

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 24, 2010

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We just heard one of the great Epiphany stories of the New Testament. It was early in Jesus' ministry, he's begun to develop a reputation as a teacher, rabbi. He visits the synagogue in Nazareth where he had been brought up. As a courtesy they invite him to read from scripture. He chooses a passage from Isaiah, God's promise of a day when captives are released, the blind see, the poor hear good news – so far, so good. But then he tells the congregation something they never expected to hear, certainly they never expected it from him. He says "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". Now that's where the reading ended this morning. If we'd gone on for a few more verses we would have heard how the congregation reacted to what Jesus said. They were not grateful for what we see as a manifestation of Christ. They said "Who does he think he is? How can he talk about scripture being fulfilled in him? This is the kid we saw grow up; he's the son of Joseph, the carpenter." They were angry, so angry that they told hold of Jesus and led him to the brow of a hill, ready to throw him over the cliff. Now when I read this passage I remembered something that happened in my parish some thirty years ago. I was teaching an adult forum and I always allowed time at the beginning of the forum for people to ask questions. Usually they wanted to know about something that happened in church the last Sunday. A man asked me; "You were talking about Epiphany; what in the world is that all about?" Well I had my handy dandy definition I'd known ever since Sunday School. "Epiphany is the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles." He said "so, who are the gentiles?" I explained that in Jesus' day the gentiles were people outside the Jewish Church and that we interpret it today as referring to those outside the Christian Church. "Well, he said, "does that make me a gentile?" And I said, "I suppose it does". "O.K. Bob, I'm a gentile start manifesting!" Now it may not be that blunt, but people are saying the very same thing to all of us. "Start manifesting!" Our friends know we go to church, they know we sacrifice time and money, even in a time when society is generally is down on any institution. People sense that we've found something here that enriches our lives and they're curious. They want to know what it is; they listen carefully to what we say, but they watch even more carefully what we do. They want to see if we live what we talk. They're saying to us: "Start manifesting." And usually we do our best; we're all serious about being Christians; our belief affects the way we respond to what's going on around us. All of us can tell stories of when we were not even aware of it, we made Christ manifest and we've probably found it a mixed experience as we read in today's reading – partly joyous; partly very painful. Now when I look back I can see a time when my family was involved in one of those situations where we knew we had to make clear what we believed. We lived in Charlotte in the early 1970's. Those were the days of the Civil Rights movement, our society was being challenged, challenged in the courts because it was so badly, totally segregated and in Charlotte as in a lot of other cities the focus of these efforts to do something about segregation was focused in the schools. A Federal Judge ordered that our city schools be integrated and the school board decided that the only way they could do that was to

send children by bus to schools that often were on the other side of town. Now our son Louis was in the fifth grade. His bus ride was forty-five minutes each way and so Jean and I had him standing out on the corner at seven o'clock every morning. Now busing was not a problem for the kids. Louis loved riding the bus. It was on the bus he learned how to play poker. Now for parents it was another matter. People had bought houses in our neighborhood because children could ride their bicycles to school. The order to integrate had come from the Federal Government and none of us had had anything to say about it. There were concerns about safety. Were those rickety old buses safe? Was it safe for the kids to go into "that" neighborhood? People from that neighborhood wondered if it was safe for the kids to come into "our" neighborhood. Well for Jean and me, there was no question. We realized how much was wrong in a segregated society. We realized how much had to be changed. We wanted to teach Louis respect for the law. We wanted to support the public schools. More than any of that, as Christians we took seriously the vow of the baptism covenant, that we respect the worth and dignity of every human being. So not only did we send our son to the new school we became co-presidents of the P.T.A. Now not everybody agreed with us. A good many of our neighbors and a good number of my parishioners boycotted the schools. Some decided to teach their kids at home, others sent their children to what they called "Christian Academies". These were schools that met in churches where parents and retired teachers led their classes. Neighbors were at odds over all of this. A discussion one night at Jean's bridge club became so heated that they decided they would not meet for a while. Now I very seldom preached about all of this. I thought it was healthier to talk about it in a setting where people could respond. The churches were about the only place in town where you had all people from all sides of the issue in the same room at the same time. And so I made this the topic of a lot of our adult forums. One Sunday in my sermon I alluded in passing to what was happening. I said that as Christians we obey the law. I thought that was pretty innocuous. My good friend George was sitting in his usual seat in the very front pew. George is a wonderful man; he loved the church; he loved his children; he didn't like what was happening in our city; he'd taken his kids out of public schools. Well, when I mentioned obeying the law, George jumped to his feet; he slammed down his prayer book, he went storming down the center aisle. Now we had a very small building. I don't know how he found seven different doors to slam on his way out. And then we heard him screeching out of the parking lot. Now I was distressed. George was my friend. After lunch I decided I needed to go and pay a call. So I drove to his house and I saw George. He was out in the backyard chopping wood. Well, I didn't even slow down. I decided this was not the day to talk to an angry man. I didn't know what to do, so I didn't do anything, but then a couple of weeks later George telephoned me. He invited me to go to breakfast with him. On the way to the restaurant he explained to me that he met with a group of Christian men, laymen mostly, who met once a week for prayer. There must have been a hundred people in the room. They prayed together. Some of them got up and talked about how Christ's presence in their lives affected their work, their family. I was really moved by it all. I was so grateful to George for taking me. During the next months we went almost every week. I don't recall that we ever talked about that sermon, but we did talk about Christ, about Christ's power in our lives. We discovered how much we had in common and that these matters that we held in common were far more important than any local crisis. In a word we became reconciled.

Now that's a long story. You can tell similar stories about your own lives, your own ministry -- times when your efforts to bear witness to Christ got you in trouble. Jesus' experience in the synagogue in Nazareth rings a bell for most of us. We make him manifest by what we say and what we do and it costs us a friendship. It hurts our place in several communities; it may even divide our families, but that's not where the story of my relationship with George ends, by the grace of God we became reconciled and this for us was the greatest manifestation of God's presence, his power. It was our great Epiphany moment. And that experience was not unique to George and me. By the time Jean and I left Charlotte reconciliation was popping up all over the place. The schools were changed, even the community was changed. We had all in some way been spiritually blind, spiritually poor, spiritually held captive. The passage from Isaiah that Jesus read became true for all of us, but once we were reconciled, we were healed of all of that. No question in my mind that God was at work, even though most of us were not aware of it at all. I wonder if the same thing hasn't happened to you. We experienced pain that we never anticipated because we were simply acting on our faith. Relationships were broken and by God's grace they not only were healed, but they became stronger, stronger than they had ever been before. It's reconciliation, a far greater manifestation of Christ than we ever could have imagined. Now if ever there was a time when reconciliation is needed, it must be right now -- at home, at work, in politics, in the church, in the community. People are digging in their heels. We call it gridlock. This may be our great opportunity to be Epiphany people, to make Christ manifest right now to show our contentious society that there is another way.