

The Power of Christ Compels You, Part 2  
Mark 1:21–28, 29 – 39  
Sunday, February 7, 2021

Last week we looked at the story of Jesus casting out an unclean spirit from a man in the synagogue; how the spirit was keeping this man separated from God and from the community around him, but in casting that spirit out, Jesus brings about healing and restores him to community. When the people see Jesus do this, it says that they are amazed because he has *authority*, and that Greek word for *authority* is best understood as *power* – to have *power* over someone or something. The people say, “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!” Jesus rules and reigns over heaven and earth. He has power and authority over this world and the next.

We talked about the unclean spirits that possess us today, particularly the spirit of *power*, and how that is at work in our politics and our media and even our churches to separate us from one another; to sow distrust and division. So there is the power and authority of this world that seeks to polarize and divide us in order to maintain power, and then there is the power and authority of *Christ* that seeks, not to *separate* people, but to heal them and bring them together. We are called by Christ to cast those unclean spirits out, to deny them their power over us; to work for the healing of the world and the restoration of community.

One of the ways that we looked at last week’s text was by thinking about the movie *The Exorcist*, particularly the scene where two priests are splashing holy water on the little girl that has been possessed, while chanting, “The power of Christ compels you!” And just as they made a sequel to *The Exorcist* (*The Exorcist, Part 2*), we essentially get a sequel here this week. The lectionary picks up immediately after last week’s reading, with Jesus going into the house of Simon’s mother-in-law and healing her, and then healing all these people in the town who were

sick or possessed with demons. It ends with Jesus going all throughout Galilee, preaching and casting out demons. So there is a question that runs through both of these readings that we started dealing with last week and we will look at again this week: What is the power of Christ that compels *us*? How does Jesus exercise power and authority in this world and in our lives today, and what does that mean for *us*? How are *we* called to be in relationship to power and authority; how do *we* exercise power and authority in the name of Jesus?

To begin answering that, I want to look back at *The Exorcist*. We talked about that scene where the priests are trying to cast out the demon by chanting, “The power of Christ compels you!” It’s a powerful scene toward the end of the movie, but the thing is, it doesn’t work. They *loudly proclaim* to this spirit that the power and authority of Christ compel it to come out of this little girl, but that is not what ultimately *makes* it leave and heals the girl. And I feel like the world around us has a very similar understanding of power and authority. That to exercise power is to impose your authority, your *will* on others. To loudly proclaim how things should be. And a lot of times in our society, the *loudest* voices are the ones that are viewed as the most powerful and authoritative, whether they are right or not. That kind of display of power and authority looks great on camera – it plays well in movies and on tv – but it ultimately does not work. It doesn’t bring about the *healing* that we need.

Instead, in *The Exorcist*, what ultimately works is that one of the priests starts pleading with the spirit, “Take me! Leave her and come into me!” The spirit *does* go into him, and he immediately throws himself out of the window and dies, thus getting rid of the evil spirit. Instead of imposing his will and authority on this spirit, he gives up his life to save this little girl. Now, while that is just a movie and should not at all be taken as sound Christian theology, it does reflect something that we see in this week’s reading from Mark. There are a couple of little

details here that I want to look at, and those little details are going to come together to make a big picture.

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When Jesus first enters the house of Simon's mother-in-law, it says that he "took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." He took her by the hand and *lifted her up*. This is something that Jesus does several other times in Mark's gospel when he heals people; he takes them by the hand and lifts them up. That word for *lift up* is the Greek word *egeiro*, and it is the same word that Mark and the other gospels use to talk about Jesus being raised from the dead. On the night before his death, Jesus says to his disciples, "After I am *raised up*, I will go before you to Galilee." That word *raised up* is *egeiro*. And then at the end of Mark's gospel, when the women go to Jesus' tomb, they encounter a man there who says, "Do not be afraid; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is not here; he has been *raised*." *Egeiro*.

Biblical scholars say that Mark is doing this intentionally as a way of foreshadowing Jesus' death and resurrection. That even here in the very first chapter of the gospel, we are already looking ahead to the time when Jesus will be raised up from death. That is what all of this is building up to; where all of this is headed. Healing and new life are ultimately found in Jesus' death and resurrection. That's the first little detail we're going to look at.

