do. But this is happening to me, and I'm scared."

Smallville is really about destiny—the kind of quest the church calls “vocation”—as Clark, Lana Lang, and even twenty-one-year-old Lex Luthor each find different ways to ask “What is happening to me?” as they grow into their newfound power as adolescents. The series focuses on these young people’s various quests to discover whom they belong to, why they are here, and how to make sense of their place on this planet. In one episode, Clark discovers a strange text, written on a cave wall in a language he does not know. A native American girl helps him decipher it, but as he unpacks the text’s meaning, Clark slowly realizes that the story is not just about a savior sent from the heavens in a meteor shower. The story is about him, where he came from, and why he is here.

Somebody Save Me: Salvation and the Search for Self

Adolescents look to the church for a story of somebody who will save them, who will keep them from going under in the adolescent search for self—a story about whom they belong to, where they come from, and what they are doing on this planet. But wait, you may say: the teenagers in *Smallville* are not looking for God. And I would say, listen more closely, for in Christian tradition, the search for self and the search for God are always inextricably linked. The Superman myth is a salvation story. *Smallville*, currently the number one show on WB, airs on a network that explicitly targets teenagers, but there is more here than a concept gimmick. The *Smallville* theme song is Remy Zero’s “Somebody Save Me.” Teenagers identify with Clark, Lana, and Lex because they, too, sometimes feel as if they are made of steel and sometimes feel as if kryptonite has overcome them. The series begins with Clark saving Lex from “going under,” literally, when Lex nearly drowns after his car goes over a bridge. These teenagers literally become one another’s salvation, rescuing each other from the swirling waters of adolescence and encouraging each small step toward adulthood.

Of course, Hollywood gets it wrong. In the pilot episode, Clark winds up tied to a cross in a cornfield, crucifixion-style—despite the fact that the “Superman” comic was based on the story of Moses, not Jesus. The original Superman was created by two Jewish sixteen-year-olds in Glenville, Ohio, a small town near Cleveland, for their school newspaper, *The Glenville Torch*. (Connect the dots here.) Joe Shuster, the artist, was born in the booming metropolis of Toronto, where he had a paper route for the *Toronto Daily Star*. When he moved to Ohio in junior high, he met his friend Jerry Siegel, who

wrote science-fiction stories no one would publish. Intent on a writing career, Jerry settled for being a mild-mannered reporter for the school newspaper.⁴

The name “Jesus” literally means “salvation”: “YHWH will save.” Christian tradition teaches that the search for salvation is ultimately a search for Jesus, whether we recognize it or not. In fact, Jesus promises, even if we could somehow silence those who proclaim the good news of God’s salvation, “the very stones would cry out” (Luke 19:40). But we do not need stones to cry out as long as we have young people, because young people—on the brink of identity formation, on the edge of finding and losing themselves all at once, whose lives take place on shifting sand—look for salvation everywhere, except (ironically) in the traditions of the church. Yet even if teenagers do not use the language of Christian faith to describe their search for identity (and in the United States, almost none of them do), they are engaged in a profoundly spiritual quest.⁵ They insist on salvation, grabbing onto whatever appears capable of either preventing the sinking self from going under or numbing them to its pain: grades, money, friends, respect, in whatever forms these may take in their particular communities.

Perhaps that sounds like an open door to the church, but there is a problem: although we have not hurled our teenagers into outer space in a spaceship, they will tell you that being sent to church often feels like an alien experience, as though they have landed on another planet where people speak an unknown language and decode mysterious texts. As a result, young people seldom recognize themselves in the story of God, and they fail to see the promise of salvation in all of our God-talk. For adolescents, genuine salvation looks like something very specific. Salvation is someone who loves you, who will go the distance for you, who is true to you no matter what. In short, the route to salvation is *passion*, someone who thinks they are “to die for” and who gives them a reason to love others passionately in return.

