

The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany – 2022

Jeremiah 1:4-10, 17-19

1 Corinthians 12:31b—13:13

Luke 4:31-44

Picture this, if you will: Jesus is in the synagogue, teaching. A man, clearly demon possessed, starts barking. “Ha! 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” (Luke 4:34). Jesus, startled, walks tentatively toward the man and speaks: “Hey, uh, you demon. I know that you’re probably comfortable in there and all but would you please, like, think about coming out of that guy. You’re really kinda ruining the vibe in here and these people are unfriending you so why don’t you just move on?”

Do you have a mealy-mouthed Lord? Does Jesus mince words? Is He timid or excessively delicate in His approach? Is the Lord Christ compromising or wishy-washy in any way? One of your sisters is at home, recovering from a major surgery. The pain is unrelenting. She left a voice-mail that detailed her struggles, imploring advice and her last words were these: “I’m just sitting here; lonely.” One of your brothers had his best good buddy, God-father to one of his sons, pass away from cancer after a long battle. His text message said that they were “taking it easy at home.” The mood in that house is one of great loss. Does Christ have lukewarm words of consolation for people who suffer? Does the Son of God marshal half-measures to address the calamity of death? What sort of Lord do you think it is who rules heaven and earth?

Call up in your mind John 14:6. Does it go like this: “Jesus said, ‘I’m sort of like the way, pretty close to the truth, and a reasonable facsimile of life. If you want to get to the Father, you could do a lot worse than thinking about going through me.’” Oh no; no. Jesus had authority. He used it. People recognized it. That authority left an impression. He was teaching in Capernaum, a city in Galilee. His Words were dynamic, alive, and what He taught captured the hearts of those who heard Him. Why? How did they know? How could common folks, like you and me, how were they able to recognize the authority that poured out of the Lord’s mouth? The Holy Spirit attended His Word. The Holy Spirit enlivened the minds of those people. The Spirit corroborated Christ’s teaching and the people knew, intuitively, irrepressibly, that this Word was Divine. “Christ’s word possessed authority” (Luke 4:32).

Martin Luther wrote this: “The Holy Spirit is no skeptic. He has written neither doubt nor mere opinion into our hearts but rather solid assurances, which are more sure and solid than all experience and even life itself.” By nature, the Lord Christ has authority. He uses it. He uses it and faith recognizes it. Faith recognizes it and responds to it. For us, Christ uses His authority. Strength, vigor, purpose, a driven agenda, an intentional pursuit of humanity – Jesus’ authority isn’t wasted on vain enterprises but is spent for our highest needs. He said this: “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:18). He used His authority for you. Oh, the temple guard came and arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, but Christ had the authority. The Son of God was tried in an earthly court of unjust men, but Jesus had the authority and He was using it. Pontius Pilate twisted himself in knots trying to find an appropriate use for his paltry authority. He failed, washed his hands in a futile gesture of innocence and sentenced Jesus to crucifixion, but it was Christ’s authority that

prevailed. Hail O Christ our King! He reigns from the tree. His authority is glorious. His flesh is pierced and His blood inaugurates His eternal kingdom. His authority is used for you.

Do you remember Charlie Brown? Of course, you do. Do you remember Charlie Brown's teacher? Charlie Brown and Peppermint Patty are sitting in class and the teacher is droning on – the voice of the teacher is a magnificent audio meme – a wordless kazoo sound. In the background a lullaby is dubbed in to mock the teacher's voice and soon Peppermint Patty is asleep. Charlie Brown's teacher – that's what the scribes and the Pharisees sounded like; no authority. What does unbeliever hear when Christ's Word is preached? I, for one, am not going to preach this Word in a milquetoast fashion, but it is not how I speak that endues this Word with power. God's Word is living and active. This Word carries authority to create faith, to reveal what is hidden, to bring people out of darkness into God's marvelous light, to deliver sinners from death. God's authority is in this place. The Bearer of that authority is in this place. God's presence is among us. God's love, His life is all around us. How will we respond to it?

If we hear Christ's Word like Peppermint Patty heard her teacher then when we encounter difficulty in life or a central choice faces us directly then we might weigh Holy Scripture in one hand and Dr. Oz or Dr. Fauci or Dr. Phil in the other hand and go with whatever our gut tells us. How has our witness to Christ's authority affected those around us? Moving forward, what sort of Christian are you intending to be? Simon's mother-in-law was a direct recipient of Christ's authority. She lay in bed with a mega fire – that is how the original language describes it – an intense fever. Who knows what mischief was being done in her bloodstream? Such fevers were perilous – no antibiotics, no modern therapeutics, just archaic techniques. Jesus rebuked the fever like He rebuked the demon. What is broken in creation, Christ brings His authority to restore, to recreate. Demon possession, sickness, sin and death – they are all subject to Christ's authority. The Messiah brings a new creation by the intentional use of the authority that belongs to Him and Him alone. His death, His resurrection, and the means of grace that deliver His triumph to us – His Word, His Baptism, His body and blood – you are the recipient of His authority and you are blessed.

Simon's mother-in-law, nameless she, as soon as she is restored what does she do? "She rose and began to serve them" (Luke 4:39). Marvelous. That is me and that is you. A life of service to others – freely we have received, freely we give. You are served in this place. Christ comes to you to give you all that flows from His sacrifice – His virtue, His righteousness, His life, His fidelity, His holiness, His love for His Father – all this and more is credited to your account. He pours His resurrection, His Spirit into your soul. This Divine Service is more astounding than Simon's mother-in-law being healed from her fever. Heaven is open to you in this place. You are made one with the ruler of heaven and earth in the Sacrament of the Altar. And what, having received such priceless gifts, will be our response? We serve. At church, at home, in the workplace, in our neighborhood – wherever God places us, we serve, knowing who it is who has served us first.

There is nothing partial or paltry about what you receive from Christ the King. Our sister who suffers, to her we say this – the Lord Himself sees you, speaks tenderly to you, saying "I know what suffering is and I am with you. Showing you myself, my love, my commitment to you, giving you hope in the midst of your darkness, I will never leave you. My love for you will

never abate. My power is made perfect in weakness. You are my beloved daughter.” To our brother who lost his dear friend, to him we say this – the Lord has seen us in our death and has ventured into this land to destroy death, to raise the sons of earth, the daughters of Eve. His triumph is supreme. Life is the Victor for He rose from the dead, shattering the kingdom of death and giving us a home in heaven. Your friend is in Christ’s mighty hand. The Lord Christ uses His authority to save us. No one has more power than Christ the King. He is full of grace and we all are in His hand. We are astonished at His teaching. We are astonished at His life. We are astonished at His love. “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come” (Revelation 12:10). Alleluia!