

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 118:4 (2012) 354-375 by Raymond F. Collins.

Some years ago Washington’s James Cardinal Hickey shared with me that during vacation he liked to attend Sunday Mass in a church where he was not known and listen to the homily. Spending some of the time in Florida this past winter that my senior status and semi-retirement allows gave me the opportunity to have a similar experience, to sit in the pew and listen. This experience has prompted me to reflect some more on the nature of the homily.

I will continue to comment on the homily in my next contribution to “Breaking the Word.” In the meantime, I recall a remark made by one leading member of a parish to a group of parishioners. Supported by the parish priests, the parish-leader observed that the homily should make the congregation feel good.

But is making people feel good the real purpose of a homily? Is that what a homily is all about? Is God’s word intended to make us feel good? If so, the homily can easily lead to self-righteousness and a judgmental attitude towards others. We are the ones to whom Jesus’ promises and consoling words are directed; God’s challenging and sometimes condemnatory words are meant for others. We are not like them, those “other people” of Luke 18:11.

Truth to tell, God’s words are often challenging. Sometimes they make us feel uncomfortable, as some of Jesus’ home-town folks (cf. Mark 6:1-6a, the gospel lection for July 8) and many of Jesus’ disciples (John 6:60-68, the lection for August 26) discovered.

Rather than being intended to make us feel good, the purpose of the homily is to actualize the word of God, to allow God’s word to be relevant to our present day and circumstances. In this regard, the words of a recent biblical study are pertinent: “For the New Testament authors as well as for the authors of these Jewish writings, ‘Scripture’ was not simply a text coming from a distant past. The *Tanach*, the three-part collection of Jewish Scriptures consisting of the Torah, the Prophets, and the ‘Writing,’ was received as God’s word for the present.” (*The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2012], 49). Homilies stand within this biblical tradition.

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 1, 2012

LITURGY

Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-25 provides a key to the interpretation of today’s gospel reading by speaking about the imperishability of human beings.

2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15, the final Sunday reading from the Second Letter to the Corinthians, is part of Paul’s plea that the Corinthians be generous in their support of impoverished Christians in Jerusalem.

Mark 5:21-43 describes Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus from the dead and curing the woman with severe vaginal bleeding, perhaps due to menstrual difficulties.

The two stories have been joined together by Mark who uses his well-known sandwich device, inserting one story into the narrative of another. In this case the story of the woman with the hemorrhage (vv. 25-36) has been joined to the story of the raising of the young girl (vv. 21-24, 37-43). The two stories are clearly miracle stories with the three-fold scheme of 1) the difficult circumstances of the miracle; 2) the simplicity of the description of the actual miracle; 3) the attestation of the cure.

There are similarities and differences between the two stories. Among the similarities are that Jesus is the principal in both and that a female is the beneficiary of Jesus’ saving action.

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Both of the women are described as “daughter” (vv.23, 34, 35) Both narratives attribute the miracle to faith, apropos of which Jesus makes a comment (vv. 34, 36). Both stories portray Jesus’ interlocutor as being on their knees as they spoke to Jesus (vv. 22, 34). In both instances, a period of twelve years is mentioned (vv. 25, 42). Some commentators suggest that this temporal element might be related to child-bearing. The woman with the flow of blood would have been unable to bear children during the time of her illness; the daughter of Jairus was on the cusp of the age for marriage and child-bearing. Jesus enables each of them to fulfill what was expected of women in his society, namely being a mother

Among the differences between the stories is the contrast between Jairus and the anonymous woman. He is named; she remains anonymous. He is a leader of the synagogue; she is excluded from the synagogue. He is a public figure, relatively wealthy—he doesn’t live in a one-room house—and apparently with servants, who can approach Jesus and dialogue with him, asking for a cure for his daughter. She acts in solitary and hidden fashion. Humble and fearful, she dares only to touch the fringe of his clothes. Throughout the centuries, Christian art has portrayed the woman as being at Jesus’ feet, an iconic representation of her humility. She touches Jesus’ clothes; Jesus touches the young girl. After her cure, the woman tells Jesus the whole truth (v. 33); Jesus orders that no one speak about the raising from the dead of Jairus’ daughter.

