

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Breaking the Word: Homiletics*,”
Emmanuel 119:2 (2013) 163-184.

While scholars and mystics appreciate the Fourth Gospel for its depth of theological and spiritual insight, preachers often find it a difficult gospel to preach. There are many reasons for this. Among them is that a good part of the gospel consists of extended discourses, whose several verses are intertwined with one another. Another is that the Fourth Gospel is replete with rich symbolism, which is sometimes difficult to understand. Still another reason why the gospel is so difficult to preach is the sometimes mystic heights to which it reaches. These receive symbolic expression in the eagle, long used as the symbol of the gospel’s anonymous and unknown author, popularly identified as “John.”

Apart from the summer-time use of John 6 in Cycle B, the Fourth Gospel does not appear in semi-continuous fashion in the church’s three-year cycle of Gospel readings. The Easter season does, however, allow the gospel to be proclaimed to our Christian faithful. This year the Johannine story of the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11) serves as the gospel reading for the Fifth Sunday of Lent. All told, the coming Sundays--if the Easter vigil is to be included--provide us with six opportunities to preach on the Gospel according to John.

These Johannine readings provide us with a unique opportunity to see Jesus as the Beloved Disciple saw him. What a wonderful opportunity for us and our congregations to have, to fly on the wings of an eagle!

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 7, 2013

LITURGY:

Acts 5:12-16 speaks of marvelous deeds accomplished by the apostles and the growth of the community of believers in Jerusalem.

Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19--and let the reader beware that the title of the book is “Revelation, in the singular, not “Revelations” in the plural!—is the beginning of what has sometimes been called the most enigmatic book in the Bible. It is the first of six selections from Revelation that contribute to an abbreviated semi-continuous reading of this book in Cycle C.

John 20:19-31, the original conclusion to the Fourth Gospel, that is, before John 21 was added as an epilogue, is a constant in the triennial cycle of Johannine readings in the Easter season.

The first section of the gospel lection (vv. 19-25), whose first verses may be used as the gospel lection for the Feast of Pentecost (John 20:19-23), describes Jesus’ appearance to his disciples on the first day of the week. The author’s mention of the first day of the week in verse 19 and, implicitly, in verse 26 suggests the early Christian practice of Jesus’ disciples gathering together on the first day of the week.

Jesus appeared to his “disciples.” The author of the Fourth Gospel does not once mention “the apostles.” The disciples would include some of those known as apostles in the Synoptic Gospels but would include others as well. The disciples had gathered in a locale where locked doors served as their protection against “the Jews.” “The Jews” is Johannine code for those

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leaders of the Jewish nation who were opposed to Jesus and were instrumental in bringing about his death. The homilist must be careful when he or she preaches on this passage lest his or her manner of speaking about the Jews leads to or reinforces anti-Semitic sentiments in the congregation.

This first section of the gospel reading is the Fourth Gospel’s account of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit to the disciples. In this Johannine account, the link between Jesus and the gift of the Spirit is clearer than it is in the well-known account of Pentecost in Acts 2. Jesus’ breathing on the disciples is a reminder that the Greek *pneuma* and the Hebrew *ruah* can be translated “breath” or “spirit.” Jesus links the gift of the Spirit with the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness comes with the sacrament of baptism. Much later in its history the church used this text as a proof text for the institution of the sacrament of penance by Jesus. At best, this later usage is an accommodation of the text.

The final verses of the first unit introduce the figure of Thomas. He is presented as someone who initially doubts the core Christian belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It is noteworthy that only one other person in the Fourth Gospel is identified as “one of the Twelve.” That other person is Judas who betrayed Jesus (John 6:71). Presented as “doubting Thomas,” Thomas serves as a scapegoat for the doubt of the disciples (see Matt 28:17; Mark 16:11, 13, 14; Luke 24:11). This is in keeping with the evangelist’s way of creating a dramatic account. Just as he uses Mary Magdalene as a representative of the Galilean women to whom the risen Jesus appeared (John 20:11-18), so he uses Thomas to represent the doubt of a larger group of Jesus’ disciples. The evangelist presents a graphic description of Thomas’ doubt. Not only does he want to put his finger into the nail holes of the crucifixion, he also wants to put his hand into the hole in Jesus’ side. The Fourth Gospel is alone in mentioning the hole in the side created by the soldier’s lance (see John 19:34).

The second section of today’s gospel narrative (vv. 26-29) replicates the scenario of the first unit, except that this time the group to whom Jesus appears includes Thomas. The repeated greeting, “peace to you” (vv. 19, 26), is the traditional *shalom* but since the Johannine narrative functions on two levels, that of the story and that of symbolism and theology, the reader should realize that the greeting speaks of peace as a gift of the risen Jesus to his disciples. Jesus recalls Thomas’ strong language (v. 25) and challenges his disciple to do as he had boasted.

