**The Secret of Authority** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake  
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany The House of Hope Presbyterian Church   
Deuteronomy 18:15-19; Mark 1:21-28 Saint Paul, Minnesota  
January 28, 2024

A few blocks from where my daughter lives in (Hampstead) London is the Freud Museum. The Freud Museum is located in the house that Sigmund Freud and his family lived in after they fled Vienna, Austria, in 1938, when Germany annexed Austria into the German Reich in what was called the *Anschluss*. Freud was one of the last Jewish intellectuals allowed to leave Austria, largely due to intense British and American diplomatic pressure.

The interesting thing about the house is that the Freud family tried to recreate (to the extent possible) the interior of their home in Vienna, and specifically, the furniture in Freud’s study is laid out exactly as it was in Vienna, including his famous “couch” where patients were psychoanalyzed.

And much to my surprise, Gail and I saw a new movie recently that was filmed in a recreation of those very rooms.

***Freud's Last Session*** is a 2023 film drama starring [Anthony Hopkins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_Hopkins), as Sigmund Freud, famed atheist and father of psychoanalysis, and [Matthew Goode](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Goode), as devout Christian writer, C.S. Lewis.  It is based on the stage play of the same name by [Mark St. Germain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_St._Germain), which itself is based upon the book *The Question of God*, by [Armand Nicholi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armand_Nicholi). It arrived in local theaters last month to middling reviews.

Nonetheless, the film raises some interesting contemporary questions; namely, *Does science or religion have ultimate authority in our lives? Why do people suffer? Why do people go to war with one another? What is the source of evil in the world? What is the source of joy and happiness?*

Let’s set the scene: The year is 1939. A fictional meeting occurs between [Lewis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._S._Lewis), nicknamed *"Jack",* and [Freud](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigmund_Freud) in London, two days after the start of World War II, *and a debate on God and other matters follows.* *"One of us will be proven a fool,"* quips Anthony Hopkins’ Freud.

The two men discuss issues such as Lewis' trauma as a World War I soldier (he likely suffered from PTSD), J.R.R. Tolkien and the Inklings, and the nature of Freud's and Lewis' relationships with other people, such as Freud's daughter Anna, who is pathologically dependent on her father. However, she eventually breaks free and introduces her lesbian partner, Dorothy Burlingham, to him.

Freud dies by suicide several weeks after the start of the war due to the intense pain from his oral cancer. C.S. Lewis goes on to become a famous author, and the children he takes in as refugees during the war serve as inspiration for his Narnia series. Anna and Dorothy live together for decades, and Anna becomes known as the founder of child psychology. The film notes that Freud met with an unidentified Oxford don in the last days of Freud's life, who could possibly have been Lewis.

Viewers who are looking for a definitive *“knockout punch”* for one side or the other will be disappointed, largely, because of the *“ambiguity”* and *“paradox”* that are inherent to human existence as highlighted in the film.

For example, the psychoanalytic insights of Freud (and his disciple Carl Jung) not only revolutionized our understanding of how the human mind and emotions work, but they have become part of the standard curriculum for the training of pastoral counselors and religious professionals for decades. In a similar way, millions of people have read C.S. Lewis’s, Narnia books without ever having an inkling (no pun intended!) that Narnia itself is a metaphor for the Kingdom of God and that Aslan (the Lion) is a Christ figure.

Let’s consider these things in light of our text from Mark 1 this morning.

You see, early in his Gospel, Mark reports that Jesus made a striking impression as a *teacher* very different from the scribes, the *“official”* teachers. His hearers *“were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes”* (1:22). Behind the Greek word for *“authority”* lies the Jewish term for the power of God, *Gevurah.* In other words, Jesus spoke from the mouth of the *Gevurah,* that is, from the mouth of the Spirit.

In fact, people who encountered Jesus sometimes experienced a spiritual presence in him. For instance, Rudolf Otto speaks of a *numinous presence* that is frequently reported in or around those who have dramatic experiences of the sacred. There is a sense of *“otherness”* in them that evokes *awe, amazement, or astonishment.* There may be something authoritative about the way they *speak,* penetrating about the way they *see,* or powerful in their *presence.*[[1]](#footnote-1)

“It is not that he himself teaches that he is such, but that he is *experienced* as such” (p. 158).

And, interestingly, narrative descriptions of Jesus in the gospels suggest that Jesus had this kind of presence.

And so, in Mark 1, the Galilean period of his mission begins. Mark presents Jesus proclaiming the kingdom of God as a *healer, exorcist, teacher, and prophet.* And, specifically, in today’s text, Jesus encounters a man *“with an unclean spirit”* in Capernaum (1:21-28).

