

Spiritual presence

By [James Sledge](#)

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What must it have been like to encounter the earthly Jesus, to meet him as he went about his ministry? When the gospels attempt to share something of this with us, they are no doubt hindered by the impossibility of rendering such an experience in words. But a common refrain in the gospels describes Jesus as "speaking with authority." This is in our gospel for today along with another common refrain, demons recognizing Jesus.

I think that both of these refrains are attempts to describe Jesus' spiritual presence. Jesus taught just as many other rabbis did. He read from the same scriptures and his teachings sometimes had much in common with others. But even when he said the very same thing as others it sounded different, and people could sense it. "They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority."

In the same way, demons recognizing Jesus speaks of this same spiritual presence. We don't live in the world of the gospel writers, a world that was filled with demons that caused all sorts of things we would attribute to other causes. But the fear expressed by these semi-divine agents of the First Century speaks to an incredible spiritual presence in Jesus, a vivid sense of God at work that could bend events toward God's will.

I think the Church would do well to focus more on this issue of presence. We need to realize that authority is less about facts and ideas well marshaled, presented, and argued, and more about God's presence. The hunger for spirituality in our day is in many ways a hunger for just such an authority.

The presence and authority that Jesus manifested was all out of proportion to the number of followers he had, the financial resources

at his disposal, or his connections to people in power. It was the power of spiritual presence, of God actively at work in him. And as the body of Christ, the Church also must seek this sort of power and authority, one derived from God's presence palpably moving in our midst. Even in a day when congregations face shrinking numbers and financial resources, when we draw nearer to God, when we become more open to the Spirit, our authority grows, and we become truer to our call of being Christ to the world.

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