The story of the daughter of Jairus is ultimately a story about resurrection from the dead because of Jesus. The father’s plea to Jesus, “that she may get well [*sothe*, literally, “be saved”] and live,” anticipates her being saved from death and restored to life. While Jesus was on his way to his house, the word came that it was too late; the young girl had already died. Perhaps Jesus’ delay in dealing with the woman lengthened the time required for him to get to the house.

When Jesus does arrive at the house, the funeral rituals have already begun. The mourners deride Jesus but Jesus tells them to leave. He allows only the inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John (cf. Mark 9:2; 14:33) to enter the room with him. In any case, there was probably not enough room for more than five in the room. Using the Aramaic “*talitha koum*,” “Little girl, get up,” Jesus brings about her resurrection. The use of authoritative language is a feature of miracle stories as is the use of a foreign language—Jesus, of course, would have spoken Aramaic but Mark’s narrative was written in Greek. The girl immediately responded to Jesus command. Jesus ordered that she be given something to eat, a sure sign that she is alive and well. His command that no one should know this—implausible in itself since Jesus was followed by crowds and there was a crowd of mourners at the house—is an instance of the so-called “Markan secret.”

Jewish tradition going back to biblical times was very much concerned about contact with blood (Lev 12:7; 15:25). A man was not allowed to have intercourse with his wife during her menses. Because of her hemorrhage, the woman was considered ritually impure and was unable to marry. Apparently she did not want to make Jesus unclean; she touched only his clothes, not Jesus himself. Her faith is faith in Jesus’ power to heal. Jesus has divine power; he realized that “power had gone out from him” after she touched his clothes. Mark’s use of this kind of language would make sense in the Hellenistic world, with its stories of “divine men” (*theoi andres*). The woman realized what had happened to her and, in fear and trembling, approaches Jesus when he inquires about the one who had touched him. Jesus addresses her as “daughter,” a sign that she is included in the family of those who believe in God. His subsequent words confirm the miracle that has taken place.

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BROKEN FOR US

The two miracle stories in today’s gospel portray Jesus’ reaching out to two women in distress. We know the names of neither woman. What is important is that Jesus reached out to each of them, despite the difficulties of doing so. The young girl was already dead by the time that Jesus arrived. The “impure” woman dared only to touch his clothes. The gist of the stories is that Jesus ministers to people in their need, not that Jesus is a great miracle worker whose mighty deeds draw the adulation of the crowds. Jesus did not work miracles for the sake of working miracles (cf. Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:11-13). He was not someone who wanted people to come and see what he could do. As a matter of fact, Jesus even tells those who knew about the raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead that they were not to talk about it.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 8, 2012

LITURGY

Ezekiel 2:2-5 is an oracle that announces that people will rebel against the prophet Ezekiel, the son of man.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 contains a powerful paradoxical statement about Paul’s ministry, “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

Mark 6:1-6a recalls the story of Jesus’ own family thinking him to be out of his mind (Mark 3:30-35). In today’s story, people from Jesus’ hometown, Nazareth (cf. Mark 1:9), show similar disdain.

Pious Jew that he was, Jesus entered the synagogue where every Jewish male had a right to speak. Jesus chose to exercise his right to speak. He began to preach, presumably as one with authority (cf. Mark 1:22). The audience was bowled over (*exeplessonto*) by what Jesus had to say. “Where did he get his wisdom and his ability to work miracles?” they asked. They accepted Jesus’ miracles but did not have faith. Disdainfully they noted that Jesus was only a carpenter—the basis for Matthew’s observation that Joseph was a carpenter (Matt 13:55)! Tradesmen were generally prohibited from speaking in the synagogue since they didn’t enjoy the leisure to acquire wisdom (cf. Sir 38:24). In a remark that contains Mark’s only mention of Mary, Jesus is identified as the kid from down the street, whose family is well-known. Basically the townsfolk thought that Jesus was unqualified to speak as he did and took offense.

Responding to them, Jesus quotes a traditional proverb, the only saying of Jesus that is found in all four canonical gospels (cf. Matt 15:57; Luke 4:24; John 4:44). Similar sayings can be found in both Hellenistic and Jewish literature. In Hellenistic literature this kind of saying was used by or in regard to wandering philosophers who were often unappreciated; in Jewish literature it was used to remind people that true prophets were often rejected. Jesus recognizes that his own people do not accept him and his prophetic ministry.

