An excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* 118:3 (2012) 267-285 by Raymond F. Collins.

Although Cycle B is the year of Mark, only three passages from the oldest of the canonical gospels are read during the months of May and June. And one of these passages, the reading for the Feast of the Ascension, Mark 16:15-20, was not part of the original gospel written about the year 70 A.D.

The reason, of course, is that during the month of May we are still in the Easter season, when the readings are taken from the Fourth Gospel. The readings for the fifth, sixth, and seventh Sundays of Easter, as well as the reading for the Feast of Pentecost, are taken from the most recent of the canonical gospels and reflect its distinctive Christology and ecclesiology. We return to the semi-continuous reading of Mark on June 17, the eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time.

The following Sunday, June 24, the reading of Mark is again interrupted as we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist. The feast calls for the Lukan narrative of the birth, circumcision, and naming of the Messiah's precursor. With the first Sunday of July, the reading of Mark resumes but not for long. Just two weeks later, on July 20, the seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we shall read from the Johannine reflection on the Bread of Life found in John 6. That account will provide the Sunday gospel readings from then until the end of August.

On this year's celebration of the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, we shall proclaim Matthew's account of the Great Commission, the finale to his story about Jesus.

It is rare that, in any given two-month period, the Sunday readings come from all four canonical gospels. That they do not do so this May and June gives us who preach an opportunity to reflect on the unique character of each of the four canonical accounts of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. That awareness should accompany us whenever we go to the pulpit to preach. We should see Jesus through different eyes so as to be able to appreciate more fully the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 6, 2012

LITURGY:
Acts 9:26-31 describes the introduction of Saul to the apostles and disciples in Jerusalem.
1 John 3:18-24 is an exhortation to love one another in deed and in truth.
John 15:1-8 contains the familiar image of the vine and the vine-dresser.

When two of John's disciples left him to follow Jesus, they asked him "where are you staying?" In reply, Jesus said "Come and see" (Jn 1:38-39). In this way, the evangelist introduced the idea of "abiding"—the Johannine motif of mutual indwelling—using the Greek verb, *meno*, a verb that is variously translated as "stay," "abide," or "remain," as it is the New American Bible translation of today's gospel reading. "Abiding" is the leitmotif of today's reading. The Greek verb *meno* appears twice in verse 4 and once each in verses 6, 7, and 8. It recurs in verse 9, the beginning of next week's gospel (Jn 15:9-17). As a result, some scholars are of the opinion that verses 9-11 are better understood when read with verses 1-8 than they are when read with verses 12-17.

The first part of today's reading (vv.1-5a) has as its focus the theme of abiding in Jesus. It begins with "I am the true vine," one of the Fourth Gospel's memorable "I am" (*ego eimi*) sayings (cf. Jn 4:26; 6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6). The saying is repeated in verse 5. Thus, "I am the vine," brackets verses 1-5a in such a way that verses 1-5a are, by the evangelist's own design a distinctive unit within today's reading.

That Jesus describes himself as the real vine, the "true" vine. This must be understood in the light of the biblical tradition that speaks of Israel as a vine or a vineyard (Jer 2:21; Ezek 19:10-14; Ps 80:14-15; Isa 5:1-7; 27:2-6). The vinedresser, the Father, takes care of the vine so that it bears fruit. Pruning the branches that are not fruit-bearing and trimming of those that bear fruit is a necessary part of the task, as any vinedresser in Jesus' time and ours can attest. Only when properly pruned does a vine fully communicate life to the branches that adhere to it and draw life from it. The disciples have been trimmed

(v. 3a) in the reception of Jesus' word. Now they must remain attached to him—they must abide in him—in order to bear fruit.

The second part of the reading (vv. 5b-8) focuses on the consequences of abiding and not abiding in Jesus, the vine. The branches that abide in Jesus will bear fruit; those that no longer abide in him can be gathered up for firewood (cf. Matt 5:13's image of salt that has lost its savor). Fruitful branches, the disciples, must abide in Jesus and in his word if they are to bear fruit. Bearing fruit suggests vital activity, in this case the love about which Jesus had spoken to the disciples (John 13:34-35). Jesus has loved much; so also must the disciples who abide in Jesus love much.