Young people look for salvation, then, in the various dimensions of passion because they are convinced that passion will save them. And they are right, although they do not, most of them, understand passion’s true meaning as suffering love, which means they frequently confuse authentic salvation with passion’s mutant forms. Young people seldom recognize that their search for a love worth dying for is really the quest for the Love who died for them, at least not until the church enters this search alongside them, helping them decipher the strange language in the cave so they recognize that the story of God’s salvation includes them—who they belong to and why they are here.

Groping for Salvation: The Slave Girl in Acts⁶

Evidence for the adolescent search for salvation is not hard to find. You have met one such teenager in Acts 16:16:

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

“But,” the story continues, “when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities,” whereupon Paul and Silas were summarily stripped, flogged, and thrown into jail (16:19). Ever the optimists, Paul and Silas prayed through the night until, “Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened” (16:26). The startled jailer woke up, and—ready to fall on his sword in disgrace due to prisoners escaping on his watch—heard Paul shout in a loud voice: “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here” (16:28). At this point, we are told, the jailer called for lights, and “rushing in, he fell down trembling” before Paul and Silas. Bringing them outside, the jailer asked them a strange question for someone whose life had just been spared: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (16:30).

The writer of Acts nearly dismisses the slave girl in this story, so anxious is he to get to the miracle in the jail. But in fact, the slave girl is the *reason* for this miracle in the first place, and the fact that she compromised the very adults who tried to help her tells us something about our traditional standards of success in youth ministry. First, the slave girl does not go looking for salvation; it finds her, as the Holy Spirit’s presence in Paul and Silas is impossible to deny. Paul and Silas are apparently simply in town to pray, but the nearness of salvation is not something teenagers will let pass quietly. Even without adequate skills to lay claim to it, the very nearness of Jesus’ salvation to this girl

unhinges her owner's plans to exploit her, frees her identity from her earning potential, and sets in motion a series of chain-shattering events. It is she—not the disciples—whose actions proclaim salvation in this story, awkwardly, inappropriately, unexpectedly, but also unmistakably. At the same time, it is the adult, the jailer, who actually asks for salvation by name. In typical gospel fashion, this story inverts human experience, for it is the prisoners who are free and those outside the cells—the slave girl and the jailer—who are in chains: the slave girl to her earning potential, and the jailer to his sense of duty.

But these two people need each other. The girl has no theological language to articulate what she seeks, and the adult has no theological imagination to recognize that what he asks for has already been given. The slave girl intuits the possibility of salvation before she can really say what it means. Like many young people, her proclamation is unwelcome; she seems to embarrass Paul. But there is no “shushing” her. She senses God's nearness, she “smells” salvation in the air, and she gropes for a way to lay claim to it. The jailer, on the other hand, cannot seem to smell anything. He practically misses God's deliverance right under his nose. Like so many of us, the jailer confuses his identity with his professional competence. When he realizes he has been overcome by the kryptonite of failure, he is ready to fall on his sword in remorse. But that would miss the crucial point: he is weak, but God is strong, and God has already spared him. Since deliverance always ushers in new life (we say we “deliver” babies for a reason), the jailer and his whole family are saved. Youth and adult balance each other in this story. The jailer needs the girl's bold proclamation of possibility, and the slave girl needs the jailer's theological understanding that allows him to ask for salvation by name.

Intuitive Theology: Adolescents' Best Guess at God

The need for “somebody to save me” is so deeply embedded in the human psyche that it is preconscious; adolescents do not know it is there, even though they act on it regularly. Both *Smallville* and the story of the slave girl in Acts are examples of what we might call “intuitive theology”—the religious inclinations of teenagers to proclaim and consume salvation even when they have no words to lay claim to it for themselves. For example, just as feminist, womanist, and liberation theologians operate with an explicit “hermeneutic of suspicion,” adolescent theologians function with an implicit “hermeneutic of salvation”—meaning their radar is up for the various dimensions of passion,

clues that someone loves them enough to die for them and invites them to love passionately in return. These dimensions reveal the self-giving love of God in the Christian community, and at least three of them—*fidelity*, *transcendence*, and *communion*, which the church enacts when we practice *the art of being there*, *the art of awe*, and *the art of intimacy*—also anchor the adolescent search for self. The question is, will adolescents find these dimensions of passion in church, or will they be left to look for them in whatever mutant forms culture has to offer?