The next one comes immediately after Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law, when all these other people who are sick or possessed with demons are brought to Jesus to be healed. It says, "he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons; *and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him*." That's an odd detail. It's one that we actually saw last week, too. When Jesus entered the synagogue, the man with the unclean spirit

cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come here to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” The spirit knew who Jesus was, but Jesus would not let him talk about it.

This is something we see happening all throughout Mark’s gospel. People get it, they know who Jesus is, they understand that he is the Messiah, the Holy One of God, and he tells them not to talk about it. Right after today’s reading, Jesus heals a leper and says to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest.” Later in Mark’s gospel, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Peter says, “You are the Messiah!” And it says that Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Next week we are going to hear the story of the Transfiguration, when Jesus and three of his disciples are up on a mountaintop, and his face starts radiating light, and they see Moses and the prophet Elijah standing there talking with him. The disciples behold the very glory of God in Jesus. And the very next thing it says is, “As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”

This happens over and over again in Mark’s gospel, and it’s referred to as “the Messianic Secret.” Jesus orders people to keep his identity as the Messiah, the Son of God, a secret until after he is raised from the dead. Why would he do that? Why *wouldn’t* he want people to know who he was, so that *more* people could be healed and hear the Word of God and experience the presence of God and come to *believe*? Wouldn’t that help him reach more people if more people knew who he was?

The reason for this is because Jesus’ glory, his power and authority, are not ultimately revealed through miracles and works of power. The power and authority and glory of Christ are

ultimately revealed in his *death* and *resurrection*. Remember, *that* is what all of this is building up to, where all of this is headed. Toward the end of Mark's gospel, Jesus is on the cross, and he breathes his last breath and dies. And when that happens, the Roman soldier who is standing there guarding him says, "Truly this man was God's son!" A Roman soldier – a Gentile who had no reason to know who the son of the Jewish God was – he saw and understood and proclaimed it, and no one silenced him. And then after Jesus is raised from the dead, he tells his disciples to "go into all the world and proclaim the good news." It is at *that* point that they can tell *everyone* who he is – *only* in light of his death and resurrection.

The power and authority of Jesus Christ are fully revealed in his suffering and death and resurrection, in his sacrificial self-giving. *That* is how Jesus exercises power and authority – not through mighty deeds and impressive demonstrations of power, but in giving his own life for the life of the world.

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And that is precisely how we as followers of Jesus Christ – as the *church* of Jesus Christ – are called to exercise power and authority in Jesus' name. *Not* in a way that imposes our will and says to the world, "The power of Christ compels you!" But in a way that says, "Take me." In sacrificial self-giving that points to Christ's death and resurrection, because *that* is what brings about the healing and new life that we need.

There are a lot of people who say that Christianity and the church *should* be in a place of greater power and authority in the world and in our country. That we should have that central place in society that we had during the age of Christendom. And there have been plenty of people using political power to try to get the church in that place of power and authority. But halfway through Mark's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny

themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

We bear witness to the power and authority of Christ, not through domination or by assuming a place of power and authority ourselves, but through service, suffering, and self-sacrificial love. Several years ago, Pope Francis wrote, "I do not want a church concerned with being at the center and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security." The church bears witness to the power and authority of Jesus Christ, not by building ourselves up, but by being broken and poured out for the world, as Christ was.

That is what we see in the Lord's Supper; what we *experience* and are *reminded* of. Jesus said, "This is my body, broken for you," and, "This is my blood, shed for you," and then he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." He wasn't just saying, "Do this *meal* – observe it and practice it and take part in it – in remembrance of me." He was saying, "*Do this*. Be broken, as I am. Be poured out, as I am. Give your life for the life of the world, as I do. *Do this, be* this meal in remembrance of me."

*That* is the power of Christ that compels us. Not loud assertions of authority, but humble self-giving service. That is the kind of authority that the world so desperately needs today. May they find it in us, in the name of Jesus. Amen.