The short narrative concludes with two important statements. First, that Jesus was unable to do any miracles in his home town apart from curing a few sick people. The later evangelists, Matthew and Luke, found this statement difficult to handle. Matthew tones it down (cf. Matt 13:58) and Luke omits it (cf. Luke 4:16-30). The second statement is that Jesus was amazed at the people’s lack of faith, presumably the reason for his inability to work miracles among them (cf. Matt 13:58).

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Although today’s gospel reading is relatively short, it is very powerful and challenges those who hear it to think about two things. One relates to what Jesus did, the other to what he said.

First, that people can be aware of God’s mighty deeds and yet not have faith. Miracles, of themselves, do not produce faith. The beauty of nature, of itself, does not produce faith. That this is so goes contrary to something that was paramount in traditional apologetics. Faith is a gift of God; it is not the result of human reasoning, no matter how well intentioned.

Second, people have a tendency to reject prophets. They, like the townsfolk in today’s gospel, are bowled over by what prophets have to say. Consequently, they take offense. They reject what they hear. This is as true in our day as it was in Jesus day and in the Hellenistic and Jewish cultures around him. Who are the prophets in our midst? It is easier to complain that there are no more prophets than to listen to the prophetic voices in our midst.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 15, 2012

LITURGY

Amos 7:12-15 describes the priest Amaziah’s attempt to banish Amos, the prophet.

Ephesians 1:3-14 begins the semi-continuous reading of the Epistle to the Ephesians, an essay on the church, written by one of Paul’s disciples in the latter part of the first century C. E. The epistle begins with a formal benediction, a *berakah*.

Mark 6:7-13 contains Mark’s version of the mission of the Twelve. It is to be noted that, although Jesus “sent the disciples out” (*apostollein*), he does not call the Twelve his “apostles” in Mark’s version of the mission of the disciples.

Jesus’ sending the Twelve out in pairs hearkens back to the Jewish tradition in which the testimony of a single person is deemed to be inadequate (cf. Deut 17:6). The practice was continued in the early church, as Luke implies with his several mentions of a pair of disciples working together: Peter and John (Acts 3:1-11), Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:42-15:12), and Paul and Silas (Acts 15:40-17:15). Paul’s letters are generally “co-authored” (e. g., 1 Thess 1:1), a sign that others were associated with him in the evangelization of the communities to which he was writing. His mission was not a mission sole. Preaching of the gospel is a community effort; not a single individual’s task.

The authority (*exousian*) over unclean spirits that Jesus gave the Twelve suggests that they were to continue Jesus’ mission. Jesus’ ministry can be summed up as a victory over the demonic, over Satan (cf. Mark 1:13-14) and unclean spirits (Mark 1:23-26). That was the point of his controversy with scribes who claimed that Jesus cast out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Mark 3:22-27).

Jesus’ instructions to the Twelve recall Exodus motifs (cf. Exod 12:11; Deut 8:4; 29:5) but they would also reflect the practices of wandering philosophers, particularly Cynics, who expected to receive some provisions from their supporters as they travelled on their way.

Jesus’ statement about the different kinds of reception that the Twelve might encounter reflects the situation of the early church, in which the house was the locale *par excellence* in which the gospel was preached. Mark’s gospel features the house as a locus of Jesus’ activity and a place where he instructed his disciples. The notion that a pair of travelling evangelists should stay in a house in which they have been welcomed, rather than abandon that location for better digs, seems more apropos to the situation of the later church than it would be to the short

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visit of a travelling missionary, who might require lodging for a day or two.

The summary with which the narrative concludes (vv. 12-13) portrays the Twelve as continuing Jesus’ ministry of preaching, calling people to repentance, casting out demons, and curing the sick. That they are said to use oil in ministering to the sick likewise seems to reflect the situation of the later church. Eugene Boring comments that, “Ecclesiology corresponds to Christology” (*Mark* [NTL. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006], 176), a point well-taken even though the narrative speaks about missionaries rather than to the body of all believers.

BROKEN FOR US

“Ecclesiology corresponds to Christology.” What we expect of the church corresponds to what we know about Christ. In today’s gospel, the Twelve—symbolically representing the new people of God—carry on Jesus mission of preaching the gospel, calling people to repentance, conquering the forces of evil, and taking care of the sick.