Of course, within the framework of the modern worldview, we are inclined to see *possession* as a prescientific diagnosis of a condition that must have another explanation, perhaps a *psychopathological* state that includes among its symptoms the delusion of believing oneself to be possessed.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Social conditions* may also be a factor; some data from anthropology and social psychology suggest that conditions of political oppression, social deprivation, and rapid social change (all of which characterized the Jewish homeland in the first century) are correlated with increased frequency of possession.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But whatever the *modern explanation* might be, and however much *psychological or social factors* might be involved, we need to recognize that Jesus and his contemporaries (and people in premodern cultures generally) thought that people could be possessed by a spirit or spirits from another plane. Their worldview took for granted the actual existence of such spirits. In fact, the participants—*possessed, exorcist, onlookers*—did not simply *think* of these as cases of possession or exorcism but *experienced* them that way.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The result? Jesus’s healings and exorcisms attracted crowds. People flocked to him. Indeed, it was his reputation as a healer and exorcist that generated an audience for him as a teacher; a teacher with *authority*. And those who were healed were made whole, which in the first century meant they were restored as full members of the community—which was the most important value in that culture—they were no longer ostracized as outsiders.

Ask yourself: *What leaders in our world have authority?* Who is bringing healing and wholeness to people?

Authority, of course, has to do with *power*—but a very specific kind of power if it is to be life giving and restorative—either for individuals or whole societies.

Peter Marty captured this idea when he said, *“It took years of observing others before I learned that I had confused the authority of* ***power*** *with the power of* ***authority.*** *Like Richard Nixon after Watergate, who still had the full power of the presidency at his disposal* ***but zero authority*** *… I had yet to grasp the magnificence of another president—Abraham Lincoln—who possessed great authority but who was often reticent to exercise the full powers of his office.”*

In a similar way, social theorist Max Weber describes *power* as having a coercive element and *authority* as having a noncoercive one. Example: *You can do what I ask of you because you*have*to do what I have the power to make you do. Or you can do what I ask of you because you* want*to do it out of respect for who I am to you.* The difference between the two motives is huge—the latter is the kind of authority Jesus had.

Marty again: *“I have noticed among people I admire that those who sacrifice the most in the way of love also end up with the greatest authority. In the New Testament, Jesus repeatedly exercises his own special power of authority through love. With no political clout, no military at his command, no particular social prestige, and no wealth to his name, he reserves the authority of power for special occasions. We do not see him positioning himself to make others do what he commands. Instead, other people have to want the life he proposes.*

(And so) *When Jesus removes an unclean spirit from a convulsing man inside a synagogue, his exorcising power is on full display. But that act of power prompts the gathered worshipers to be astonished by his authority. “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!” (Mark 1:28). What they saw in Jesus was more than raw power; they witnessed the power of* ***love.*** *And in that love is the secret of [Jesus’s] authority.”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Which brings us back to Freud and Lewis; one a healer of the mind, the other a curer of souls. In the film, Freud admits to Lewis that he is *“a passionate disbeliever who is obsessed with gods and worship—yours included.”* He calls John Bunyan (author of the classic Christian book, *Pilgrim’s Progress)* a literary giant, and his library is filled with statues and idols from all manner of religions. But Freud has reserved a special spot for the Catholic *St. Dymphna,* patron saint of *“the mad and the lost,”* he tells Lewis.

And on it goes. Each man seems a bit of a *spiritual paradox.* Freud sees Lewis panic in a bomb shelter and demands to know, *if* he believes in an immortal soul, *why* he seemed so terrified. They mention pagan gods and religious leaders. And when they enter church together, Freud knows more about the saints depicted there than the priest. Lewis admits that faith has often been used *“as a weapon.”*

But their disagreement, while sincere and spirited, is done within the context of respect and, ultimately, friendship. They may strenuously differ, but they still care for each other—and they show it. When Lewis suffers a panic attack during a bomb scare, Freud calms his fears. When Freud’s prosthetic jaw causes him unendurable pain, he turns to Lewis for help.

In fact, their amicable relationship feels like an important example for us today, living in such fractious times: We can hold fast to what we believe in without hating those who believe differently.

This, too, is the way of Jesus. Remember: Jesus’s hearers *“were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority …,”* that is, (he spoke) from the mouth of the Spirit. *What they saw in Jesus was more than raw power; they witnessed the power of* ***love.***

That’s our calling as well. May people see it in us, too.

1. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy,* especially 155-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the provocative and illuminating discussion by M. Scott Peck in *People of the Lie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 182-211. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religions* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), pp. viii-ix, 103, 107-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peter W. Marty, *The Secret of Authority,* The Christian Century, June 22, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)