Dimensions of Passion

Fidelity	Steadfastness	Acceptance	"Being there"	The art of being there
Transcendence	Ecstasy	Feeling part of greatness	"Being moved"	The art of awe
Communion	Intimacy	Belonging	"Being known"	The art of intimacy

Dimension #1: Fidelity

Young people experience passion through fidelity. Erikson defined *fidelity* as the strength of having something "to die for," which he considered the chief virtue that must be developed during adolescence.⁷ For teenagers, fidelity means "being there"—someone who comes alongside us the way a coach comes alongside a runner, urging us on, reminding us that the journey is worthwhile. Yet contemporary young people have a chronic shortage of people who will "be there" for them, especially adults. In her widely acclaimed profile of suburban youth in the mid-1990s, Patricia Hersch found that contemporary young people do not pull away from adults any more than they ever have; the distinctive feature of childhood in the late twentieth century was the way *adults* pulled away from youth, despite adolescents' expressed desire for a significant adult presence in their lives.⁸ Teenagers in an affluent New Jersey congregation I know recently asked their pastor—not their parents—to sign the emergency release forms sent home from school. "If we need something," they told her, "We know you'll be there." Even adults who are physically present cannot be assumed to fulfill an adult role in young people's

lives. In May 1998, four months before President Bill Clinton acknowledged “an inappropriate relationship” with a twenty-two-year-old intern, a Bennington College senior told *Rolling Stone*: “Adults no longer behave like adults. We have no models. They’re talking about sex and therapy and substance abuse, just like us.”⁹

Fidelity addresses the adolescent desire for steadfastness, and the developmental need for acceptance. As Erikson notes, since adolescents must learn to trust themselves and others, they look “most fervently for [people] and ideas to have faith in.”¹⁰ The essence of fidelity (from the Latin *fidei*, or faith) is the ability to be faithful. Because fidelity enables us to be “for” another person, it can be developed only in the shadow of someone who is “for” us. We are not taught fidelity; we suffer it, experience it passively, participate in it as a believing partner, give ourselves over to it. In short, fidelity cannot be achieved; it can only be received from those who practice it on our behalf. Before adolescents can take seriously the gospel’s claim that Jesus will “be there” always, a community of affirming others must first “be there” for them.

Erikson believed that fidelity is inspired by “confirming ideologies and affirming companions”—who usually present themselves in the form of “adult guarantors,” representatives of the adult world who embody worthy ideologies and who respond to the adolescent’s plea to be recognized as more than he seems to be, with unique potentials needed by the world.¹¹ As youth pastors, it is easy to read Erikson’s theory and conclude that fidelity depends on us. *It does not.* Young people do not, ultimately, seek our fidelity; they seek the fidelity of Christ. Our “being there” for young people is an icon, a smudged window through which they may catch a glimpse of the utter fidelity of God. The mandate to “be there” for young people belongs to the Christian community, not to an individual or even team of individuals who works with teenagers. The church that worked alongside police and schools to oust drug dealers from the neighborhood; the congregation who sends envoys to visit students on campus; the church that presents each confirmand with a key to the church building; the congregation who sends “birthday cards” on every anniversary of a child’s baptism until they are eighteen—even after they have moved out of the community—all practice the art of “being there” in ways that more honestly approximate the steadfastness of God than can be accomplished by any one person.

Dimension #2: Transcendence

Teenagers also experience passion as transcendence. The number one criterion for excellence among adolescents is, “Did it move me?” If the concert does and worship does not, the concert wins. Augustine recalled that, as a youth, “I loved to suffer, and sought out occasions for such suffering”¹²—and not much has changed. Today’s adolescents still love to suffer in the Augustinian sense: to undergo *pathos*, to be completely affected, or moved, by an overwhelming experience.

