

From its very beginning, Mark's gospel doesn't hesitate to let us know that Jesus is called and credentialed to bring about God's world.

The prophets have foretold it. The Evangelist has baptized Jesus. God has affirmed Jesus. The wilderness has even tempted and tested Jesus. Jesus is ready.

Last week, Jesus told the earliest disciples (and you and me as well), that the work has begun. Jesus invited them (and you and me as well) to fish for people. Jesus reminded us that we, too, are credentialed, and called to do God's work in the world.

This week, the credentials and calling of Jesus are affirmed in the way Jesus demonstrates authority.

I think it's helpful for us to consider, briefly, the meaning of the word authority. In most instances, I think we understand authority as a noun: a power that can be possessed or obtained. Merriam-Webster's most common definition says that authority is "the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience." Local leaders have a formalized power – a title, a badge, a platform – to enforce the will of the ruler, monarch, or ultimate leader.

Such a definition describes the authority wielded by scribes in first-century synagogues. These were elite and learned men of the priestly order, and there was always at least one of them in a village like Capernaum, who were charged with interpreting and enforcing the community standards. I think it's fair to say that in the Roman era, many scribes were in a difficult position: they wanted to protect the institution of Judaism, but do so in a delicate enough manner as to not upset the local Roman authorities. I think it's also fair to say that their expression of authority, that is their interpretation and application of law, might often advance Roman or personal interests rather than those of their faith communities.

Merriam-Webster offers a lesser-used, even tertiary definition of authority: "The power to influence others, especially because of one's commanding manner or one's recognized knowledge about something."

I think this is a better way to describe the authority of Jesus. When Jesus invites the disciples to fish for people, Jesus doesn't call the local wildlife office for a fishing license, nor does he procure the services, recommendations, and equipment of the local sporting goods store. Jesus uses his intuition, and his charisma, and his authenticity to invite others into meaningful conversations and relationships.

When Jesus decides to visit the synagogue, he doesn't call ahead and ask the corresponding secretary for a formal invitation to speak, or to be introduced into the order of worship. Nor does Jesus rely on formal documentation of his training, or formal expression of his legitimacy. The oratory, presence, and umph of Jesus exhibit his authority.

The scribes may claim to have authority, but it's really the Authorities that have a hold on the scribes.

Jesus, on the other hand, HAS authority. And what Mark's gospel lets us know today is that Jesus is gonna use that authority in unique and authentic ways.

The text's movements substantiate this claim. The townspeople are used to going into or toward the synagogue, it was most likely more akin to a town square in those days, and being received by scribes, who would teach or interpret texts in such a way as to enforce their personal authority. They used Torah to fortify their systems, not to embolden and empower their people, or to imagine God's possibilities. Theirs is a power that requires people to be drawn in, and in many instances coerced to stay in line. They don't have power because of their presence, they have power because of the force their presence might possibly exert.

But Jesus doesn't wait for people to come to him. Jesus fishes where the people are. Jesus enters the town square, and offers his teachings and ideas. The people respond to him, and recognize his authority, not for fear of what might happen if they don't, but because in Jesus, they notice one who channels real strength and real power.

So it's clear Jesus has a real sense of authority. And how will Jesus use it? We find out very quickly.

A man with an unclean spirit cries out among the congregation. Some force, some metaphorical demon prevents this person from claiming his wholeness. I know a lot of people will call this scene an exorcism. I think that's fine, but I don't believe such an expression captures what's really happening here. Maybe this person has a severe mental illness that intrudes on his ability to express his inner beauty; maybe this person has a form of epilepsy, and from time to time, seizures wrest control of his senses. Or maybe, maybe this person is just overwhelmed by grief. Maybe he is overwhelmed by a system that never affirms him for expressing his real gifts; maybe the local leaders have spent so much time equating shame with love, that nobody can ever have a clean spirit in this place, because a clean and whole community might jeopardize the entire operation. Maybe it's no so much that an unclean spirit is being removed in the midst of the gathered community, but rather that the gathered community is falsely labeling unclean, that which is a beautiful, whole, clean, wonderful, valued, God-made spirit.

I don't think Jesus is healing via extraction or exorcism. I think what Jesus is telling to "Get outta here!" is this person's dependence on an outdated credentialing process. The scribes, and others in traditional roles of power, used Torah to rigidly define God's hospitality and healing. God can only be hospitable and benevolent if the community operates within the bounds of a system where those in power can declare what is clean, and whole, and valued. And in such a system, power isn't shared.

But what does Jesus do? Jesus empowers this person to feel whole, and connected, and valued. Jesus uses his authority in a way that makes God more accessible to the community, and invites the recipients of such healing and power-sharing to go and do likewise. Jesus isn't using power to fuel a system; Jesus is using power to build the beloved community. And in the coming weeks, as his authority becomes more evident and visible to those around him, Jesus will shun all attempts to make him consolidate or hoard such authority.

**A New Demonstration of Authority**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
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**Mark 1:21-28**



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

Jesus show us that divine authority is not born of monarchs, nor is it administered like a local magistrate. Real authority is claimed and shared in the love of God, and love of neighbor.

I wonder, Sardis Baptist Church, if we were to recognize the authority of Jesus, what kind of lunch counters might we integrate; what kind of demons might we exorcise; what kind of callings might we discern; what kind of community might we find? I dare say, it might be one where people are full; where inner beauty is recognized; where encouraged gifts turn outlandish dreams into realized callings; where sisters, brothers, kindred, all have the authority to be as God created them.

Friends may it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.