

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | JANUARY 31, 2021

DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20 | PSALM 111 | 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13 | MARK 1:21-28

There's a peculiar moment halfway through today's gospel reading. Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit, and when the spirit emerges, it calls Jesus the holy one of God. You would think Jesus would say, "That's correct." But instead, Jesus says, "Be silent."

As we go through St. Mark's gospel over this coming year, you'll notice that when Jesus performs some kind of miracle or healing, he'll often tell the person he's engaging with not to tell anyone. He doesn't want people going off and talking about these healings. This isn't because Jesus is shy. Jesus is out in the world proclaiming the kingdom of God and declaring the year of the Lord's favor and engaging in public ministry, but when it comes to miracles and healings, Jesus wants things kept on the down low. The word scholars use for Jesus's reticence is the "messianic secret." *You are the holy one of God. Be silent.*

But wait. Isn't the whole point to tell people about Jesus? Maybe it's a bit weird that it's coming from an unclean spirit, but the unclean spirit isn't wrong. Doesn't Jesus want us to spread the good news? Why is Jesus being so coy?¹

There's a hint at an answer in the assembly's reaction to this healing. Mark tells us that the people in the synagogue "were astounded at [Jesus's] teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." It was common for the scribes in Jesus's time to build arguments and gain authority by referring to the ideas of other scribes. *Well, so and so interprets Torah this way, and so and so says this, and that's my argument. If you disagree with me, you're disagreeing with them, too.* Authority is a numbers game. A status game.

And we often do the same thing. We build authority by bringing in other people to back us up. Don't take my word for it, here's someone with a PhD who thinks the same thing as me. Jesus doesn't do that. When he teaches, he doesn't couch his ideas in this web of references. He doesn't try to convey authority by name dropping famous scribes he studied under. His teachings justify themselves.

This might explain why Jesus wanted these miracles and healings kept quiet. According to John Donahue, PhD, Distinguished Professor at the University of Baltimore, exorcists and spiritual healers were common in Jesus's time.² Some healer walking around casting out demons wouldn't have been all that uncommon. So it seems that Jesus wants people to know that he's not just another healer. He doesn't want people to get the wrong idea about who he is and why he's here. And sure enough, at the end of today's gospel reading Mark tells us that Jesus's fame began to spread around Galilee. And it didn't spread because Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was at hand. It spread because of the miracles.

That isn't to say that the miracles don't matter. But for Mark's Jesus, the miracles are never simply a way of demonstrating power or proving a point or getting people's attention. The miracles are a way of conveying what the kingdom of God is like. They're about building trust. This is someone with your best interests at heart. This is someone whose authority is not contingent on someone else's approval. That this is someone who has nothing to gain from this encounter besides your flourishing.

That should raise some new questions for us about what it means to have authority. Too often, our understandings of authority rely on getting people to do things. Being able to compel or cajole people. We think of authority much like the scribes do. Authority is power and influence that's backed up by other resources. We feel like we have authority when we have other people backing us up. When other people tell

¹ One theory is that around the time Mark's gospel was written many people started asking why they'd never heard about Jesus when he was alive. *If the Son of God was walking around performing miracles the next town over, why didn't I hear about it?* The messianic secret was just an easy excuse Mark made up to get out of an awkward conversation. *Sorry you missed out. Jesus told us not to tell anyone. Don't blame me.* It's a simple answer, but it's not entirely satisfying.

² John Donahue and Sam Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2002).

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us that they like something we're doing or that they think it's important, it feels good. It makes us feel powerful.

And I would wager that when we get anxious about our seeming lack of authority, we're not doubting the merits of our efforts or the worth of our endeavors. What we're really anxious about is the lack of other voices affirming our decisions. It's the lack of other people telling us that what we do matters and has a great deal of influence on the world.

But Jesus shows us something else. That true authority comes from the freedom of not finding an identity in the whims of other people's affirmation. Authority comes from what we could call a kind of holy disinterest. The lives of the ones we call the saints are authoritative not because they are morally perfect or without blemish but because they have the quiet courage to go on striving after the kingdom of God even when others stop caring. If you go through the list of commemorations in the front of our hymnal, you'll find that what this seemingly disparate group of people has in common is that many of them reached a point in life when people stopped praising their efforts, when people stopped telling them that they were important, and they decided to keep on going. We are going to live God's future today. If people think that's praiseworthy, fine. And if they don't, well, who cares?

One of those people was St. John of the Cross, who was a Spanish priest in the sixteenth century who tried to reform the church. And like many reformers, he wasn't met with open arms. He was imprisoned, kept in solitary confinement, abused by his captors. The painting in today's bulletin is his contemporary El Greco's *View of Toledo*, which shows the city where John was kept. John entered what he called the "dark night of the soul." The dark night of the soul is when you feel like your life is slipping away and God has abandoned you. And when his life bottomed out, John, like most mystics, had a kind of revelation. He wasn't losing God. He was losing his belief in God as a means to an end.³ And so sitting in his cell, he wondered, would he still love God, would he still want God, if God had nothing to offer him?

Today's gospel puts the question the other way around. Would we seek the kingdom of God if it had nothing to offer us? Would we love others if no one ever thanked us? Would we work for justice if it didn't get our picture in the paper? Would we toil for the kingdom of God even if the only thing we got out of it were calloused hands? Are we striving for the fullness of the kingdom of God? Or just using it as a means to an end?

It's worth reflecting on. After all, for the scribes, it's not worth making an argument that no one else approves of. No one's going to believe you. For the exorcists walking around Galilee, it's not worth ridding someone of an evil spirit if no one is around to see it. No one's going to be impressed by you.

But for Jesus, things are different. It's worth freeing this man of his demon even if the only thing it changes is this man's experience of life. The act justifies itself. Even if no one else notices. Even if no one else cares. Even if no one else is impressed. That's what the kingdom of God is like. That's what it means to have authority, freedom, and power. And that's the kind of power, the kind of authority, the kind of freedom that Christ gives us today. To enter the dark nights of one another's souls and speak a word of grace and truth.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 45.