

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – January 28, 2018
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For a few minutes a week and a half ago, everything looked the same. Everything was covered in snow. Oh, you could distinguish the buildings, of course, but when it came to the ground, you couldn't tell the parking lot from the soccer field, the sidewalk from the lawn. All you could see was the blanket of snow. It was a great equalizer. The snow covered both the attractive plants and the weeds, the high ground and the low. Of course, if you were unfamiliar with the terrain and decided to go out walking, you would quickly discover that not everything was equal. Some ground was solid, and some was not. The snow made everything look the same, but the real differences remained.

In the first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses told the people that the Lord God would send to Israel a prophet from among their own kin to whom they should listen. He also cautioned, however, that there would also be other prophets, false prophets – those who presume to speak in the name of the Lord but are really speaking only for themselves. If these false prophets speak a word that the Lord God has not commanded them to speak, they shall die. But then everyone dies, so that's really not much of a test. And some of these false prophets probably sound pretty convincing. How was Israel to know – how are any of us to know – who is a real prophet and who is not? If everything is covered with snow, how can we tell when the asphalt ends and the ground begins? If all of the prophets sound alike, how can we know what is false and what is true?

Modern society says that you can't tell the difference. What is true for me may not be true for you. There's my truth and your truth – and it is all equivalent. It's all relative. In other words, it's all a snow covered world where my cultivated crops look just like your landfill. What's more, modern society wants us to forego exploring for the truth. Don't bother looking beyond the surface – it's all the same, they tell us. Modern thinkers, if you can call them that, want us to rest in the false comfort that everything is equal under the blanket of snow. Maybe that's why they are so afraid of global warming. Once the snow is melted, it will be easy to see what is farmland and what is a toxic wasteland, what is true and what is not – and modern protestations to the contrary, the two are not equivalent, the two are not relative. There is no my truth and your truth – there is only the truth that comes from God.

The people in that synagogue in Capernaum certainly recognized truth when they heard it. The scribes were always talking out of both sides of their mouth, arguing over a point or two in the Torah, but never really taking a side. They gave one opinion and then another, but never actually spoke the truth in a definitive way. That's why those people in the synagogue found Jesus so intriguing, so astonishing. He spoke the truth, not one side or another, not my truth and your truth and everything is relative. No, Jesus spoke with authority, so much so that even the unclean spirits obeyed him. Now our friends the scribes, like our friends the modern thinkers might argue with our description of those poor, misunderstood spirits as unclean. What a pejorative term! How dare we declare a spirit unclean just because he or she does not agree with us? How dare you call the battle between Michael and Lucifer a battle between good and evil! It was probably just a property dispute! You see where relativism leads us. Jesus was never one afraid to take a stand, never one to back away from the truth. We back away all the time. We don't want to upset anyone, don't want to make any waves. That's why relativism, the pressure of our modern society, is so appealing. If we just tolerate everything, if everything is of equal moral value, then no one can get upset. If truth is relative, then one person's theft is another person's shrewd business deal; one person's lie is another person's alternate facts.

Most Christians, after all, try to be like Jesus – we try to be people who are loving and merciful and compassionate and forgiving. But are we like Jesus in our proclamation of the truth? Do we echo his authority or do we shy away from it? Do we believe that my truth and your truth and his truth and her truth are all equivalent? Or do we understand that God alone is the source of truth and that the closer we get to God, the closer we come to the truth? Jesus spoke with authority, and it got him noticed. Today's gospel says that his fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee. Yes, he grew increasingly popular – and increasingly unpopular. Both the number of his followers and the number of his enemies grew – and, eventually, at least in the eyes of the world, the enemies prevailed. Jesus did not come to win popularity contests, he came to win souls – and that should be our goal as well. In proclaiming the truth, we must do so as Jesus did – with compassion and with respect, but with a clear understanding that the truth of Jesus Christ does not change. We don't need to cover everything over with snow, or with sugar or with relativism. We need only speak the truth as Jesus did – with love beyond measure.