

Epiphany IV

“At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.” In the name...

Happy anniversary, btw. Today is exactly my three-year anniversary. What a gift you have been.

I sometimes forget that Jesus was a rabbi. A Jewish teacher of the law. And of course the Gospel. He's a teacher. He's a teacher like the prophets. Like Solomon. Even like Socrates and Plato. Christians have always had a very heightened view of teaching because of it. At a very simple level, humans are a taught people. They are not the same as animals in this regard. We train animals. We teach humans.

This passage makes it clear that there are at least two kinds of teaching, and one lacks the kind of courageous moral authority that moves the hearts of its hearers. This is the kind of teaching that the Scriptures associate with the scribes and sometimes the Pharisees. Their teaching is petty, it's behavioral, it's anemic, it's tepid, it's uninspired—it's terrible. It reminds me of dishonesty, really. Some semblance of truth without any conviction. It's what some authors have called the 'crime of clichés.' It parrots the style of substance, and instead gives you cheap truisms that dishearten your listeners. Can you imagine looking at your children who stand before you—children who face hardships in this life, fears, tragedies, successes—certainly, but plenty of opposition, and saying, “Children, I have but one gift to give you to arm you for the life ahead. It is a gift that will help you wage war against darkness, against injustice, against evil, against the powers of dishonesty in this world.” And they say, “What is it, father? What will you give us?” And you respond, “I will give you clichés!” NO! No one would ever speak so foolishly, but we often live so foolishly. Cliches are the rhetoric of the scribes. It's powerless. It's insulting. It's spiritually destructive. You wouldn't do that. And yet the rabbis in large part, it would appear, had insulted the people in this way.

In walks Jesus. You can just imagine the astonishment. For some in Capernaum, a lifetime of clichés followed them into that synagogue. The promises of the Old ^{Covenant} sounding as hollow, as distant, and as empty as the political rhetoric of the Romans. Their own religion buckling under the weight of its poor teaching. And a new rabbi stands up—the one “through whom ~~are~~ all things and through whom we exist,” and he opens the Scriptures to them. The convenience of attendant religion is swept aside, and the power of God fills the room. True Religion. A religion that awakens souls, enlarges hearts, improves upon our love, wipes the sleep from our eyes, and awakens everyone to hope. In fact, for the first time, a demon-possessed member—who I'm assuming hadn't said much over the years, trembles before the teacher. Hell is now disturbed at what is taking place. When hell gets nervous, Christian teaching is taking place. Hell thrives upon indifference. Hell thrives upon cliché. Hell thrives upon the motions of apathy. Hell thrives upon the spiritually sleepy. Jesus throws light upon hell in the synagogue, and the man is delivered from his darkness.

The Scriptures call it *authority*. Christians don't bristle at authority, they reshape it. Speaking the truth about reality in love for the sake of our neighbor is itself authority. For Jesus it is intrinsic authority. He need only open his mouth. His very words are active in our lives. They

are active in the reading of Scripture. They do not penetrate from manipulation, for manipulation bypasses or even forces the will of the listener. Instead, they activate the will for the Good, and the True, and the Beautiful. The hearer is fully involved in the response. The hearer is not manipulated, and therefore the authority is trustworthy.

It is into this reality that St. John has turned its attention this year. St. ^{John's} offers comfort for the weary, peace for the restless, and joy for the disheartened, but we do not offer it as spineless and dishonest charlatans hoping for another mindless drone from which we can mooch. You offer it with the authority of Jesus, the Holy One of God (as the demon-possessed man names him). Invite people to church to hear the truth about reality in love. This is salvation. Let's fill this church with people seeking the authoritative, will-activating, love-transforming Gospel of Jesus. Let's pray that way. Let's invite in that way. Let's welcome strangers that way. I do not want to be lazy with a message that is captivating. ~~That is substance abuse. We have real substance that we do not want to abuse.~~

And above all else, we have this altar. True substance of his Body and Blood that restores humanity. This altar does what no political law, no possession, and no purchase could ever gain. It is direct access to the life of God. The veil is lifted, here, friends. You are not inviting someone ~~to~~. You are inviting them into the life of God through Christ. Christ the rabbi. Christ the teacher. Christ the Word of God made flesh. Christ who is alive even now.

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Brookline.
In the name...