The discussions on universal health care that have taken place during the past few years remind us that many Christians do not really believe that taking care of the sick is a constituent element of Christian reality, part of the mission of the church. Speaking and doing something about evil, especially on the macro-level--an unjust war that claimed the lives of two percent of the Iraqi population, rampant poverty and homelessness, hundreds of thousands of abortions paid for by health insurance companies that make most of their money selling policies that include abortion coverage, to name a few examples--has been virtually abandoned within the Catholic church in the U.S. Today’s gospel calls the church to evaluate its priorities in terms on the continuation of Jesus’ mission and ministry in our times and political circumstances.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 22, 2012

LITURGY

Jeremiah 23:1-6 is an oracle that pronounces a woe on shepherds who do not lead the people well and gives a promise that a new leader will be raised up.

Ephesians 2:13-18 gives us the wonderful image of Christ Jesus breaking down the wall that separates Jews from Gentiles.

Mark 6:30-34 begins with the report of the “apostles,” those who had been sent out two-by-two. This is the only time that the word “apostle” appears in Mark’s gospel but in this context the word may be more functional than it is titular.

As had been the case in his earlier narrative about Jesus, Mark does not give the content of what the apostles taught. There is, nonetheless, an implied contrast between Jesus and his disciples. Whereas he had been rejected by the people of his home town (Mark 6:1-6a, the gospel reading for July 8), the apostles appear to have been successful in their mission of deed and word.

Jesus invites them to take it easy for a while. This was difficult to do since so many people were milling about, coming and going. The apostles did not even have enough time to eat. The allusion to food prepares the way for the story of the feeding of the five thousand which follows immediately in Mark’s narrative (Mark 6:35-44) and links the episode to the long section in Mark’s gospel where the motif of eating is prominently featured (Mark 6:30-8:21).

In order to get some rest and have an opportunity to eat something, Jesus and disciples

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get into a boat and go a place where there are not many people. But they have no luck. People walk the shore of the Sea of Galilee and arrive at the spot before Jesus and the apostles do. The spot may have been one frequented by Jesus. This would have enabled people to know where Jesus was headed. The idea of rest, introduced in verse 31, alludes to Psalm 23 (cf. Ps 23:2), today’s responsorial psalm, whose motifs echo throughout Mark’s story of the feeding of the five thousand.

Seeing the crowd, the heart of the all-knowing Jesus as moved with pity. To him, they were like sheep without a shepherd. Mark’s scriptural language (cf. Num 27:17) evokes images of royal messianism. “Sheep” is a traditional biblical image for the people of God (e. g., Ps 100:3; Isa 53:6). “Shepherd”—the occupation of David at the time of his anointing—is a royal image. Although the Lord is the true leader of shepherd of Israel (Pss. 23:1; 28:9; 80:1; Isa 40:11), the kings of Israel were appointed to be the Lord’s vice-regents as shepherds of Israel (cf. 1 Chr 17:6; Ps 78:71) but they often failed in their task (cf. Jer 23:1-4, today’s first reading; Ezek 34). Feeding the five thousand, Jesus will show himself to be a good shepherd of the flock. In the meantime, he began to teach them many things. Once again, Mark does not specify the content of Jesus’ teaching.

BROKEN FOR US

The Fathers of the Church often suggest that we identify with one of the characters in the gospel narratives. From a literary standpoint, both the “apostles” and “the people” are literary characters.

Many people--and these days many overextended clergy--can identify with “the apostles” who were so busy that they didn’t really have time to rest nor time to have a proper meal. Probably all of us have been able to identify with this situation at least once in our lives. Today’s gospel reading suggests that, notwithstanding these circumstances, we need to get away with Jesus and be fed by him. The people’s time to celebrate the Sunday eucharist and our time to pray the office are privileged moments in which we and they are taught and fed by Jesus.

As for our identifying with “the people” in today’s gospel, do we not sometimes appear to have an aimless existence? Do we not often seem to be people who need real leadership both within the civic sphere and in the church? Does what our political and ecclesiastical leaders say and do provide us with a direction in which to lead our lives?

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 29, 2012

LITURGY

2 Kings 4:42-44 tells about Elisha’s insistence that twenty barley loaves, made from the first fruits, be shared with a hundred people.

Ephesians 4:1-6 incorporates a famous septad on the unity of the church.