Thomas does not do so. Instead he confesses Jesus as “my Lord and my God,” the strongest christological confession in the Fourth Gospel. The Roman Emperor Domitian, whose reign, 81-96 C.E., ended just before the Fourth Gospel was written demanded that he be called “our lord and god” (See Suetonius, *Domitian*, 13). It is therefore not unlikely that there was some anti-imperial polemic in the confession of Jesus that the evangelist placed on the lips of Thomas.

The focus of verses 26-29 is the dialogue between Thomas and Jesus. Thomas makes a confession of faith in the risen Jesus. Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who have faith in him without the benefit of a “physical” appearance. Jesus’ question to Thomas (v. 21) serves to emphasize the beatitude. Blessed are those who have not “seen” but nevertheless believe in the risen Jesus. The beatitude is remarkable. Not only does it speak of the faith of believers for generations to come but it also appears at the end of the gospel and is the only true beatitude in

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the Fourth Gospel (cf. John 13:17). The final words of Jesus in the first draft of the Johannine gospel—that is, excluding the epilogue in chapter 21—are those of this beatitude, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed” (See my “Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen”: John 20:29,” in Rekha M. Chennattu and Mary L. Coloe, *Transcending Boundaries: Contemporary Readings of the New Testament* [Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 187; Rome: LAS, 2005] 173-190).

The third section of today’s reading (John 20:30-31) was the original ending of the gospel narrative. In a final editorial comment, the evangelist tells his readers why the gospel was written. His story about Jesus was written so that the believer might believe that Jesus was Messiah and Son of God. “Messiah” (=“Christ,” see John 1:41) is one of the oldest Christian confessional titles for Jesus. “Son of God” is a particularly Johannine title.

The consequence of belief in Jesus is that those who believe in him have eternal life because of him. That Jesus came to give life, eternal life, is a major theme in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, for example, “the water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14; cf. John 10:10).

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BROKEN FOR US:

Today’s gospel reading is very rich. It offers any number of themes for a homilist to develop. Among the many themes that can be developed are Jesus’ gift of the Spirit and his gift of peace, baptism as a sacrament of the forgiveness of sins, faith in Jesus as both confessional and life giving, and Jesus’ blessing of those who believe without having been the recipient of a vision of the risen Lord.

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 14, 2013

LITURGY:

Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41 describes a judicial hearing of the disciples before the Sanhedrin. The reason? They had born witness (cf. Acts 1:8) to Jesus having been put to death as an accursed criminal by the authorities and God’s trumping of that action by exalting Jesus as leader and savior.

Revelation 5:11-14 highlights a doxology addressed to God and his Lamb by every creature in heaven and on earth.

John 21:1-19 represents the only use of the Epilogue to the Fourth Gospel (John 21) in the triennial cycle of Sunday readings. After the scene is set in vv. 1-3, the reading consists of three literary scenes. In setting the scene, the author of the epilogue announces that he is going to continue with the Fourth Gospel’s “revelation” of Jesus (cf. 1:31; 2:11; 3:21; 7:4; 9:3; 17:6). A full complement of disciples, seven in all, is present. The group includes Peter and Thomas, principals in John 20, Nathanael, now identified as a man from Galilee, the sons of Zebedee,

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mentioned for the first time in the Fourth Gospel, and two nameless disciples, one of whom must have been the Beloved Disciple (cf. v. 7). Peter decides to go fishing; the other six decide to go with him. The narrative, which mentions Peter as a fisherman for the first and only time in the Fourth Gospel, appears to be derived from a source used by Luke in Luke 5:1-11. A night on the sea ends with no catch to show for it.

The first scene (vv. 4-8) is the core of a miracle story. Once there had been no fish but when Jesus’ authority comes into play, there is an abundance of fish. Jesus’ authority extends to the detail of casting the net from the right side of the boat. Familiar motifs enter into the story. The disciples do not recognize the risen one (cf. John 20:15; Luke 24:12-35, 36-38). The Johannine motif of a kind of competition between the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter enters in. As in John 20:8, the Beloved Disciple is the believer. He recognizes Jesus and points him out to Peter. The ever impetuous Peter—the trait is often underscored in the Synoptics—throws some clothes on and plunges into the sea, the more quickly to reach Jesus.