Transcendence is the strength received from being incorporated into a larger reality, a broader purpose, a grand vision that invites us into a wider, more appealing world than the one we knew. Transcendence addresses the adolescent desire for ecstasy, the perceived need to exceed the boundaries of the self as our capacities for self-reflection expand.¹³ Erikson observed the adolescent craving for “locomotion,” which causes young people to seek ways to be moved, both physically and existentially.¹⁴ Thus, young people are constantly “on the go”; they take drugs to “get high”; they “lose themselves” in sports or music or dance; they are “swept off their feet” by romance; they “get a rush” from fast cars, extreme sports, action movies. These moving experiences inevitably *feel* sacred to adolescents, who often equate God with “whatever moves me.”

The problem, of course, is that many things move us during adolescence that are not God. During adolescence, the onset of formal operational thought bequeaths the capacity to ponder our inner selves, making the need for sensation acute as teenagers try to “go deep” as well as to “get high.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, as recent brain research suggests and as youth leaders and parents have long suspected, skills of discernment do not follow at a similar pace; while the brain’s impulsive centers operate at full strength during adolescence, development in the prefrontal cortex, the “area of sober second thought,” lags behind.¹⁶ The modern emphasis on subjectivity reinforces adolescents’ attraction to ecstatic experience—experience that moves them “outside” their accustomed boundaries. But passion seeks awe, not subjective expressionism. Teenagers are “moved” toward God, not because we have dragged them there either honestly or manipulatively but because in Jesus Christ God has “moved” toward them, and as the Holy Spirit incorporates them into the mission of God, they find themselves in a new place altogether. Christians are called to practice the art of awe, not to jockey teenagers nearer to heaven but to help them recognize, as my late colleague Don Juel liked to say, that “God

is on the loose!” and to assume a posture of openness because God is heading for them.¹⁷ Practices of transcendence enable young people to shed their defense mechanisms in order to allow God to sweep them into the divine self, transforming them into people who “become Christ” for others.

Transcendence is not a geography question; practicing transcendence is not a matter of putting God “out there” versus “in here.” Transcendence is a *significance* question: Is God big enough to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and still be God? Can our God, as H. Richard Niebuhr put it, survive a shipwreck? Often the key to practicing the art of awe in ministry is doing less, not more—to “cleanse our palate” for God, eliminating competing tastes that cause us, like the jailer, to miss God’s salvation right under our nose. One pastor I know cancelled all church activities during Lent except worship, with the caveat that his congregation should not “fill up the time” with other commitments. The point was to do less, and to do less attentively. Meanwhile, this pastor took communion to every family, variously defined, in his flock during Lent, practicing the art of awe around kitchen tables as well as altars. The current “religious practices” discussion in youth ministry represents a similar attempt to “do less” in the name of authentic ministry with young people as we mentor them in faith. The typical direction of this discussion is to *enact* forgiveness rather than plan a program on forgiveness, *embark* on a pilgrimage that relocates youth in a “liminal” space where they may hear God’s voice with fewer distractions rather than talk about vocation; engage young people in boundary-breaking practices alongside cultural “others” rather than study cultures in the abstract; invite young people into ecstatic worship through music, dance, and embodied prayer rather than construct an experience calculated to evoke a “spiritual high.”