John 6:1-15 replaces Mark’s story of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:35-44) and prepares the way for the reading of selections from the Johannine Discourse on the Bread of Life that will follow during the next four weeks.

The scene is set in verses 1-4. The focus is on Jesus. Crowds are following him because of the miracles that Jesus performed for the benefit of the sick. In Johannine terminology these miracles are called “signs” because of what they tell us about Jesus. Thus far, only two such

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signs have been reported in the Fourth Gospel, namely, the cure of the royal official’s son (John 4:46-53) and the healing of the lame man on the Sabbath (John 5:2-8).

Jesus goes up a mountain where he sits down, adopting the traditional posture of a rabbi who is about to teach his disciples. The long discourse on the Bread of Life, delivered on the following day in the synagogue of Capernaum (John 6:22, 59) will follow shortly in the Johannine narrative. Passover was approaching. The mountain may recall Moses’ association with a mountain (Exod 19:3, 14, 20; 24:12, 15-18). Moses will figure prominently in the Discourse on the Bread of Life. It is to be noted that the evangelist carefully separates the crowd that followed Jesus from the disciples who went up the mountain with him.

The narrative itself follows the traditional form of a miracle story, with distinctive Johannine features. Jesus saw the large crowd, some five thousand men (*andres*, v. 10) and posed a rhetorical question, “Where can we buy enough food for them to eat” (cf. Num 11:13). Jesus was obviously in command; he knew what he was going to do (v. 6b). Philip responded with notable naiveté: more than a half-year’s wages wouldn’t buy enough food for all those people. Andrew’s response was not much better. He reported that there was a youngster in the crowd who had five barely loaves and a couple of dried fish but that wouldn’t be enough food to go around. Apparently the pair had not grown very much in faith since their initial encounter with Jesus (John 1:40-43).

That the loaves are said to be barley loaves—a trait not mentioned in the Synoptics’ accounts of the feeding story (cf. Mark 6:35-44 and parallels)—may reflect the practice of the church to use ordinary bread, the bread of the poor (cf. 2 Kgs 4:42 in today’s first reading), in the celebration of the eucharist. The problem, in a nutshell, was that five thousand men were hungry because they followed Jesus (vv. 5-9). The Israelites who followed Moses at the desert were also hungry, that is, until God provided manna for them to eat.

The solution to the problem is the sign that Jesus performs (vv. 10-14). The green grass recalls the “verdant pastures” of Ps 23:2. Jesus has the people recline. They adopt the traditional posture for dining. In a ritual gesture Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them. The evangelist’s telling of the story so focuses on Jesus that he himself is said to distribute the loaves rather than calling upon the assistance of the disciples for this task (cf. Mark 6:41). Jesus also distributed the fish but the emphasis is clearly on the bread.

The result was that the men had more than enough to eat (vv. 12-13). There was some left over (cf. 2 Kgs 4:44 in today’s first reading). The Johannine “fragments” are, literally, “broken pieces” (*klasmata*) of bread. That none of the bread be lost recalls Exodus 16 but some scholars see this as an anticipation of the eucharist, known in the early church as the “breaking of the bread” (*klasis tou artou*, Luke 24:35; cf. *Didache* 9:3). The eucharist remains available to believers after Jesus’ Passover death on earth. That there are “twelve” baskets-full of pieces of broken is symbolic.

This proof of the reality of the miracle is matched by a choral response. The people proclaim that Jesus is a prophet, the one who is to come into the world. He is the prophet like Moses promised long ago (Deut 18:15-18). They were going to make Jesus the prophet-king but Jesus brings the incident to a close by departing from them. He went back to the mountain alone. It must be noted that the faith of the people was just a faith based on signs (vv. 2, 14).

BROKEN FOR US

In reading today’s gospel story, so full of symbolism, we must be aware that the emphasis is on Jesus’ action of feeding the people. The evangelist notes that five thousand men

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had more than enough to eat. Not once does the evangelist intimate that Jesus produced thousands of loaves from the few that were brought to him.

Details in the story recall not only the manna tradition and prepare for the Bread of Life Discourse but also the eucharist, whose institutional gestures are rehearsed in this story (cf. Mark 14:22). Surely, we must look to the eucharist as a meal in which we are fed by Jesus, with a food that does not perish. In this respect, the eucharist is clearly different from the manna of old.