

THE MOST IMPORTANT POWER JESUS HAS

Mark 1:21-28

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on January 31, 2021, the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany. A limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come 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!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The title of this sermon is "The Most Important Power Jesus Has." While it is not a memorable title, it is a bold one, because it claims that *one* power Jesus has is more important than his other powers. My claim is probably more personal than theological. I am not even sure that there needs to be a competition among the different powers we see in Jesus: we don't need NFL "power rankings" each week. But for some reason I am wanting to argue for a preeminent place – a #1 ranking – for *one* of Jesus' powers; and if I am going to make that *case*, I need to make it well.

But before I get to what I believe is the most important power Jesus has, I want to hold up two others for praise and affirmation as well.

I.

One is the *power of presence*.

Our grandparents gave voice to this power, when, sitting in church pews at funerals, they sang:

I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear
The son of God discloses.

And he walks with me
And he talks with me
And he tells me I am his own
And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known.¹

In this beloved song of the faith, Jesus Christ is present to us as he speaks, discloses himself, walks, talks, tarries with us, tells us we are his own, and shares joy with us in a garden like that into which our Creator originally placed us.

¹ This song was written by C. Austin Miles and Robert Hebble. It is available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_the_Garden_\(1912_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_the_Garden_(1912_song)).

An equally warm expression of presence is another favorite at funerals and gravesides:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.²

A less known, but even more powerful psalm of presence for me, is 139:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways...

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

The presence of God, in light and darkness, in heaven and in Sheol, on land and at sea: the power of God's presence is an extraordinary power Jesus Christ brings to us.

II.

Another power we see in Jesus Christ is the *power of his person*, the sheer example of who Christ is, what he did, how he lived.

Earlier this year I shared with you words of David Brooks, the columnist and commentator, who, raised Jewish, has become progressively more enthralled with Christ over the past several years. Listen to how he describes the power of Christ's person in a sermon at the National Cathedral this past summer:

² Psalm 23: 1-4 *King James Version*.

...the Beatitudes are...astounding [Brooks wrote]. In the midst of conflict, here was *another* way, *another* path, a *higher* serenity. They were an inversion of values. They were beauty in the storm...in the Beatitudes, something of the celestial grand jury breaks through. [They] are no mere formulas for superior ethics, but tidings of sacred and Supreme realities' entry into the world. Jesus was love and beauty in the midst of muck and violence and the most difficult circumstances imaginable...beauty is more powerful when it's in the middle of the storm. It's beauty in the storm.

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Another example of the *power of Christ's person* comes from a phrase coined by the Romantic philosopher Frederick Schiller. The phrase: *beautiful souls*.

What is a beautiful soul? [Schiller asked] ... it [is] a person in whom the age-old tension between *moral law* and *human instinct* has been overcome. "In a beautiful soul," he wrote, "individual *deeds* are not what is moral. Rather, the *entire character* is...The beautiful soul has no other merit than that it is" ... it simply behaves instinctively – and such behaving is good.³

If there ever was a beautiful soul whose feet touched earth, it is Jesus Christ. It is the power of his person – his beautiful soul – that draws many of us to him.

III.

I have felt the power of Christ's presence at both beautiful and frightening periods of my life; and I am drawn to the *beautiful soul* who steps forth from the pages of the New Testament and to the beautiful soul which seems to reside in the lives of certain special people.

But it has always been the case – at least for me – that the most important power Jesus has is *the power to overcome evil*.

In our text for today, when Jesus begins his ministry in Mark, a mere 21 verses into the Gospel, as he finishes teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum, a man with an unclean spirit literally "cries out" to him, shouting:

*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*

We don't really know what Mark had in mind in using the term *evil spirit* to describe the origin of the man's behavior. In our more scientifically refined description we tend to say: "Oh, 'evil spirit' is just a term in primitive times they used to describe what now know to be mental illness or a psychotic condition." But I don't know that even in our sophistication we are much closer to understanding the nature or origins of what possessed this man in the synagogue or what possesses similar people in our world and in our lives. There are times when a terrible, menacing force seems to invade an individual life and bring it to its knees in a primal scream of anarchy and confusion and hatred and anger and chaos and self-destruction and violence. And such force can just as easily invade a family, a workplace, a mob at a Capitol, a nation.

*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*

³ Mark Lilla, "On Indifference," in *Liberties* Volume I, Number 1 (Fall 2020), 117.

Call it evil spirit. Give it a clinical medical term. But know this: “It is real. It is evil. And it has not yet taken leave from our world.”

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The text then says:

²⁵But Jesus rebuked [the evil spirit], saying ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’

Rebuke a strong and loud word in Mark:

- When Jesus stills the storm, he *rebukes* the waters⁴
- When Peter denies Jesus’ prediction that as Son of Man he will suffer and die, Peter *rebukes* Jesus and Jesus *rebukes* Peter in an escalation of mutual *rebuking*⁵
- When Jesus encounters a boy with an unclean spirit, he *rebukes* the spirit⁶ just as he had *rebuked* the unclean spirit in the man in our passage.

After its *rebuking* by Jesus:

...the unclean spirit, throws the man into convulsions, cries with a loud voice, and comes out of the man.

Those in the synagogue are “amazed,” and they say:

“He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

IV.

For me personally, in my faith, *the power over evil* is the most important power Jesus has because it promises that in the new world he brings to us – begun but not yet fully complete – even the unclean spirits – or whatever name we want to give them – *obey* him. In other words, Jesus Christ ultimately *prevails* over the power of evil.

It is that power which, I believe, allows us to “walk in the garden” with him “while the dew is still on the roses.” It is this power that allows us to “we walk through the valley of the shadow of death” comforted by his “rod and staff.” It is that power that allows us to reach up to him with outstretched arms even when we have made our bed in Sheol – the lower regions, the land of the dead. It is that power, I believe, which allows us to discover within ourselves and recognize within others the “beautiful souls” embodied by the Sermon on the Mount.

I know evil spirits – or whatever we want to call them – still roam the earth seemingly unchecked. They sometimes come in the form of searing tragedy beyond our control: Pastor Whitney felled by paralysis as a ministry and life are breaking forth. They sometimes come through forces that are both external and internal: Addiction I witnessed as a child in both maternal grandparents; my own adopted son’s battle with alcoholism which is right now at its most perilous point in thirty years; a member of Maggie’s family who more or less lives on the street while her three teenagers do relatively well living with their grandparents who are

⁴ Mark 4:34-5:3, especially verse 39.

⁵ Mark 8:32-33.

⁶ Mark 9:20-30.

in their seventies. The long legacy of racialized in our nation and its continuing power to hold us back. There are still evil spirits to be silenced in our world.

But just as the fences around the Capitol and the troops sleeping in its hallways help clear the way for the experiment in democracy which is our nation to have another decade of life, so also Jesus' commanding unclean spirits to obey him clears the way for us to walk in the garden and for beautiful souls to flourish, sometimes even as they reside within bodies not yet fully healed.

Though not all evil spirits have been silenced, the promise of more silencing is before us. In the power of Jesus Christ over all that is evil, God's truth is marching on. Christ enlists us in that march. The Kingdom of God, God's truth, like history, moves slowly, but it moves,⁷ clearing from the path ahead all that holds us back, holds us down.

Amen.

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⁷ A phrase used to describe history by Sean Wilentz, in "Abolition and American Origins," in *Liberties* Volume I, Number 1 (Fall 2020), 140-165.