Dimension #3: Communion

The third way in which the Christian community conveys Christ’s passion to young people is in *communion*—literally, the act of becoming “one with” another, the life-for-life intimacy that comes from a relationship in which we would lay down our lives for our friends. Communion addresses the adolescent desire for intimacy and the developmental need for belonging. Unfortunately, aside from sacramental forms of communion (typically very meaningful for teenagers), churches tend to shy away from expressions of intimacy with young people. Fearful of passion’s connotations of excess, the modern church largely left intimacy to the broader culture, where

twentieth-century consumerism quickly discovered that the most marketable way to define intimacy was as sex. Yet in the Christian tradition, sex pales beside the experience of “being known”—literally, in the biblical sense—as the ultimate form of communion. To be known by God is to be loved more deeply, more vulnerably, even more closely than sexual relations permit. Salvation inheres in being known in the biblical sense: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

If the church has missed this point, advertisers have not; passion sells in American culture because it promises to save us. Sprite is “cool” because it will “be there” after your friends have checked out. AOL makes you fast, so you can transcend time and space with an AOL connection. Coors Lite gives you a social life, because you can experience intimacy whenever you break out a brew. Every television commercial, every magazine spread, every pop-up ad pitches a salvation story and posits its product as the savior. However, despite adolescents’ insistent search for a savior, intuitive theology is not always graceful or successful. In fact, the chance that intuitive theology, which consists of hunches and intuitions but possesses no clear referent, will lead to an adequate savior is highly optimistic.

Groping for Salvation: Tracy in “Thirteen”

This is Tracy’s dilemma in the disturbing but startlingly realistic movie *Thirteen*, one of the break-through independent films of 2003. Raw, shocking, and moving, the story follows two eighth-grade girls, Tracy and Evie, as they explore the dark side of salvation. The script (coauthored by the teenager who plays Evie in the film) collapses most of the problems of adolescence into two characters, but its unifying thread is the salvation these two girls seek and are led to believe they have found in one another. If *Smallville* portrays a healthy (if romanticized) community of adults who know how to practice passion appropriately with young people, *Thirteen* profiles the disintegration that occurs when teenagers lack such a community.

The basic story goes something like this. Tracy feels abandoned by her distracted, working class mother and her absent, upwardly mobile father. Fidelity has been seriously compromised in this family. Tracy’s mother, Mel (in an award-winning performance by Holly Hunter) loves her family the only way she knows how, but both Mel and her ex-husband lack the ability to practice passion on their children’s behalf, to the detriment of all.

Enter Evie, the “hottest” girl in school, who decides to show Tracy what passion looks like—and Tracy gladly turns to Evie as her savior. The problem is that Evie is not up to the task. She offers Tracy distorted forms of passion, which means that Evie cannot be Tracy’s true savior. But no one knows this at first, including Evie. In fact, Tracy’s desire for Evie’s approval saves Evie as well, for she is also an “abandoned” youth, and she copes with her own self-destruction by visiting it upon others. So Evie plunges Tracy into a world of false hopes, believing that fidelity can be found in self-serving friendships, that ecstasy resides in risky behavior like shoplifting, drinking, and doing drugs, and that wanton sex counts as intimacy. At first, it seems as though Evie may be right. In fact, when Tracy is with Evie, she feels delivered from her marginal place in her family, from her working-class economic limitations, from her social isolation at school. Like all intuitive theologians, Tracy fails to recognize that her search for a savior is a profoundly religious quest. On the outside, the salvation myth looks complete. Evie seems to be “there” for her in ways Tracy’s parents are not (*fidelity*). Evie shows her a route to ecstasy—thrill-seeking, drugs, alcohol—which all deeply move Tracy (*transcendence*). Evie introduces Tracy to sex as a way to belong (*communion*). Unfortunately, without an explicit theological framework, there is no way to test the adequacy of Tracy’s chosen savior, or of the particular brand of passion this savior offers, except to live through it—if she can live through it—and see if anyone gets saved in the end.

Maybe we should ask: what if Tracy had turned to us instead of to Evie in her search for somebody to save her? Would our ministries have offered Tracy any less co-opted dimensions of passion than she received from Evie? Do our churches hold out an alternative vision of passion that points to the self-giving love of God rather than to the self-fulfilling passions of hurting adolescents? The traditional response when teenagers turn to long suffering, ecstasy, and intimacy is to “just say no”; passion is off limits, especially for teenagers who have trouble containing themselves. Fearful of emotional manipulation and the self-abandonment that passion implies (to capitulate in either direction threatens mainline Protestants’ respectable place in society, not to mention our reputation for being polite company), we largely excised passion from our theological vocabulary and from our practice of ministry as well.