The second scene (vv. 9-14) tells about an early morning meal on the shore. At some point in the early tradition of the pericope, the idea of a meal probably indicated that Jesus was truly risen (cf. Luke 24:41-43; Mark 5:43 and parallels; John 12:2) but John emphasizes other elements. The charcoal fire recalls another charcoal fire (John 18:18, 25), beside which Peter denied Jesus and thus anticipates Peter’s rehabilitation in John 21:15-19). The food recalls the bread and fish of the story of Jesus’ feeding the five thousand (John 6:1-15), with its eucharistic overtones (cf. Luke 24:35). The number of fish, 153, is undoubtedly symbolic; but symbol of what?

The third scene (vv. 10-19), the Fourth Gospel’s version of the primacy of Peter, represents Peter’s rehabilitation after his triple denial of Jesus (John 18:15-18, 25-27). Peter confesses his love for Jesus three times, each time adding that the risen Lord surely knows Peter’s love for him. Though a fisherman, Peter is charged with a pastoral responsibility that recalls Jesus’ role as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14-16). Peter is to succeed Jesus in taking care of the flock, a traditional symbol of God’s people.

Jesus’ double “Amen” (v. 18) introduces Jesus’ harsh reminder to Peter. In times past—when he was young—Peter did what he wanted to do. Now—when he is old—things are different. Peter is no longer master of his own destiny. Others will control his fate. By the time the epilogue was written, Peter had already been put to death for his role in the fledgling community of Jesus’ disciples. There remained only more things for Jesus to say. That was to remind Peter that he was to be a loyal disciple for the rest of his days.

BROKEN FOR US:

Today’s homily might appropriately focus on leadership in the church, beginning with the highest levels of leadership. Leadership requires conversion, as is indicated by Peter’s triple denial, followed by his triple confession of faith—the kind of conversion about which the late Cardinal Carlo Martini spoke about in an interview just before his death. Leadership requires a love of Jesus and a confidence in one’s faith. Leadership involves a pastoral role, a kind of

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leadership different from that of secular leaders, the kings and legislators of this world. Leadership involves suffering and even death for the sake of love of Jesus. And leadership requires that one be a disciple, one of the company of the loyal disciples of Jesus.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 21, 2013

LITURGY:

Acts 13:14, 43-52 describes the reaction to Paul’s proclamation of the gospel (cf. Acts 13: 15-41, the intervening and omitted passage of today’s lection) in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, an ancient city in the Turkish Lakes Region.

Revelation 7:9, 14b-17 imaginatively speaks about the universality of salvation.

John 10:27-30 continues the reading on John 10, which began on the Fourth Sunday of Easter in Year A and continued on the same Sunday in Year B. Jesus’ words were addressed to Jewish leaders who had confronted him about his messiahship (John 10:24) on the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple. At the time festival was a relatively new feast that had been inaugurated within Judaism to commemorate the rededication of the Temple under Judas Maccabeus (cf. 1 Macc 4:52-59; 2 Macc 10:5-8). The festival continues today in the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah.

The reading supposes that Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Its confrontational character owes to the fact that in the Johannine narrative Jesus has just told the Jewish leaders, the Johannine “Jews,” that they do not belong to his flock (John 10:26). These “Jews” celebrate the temple festivals but there is another way of belonging to God. That is to belong to Jesus’ flock, as today’s gospel lection makes clear.

Jesus speaks of his sheep as those who listen to his voice. Members of his flock hear and understand. These are the people whom Jesus knows, who share in his experience. They are the disciples who follow him.

They have been gifted by Jesus with a gift that he alone can give, the gift of eternal life (*zoe aionios*), a major Johannine theme (John 3:15, 16, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68). That gift is the purpose of his mission, says the Johannine Jesus: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). The gift is associated with belief in Jesus (John 3:15; 5:24; etc.). In today’s gospel lection Jesus draws out an implication of the gift. Those who receive it shall never perish; no one can separate his disciples from Jesus. Implicit in the assertion is the idea that those who do not believe in Jesus will not receive the gift and will perish. In context, these are the unbelieving and argumentative Jewish leaders.

Jesus moves the discussion to another level when he speaks of the Father, the one God of Israel in honor of whom the temple had been rededicated, that pagan altars erected on the site torn down. There is no doubt that the one and only God of Israel is more powerful than other

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deities. No one can take anyone out of the Father’s hand because Jesus and the Father are one. Whoever is in Jesus’ hand is in the Father’s hand.

BROKEN FOR US:

In preaching today’s gospel, the homilist should avoid eisegesis, specifically reading Trinitarian theology into Jesus’ powerful saying, “I and the Father are one” (v. 30). At most, there is a hint “of the metaphysical depths contained in the relationship between Jesus and the Father” in the logion (see Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 2, [New York: Seabury, 1980]. 308).