Yet practicing passion is part and parcel of Christian tradition. For the church to abandon passion leaves teenagers like Tracy and Evie adrift in a sea

of popular culture that is only too happy to define passion for them in ways that exploit them as surely as the slave girl's owners exploited her in Acts. The good news is that the church has at our disposal a repertoire of practices by which we imitate, or take part in, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we engage youth in these forms of discipleship, we practice passion with them in inchoate but real ways. For example, the thoughtful practice of passion with young people might include ministries that consist of the following:

Dimensions of Passion in Youth Ministry

Fidelity ("being there")	Practices of exhortation <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Christian conference• Christian caretaking	"a sacred solidarity"	Coaches
Transcendence ("being moved")	Practices of pilgrimage <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Play• Praise• Lament	"holy momentum"	Trail guides
Communion ("being known")	Practices of spiritual friendship <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chastity• Prayer	"the sacrament of one another"	Mentors

If love that is "to die for" consistently comes in three forms—*fidelity*, God's refusal to let us go; *transcendence*, God's insistence on drawing us into God's own life, death, and resurrection; and *communion*, God's longing to be united with God's beloved and our longing for the source of our desire—then biblical passion invariably involves deliverance or rescue; there is nothing "benign" about it. Christian passion may be refused, but it cannot be denied.

What Tracy wants in all this passion is salvation, and in the end, Evie cannot give it to her. Betrayal is the kryptonite of their relationship. Evie gets busted and "rats" on Tracy, playing innocent while Tracy takes the fall. Utterly alone, Tracy descends into hell. But salvation is yet to come. Tracy's situation does not call for benign positive regard; it calls for passion, a love so profound that, in spite of everything, it will not let her go, will not go away, and will

not let her down no matter what. This love stands ready to die for her. Ultimately, Christ comes to Tracy through her mother, Mel, although neither Mel nor Tracy recognize this. One day after school, Mel and Evie's aunt confront the girls about Tracy's drug use and shoplifting. When Tracy is blamed for Evie's fall, she realizes the extent of Evie's betrayal. Evie's aunt unmasks another of Tracy's secrets—she cuts—to Mel, who recoils in shock at the sight of knife slices up and down her daughter's forearm.

But when Evie's aunt begins to call Tracy names, Mel steps in on Tracy's behalf. Ousting the unwelcome visitors, Mel holds Tracy to her breast and will not let go. "You are my heart. I love you and your brother more than anything in the world," she tells Tracy. "I would die for you. But I will not let you be alone right now." Tracy pushes her off; Mel holds on. And again. And again. Mel and Tracy struggle to the kitchen floor together, until finally Tracy allows her mother to push up the sleeve of her sweatshirt, revealing her scarred forearm. Mel says nothing; she only begins to kiss the scars, one by one, all the way up Tracy's arm. Still holding on, Mel finally leads Tracy to bed. They lie down together, exhausted, hand in hand. Sleep overtakes them; the sun dies and rises again. Then, it is morning.

Passionate Humility

Powerful as it is, this scene nonetheless points out three weaknesses that adults who practice passion on behalf of young people must humbly acknowledge. The first is that it takes the entire church—adults and youth, jailer and slave girl—to imitate the passion of Christ. Tracy could not do this on her own. Second, it is the alert adult, not the teenager, who notices the implicit, intuitive need for salvation on the part of the adolescent, even when Tracy denies it, and who stands by her not only in her search for a savior but also in her pain as the false gods in whom she placed her trust betray her. Finally, no adult can "fix" a young person's pain. Only God can save Tracy. The adult can only kiss it, bathe it in grace, and hang on to this girl in spite of everything—and, in so doing, Mel quite unwittingly becomes Jesus' envoy to Tracy: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Without a theological framework, Tracy is left to transfer her sense of salvation from her friend to her mother, who, of course, will also eventually disappoint her. This is why God calls the church, and not simply interested youth workers, to passion on behalf of young people. The church has the definitive story on human passion: love is true not when it draws from our own resources but when it reflects *in the concrete embodiment of a human being*

Christ's fidelity, transcendence, and communion—the dimensions of passion that will not go away, will not let us down, and will not let us go. The church cannot offer young people the passion of Christ; this is God's alone to give, and God has given it. What we can do is offer young people communities that intentionally practice passion on their behalf, engaging young people in the art of being there, the art of awe, and the art of intimacy, and inviting them to participate in the self-giving passion of God.

When the church practices the passion of Christ, we show our humility, not our strength. God's suffering becomes our suffering; God's desires become our desires. What finally save the slave girl and the jailer—and what finally reconciled Tracy and her mother in *Thirteen*—was not their power, but their weakness. A young girl acknowledged her enslavement; a jailer faced his failure. Mel acknowledged her shortcomings as a mother, and Tracy confronted her sins as a daughter. Kryptonite has its purpose: it makes us weak, so that we finally move out of the way and let God take over. Counterintuitive though it is, passion implies the willingness to be overcome by another, a chosen vulnerability on behalf of the beloved. Suffering love is self-giving love; we are weak, but God is strong. This is the story of salvation, and the church tells it better than anyone. Yes, Jesus loves me. No matter what.

Notes

1. The themes presented in these lectures are elaborated in my book, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). I am grateful to the Princeton Theological Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry for allowing these themes to be presented here in lecture form.

2. Thanks to Blair Bertrand and Matthew Schultz, who pointed me to the latent soteriology in this series while working with me on a project for the Fund for Theological Education. Matt is also responsible for introducing me to the origins of the Superman myth, while Blair pointed out the hermeneutical significance of the episode about the language in the cave.

3. See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 194.

4. For more on the origins of "Superman," see <http://theages.superman.ws/History/Version0.php>, accessed June 18, 2004.

5. See findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion, reported in the previous lecture, "The Problem with Passion: Or, Why the Church of Mel Gibson Is Doing Just Fine."

6. I have exegeted this passage, for a slightly different purpose, also in "Proclaiming Salvation: Youth Ministry in the Twenty-First Century," *Theology Today* 56 (January 2000), pp. 524–539.

7. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 233.

8. See Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescents* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998), pp. 10–30.

9. Cited by Edward Hoagland, "The American Dream 1998," *Rolling Stone* (May 28, 1998), p. 96.
10. Erikson viewed fidelity as the center of youth's "most passionate and most erratic" striving (Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, p. 233).
11. Erik H. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), p. 125.
12. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 37.
13. Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility*, p. 66.
14. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, p. 243.
15. Sharon Daloz Parks describes this as developing "interiority," a by-product of the adolescent's new capacities for formal operational thought. Cf. Daloz Parks, "Faithful Becoming in a Complex World: New Powers, Perils, and Possibilities," *1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999), p. 45.
16. See Claudia Willis, "What Makes Teens Tick," *Time* (May 10, 2004), pp. 56–65. The adolescent attraction to risky behavior is also linked to the way teenage neurological systems handle dopamine. For a summary of recent brain research in adolescents, see Barbara Rauch, *The Primal Teen* (New York: Doubleday), 2003. For a particular look at how this research impacts adolescent males and the church's ministry to them, see Paul G. Hill, "Understanding the Excited Imaginations and Existential Struggles of Early Adolescent Males and the Ministry Implications for the Church" (DMin thesis, Minnesota Consortium of Theological Schools, 2004).
17. For the exegetical roots of this position, see Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 2002), pp. 107–146.
18. Daloz Parks helpfully employs Niebuhr's metaphor for exploring the significance of faith in young adults. See Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000), pp. 5–24.