What should be emphasized is the importance of faith in the life of the believer, particularly that aspect of faith which consists of listening to Jesus’ voice, of heeding his words. For a person with such a faith, God’s providential care is expressed in the gift of eternal life mediated by Jesus, God’s Son, agent, and sacrament.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 28, 2013

LITURGY:

Acts 14:21-27 tells about the conclusion of Paul’s first missionary voyage and the report that Paul gave to the church at Antioch which had commissioned him and Barnabas for this mission (Acts 13:1-3).

Revelation 21:1-51 uses many different images to describe the “new Jerusalem.”

John 13:31-33a, 34-35 tells about what happened after Judas abruptly left the meal that he was sharing with Jesus and the other disciples. His departure marked the beginning, the “now” (*nyn*), of Jesus’ hour.

The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel typically uses the Son of Man epithet to speak of his crucifixion (John 1:51; 3:14; 6:27, 53; 8:28 12:23). Now that the time of the crucifixion is at hand, Jesus interprets the reality of what is to happen for the disciples. They are to know that the raising up of Jesus on the cross, Jesus’ exaltation, is his glorification. It is also the glorification of God. Through the crucifixion, God is to be glorified. By means of Jesus’ crucifixion, God is to be revealed, as he had been in the past, particularly at Sinai. That the evangelist wants his readers to understand that the crucifixion is the means of God’s revelation by his five-fold use of the word glorify (*doxazo*). In the Fourth Gospel, “glory” (*doxa*) is a term that refers to revelation (see John 1:14; 2:11; 5:44; 7:18; 11:4, 40; 12:41, 43). The evangelist uses this language to indicate that what the crucifixion really means. According to the author of the Fourth Gospel, the crucifixion is not so much a terrible event as it is the means by which the Son and his Father are revealed to the world.

This is to happen momentarily. Jesus speaks of it as happening “at once,” (*euthus*, “immediately”). In the pathos of the moment, Jesus addresses his disciples as his “little

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children” (*tekna*), thus indicating his undying affection for them. He continues to love them until the end (cf. John 13:1, an idea echoed in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer). Having thus affirmed his love for them, Jesus tells them that the time is short. He is about to leave them.

As he is about to leave, Jesus gives his disciples a departing gift, the new commandment: “As I have loved you, so you should also love one another” (see my “‘A New Commandment I Give to You, That You Love One Another . . . ‘ (John 13:34),” in *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* [Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 2. Louvain: Peeters—Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 217-256).

Jesus “as I have loved you,” is particularly important. It immediately suggests that the disciples love for one another should emulate Jesus’ love for them. Jesus’ love for the disciples was expressed in the humble gesture of washing their feet, a service to them that Jesus performed in order to set an example for them (John 13:15). The love of Jesus for them was a love until the end (John 13:1, 33). He would go so far as to lay down his life for them (John 10:15, 17; 15:13, a verse that comments specifically on the love command of John 15:12).

“As I have loved you,” implies more than mere imitation of Jesus’ love for the disciples. The Father’s love for Jesus is the source of Jesus’ love for the disciples (15:9). Jesus abides in the Father’s love. If the disciples love one another as Jesus loved them, they will abide in the Father’s love just as Jesus abided in the Father’s love. There is chain between the Father’s love for Jesus, Jesus’ love for the disciples, and the disciples’ love for one another.

Because their love for one another is the means of their abiding in the Father’s love, Jesus’ command that they love one another is truly a gift (*didomi*, “I give,” v. 34), Jesus’ farewell gift to his disciples. It is a memento of what Jesus did for them; it is a means by which Jesus and the Father remain present to them.

To underscore the importance of the commandment, Jesus says that the fulfillment of the commandment is the distinguishing mark of his disciples. It should be the reality that characterizes their existence as disciples of Jesus, for “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

BROKEN FOR US:

Although today’s gospel reading is relatively short, it calls for two homilies. The first should be devoted to the meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion. That homily may well be necessary for a congregation that appreciates only the pathos of crucifixion, one that looks upon the crown of thorns as an instrument of torture rather than as an ironic symbol of the kingship of Jesus.

For most congregations, the second homily might be more appropriate. The homily should, however, be consistent with the Johannine tradition. The homily should focus on the meaning of our love for one another. Expressed in simple gestures of support and service though occasionally requiring expressions of greater magnitude, it should be a love that in self-conscious fashion imitates Jesus’ love. Our love for one another is the way that Jesus loves the other. We are the instruments of Jesus’ love for others. If we faithfully receive and heed his parting gift, we can be sure that we abide in the Father’s love, just as Jesus did.