The role of the Father, the vinedresser, in this part of the reading should not be overlooked. The passive voice of the verbs in verse 6, "thrown out" and "burned," is a theological passive, suggesting the activity of God. Another use of the passive, in verse 8, "it will be done for you," suggests that the Father will hear the prayer of Jesus' disciples. All this, of course, is not for the glory of Jesus, still less for the glory of the disciples, it is for the glory of the Father himself.

BROKEN FOR US:

The form of the saying in verse 6, "Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither," suggests that the words are almost proverbial in nature. They have revelance beyond the group of disciples who were sharing the meal with Jesus. When the congregation hears "disciples," it should think of itself as a group of disciples, sharing a meal with him as did the group who shared that memorable meal in Jerusalem.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Fourth Gospel does not once mention the "apostles" of Jesus. The word *apostolos*—especially prominent in Luke—is absent from the vocabulary used by the evangelist in the Fourth Gospel. By using "disciples" as often as he does, the evangelist allows for an application of the text to later generations of disciples, as is clearly the case with today's reading because of the gnomic form of verse 6.

In sum, the congregations to which we preach are the disciples who are to abide in Jesus and in his words in order to bear the fruits of love.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 13, 2012

LITURGY:

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48 speaks of the coming of the Holy Spirit to Gentiles, exemplified by the centurion Cornelius.

1 John 4:7-10 contains a profound reflection on the nature of Christian love.

John 15:9-17 continues last week's gospel reading. The over-arching theme of the reading is love, *agape*. It is best understood when it is broken down into four sub-units.

The first unit (vv. 9-11) links this week's reading with last week's reading. Three times, once in verse 9 and twice in verse 10, the evangelist uses the verb *meno*, "remain" or "abide." Jesus tells the disciples that the source of his love for them is the Father's love for him. He abides in the Father's love insofar as he has kept the Father's "commandments." The meaning of what Jesus says is clear. Jesus keeps the Father's commandments insofar as he does the will of the Father and loves the disciples. In similar fashion, the disciples abide in Jesus' love, whose source is the Father's love, if they keep Jesus' commandments.

The unit concludes with Jesus telling the disciples that he has spoken as he did, not to burden them with obligations but to enable them to share in his joy and do so completely. Jesus' joy comes from the oneness that he has with the Father.

The second unit (vv. 12-14) takes up the topic of Jesus' commandments. In fact, there is only one commandment, namely, "love one another as I have loved you." There is a chain of love. The Father has

loved Jesus. Jesus has loved his disciples with a love that has its source in the Father's love for him. The disciples are to love one another with a love that has its source in Jesus' love for them. This is what is implied when Jesus says "as I have loved you." The disciples love for one another ultimately participates in the Father's love. On this chain of love, see Raymond F. Collins, "A New Commandment I Give to You, that You Love One Another . . ." (Jn 13:34)," in *These Things Have Been Written. Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 217-256.

Yet there is an additional dimension to "as I have loved you." That is the exemplary role of Jesus' love for the disciples. Jesus lays down his love for "his friends." His friends are those who heed his command to love one another. Jesus calls his disciples his friends rather than servants because he has shared the revelation of the Father with them. Jesus' friends should love one another unto death, emulating Jesus' love for them unto death.

To capture the full impact of Jesus' words, we might note that the Greek word for "friend" is *philos*. Related to the verb *philo*, "love," a friend is one who is loved. In this week's reading *agapo* is the verb used to mean "love" but the triple question posed to Peter in John 21:15-17 shows the basic similarity of the two verbs. Questioning Peter, the Johannine Jesus twice uses the verb *agapo*; once he uses *philo*. All three of Peter's responses use *philo*.

The third unit of today's reading (vv. 15-16) underscores the priority of Jesus' love for his disciples. Jesus has taken the initiative in the relationship between him and his disciples. He is the one who has chosen them (cf. Jn 13:18b); they did not choose him. Not only has he chosen them, he has commissioned them. They are appointed to bear the fruit of love. The image of fruit and the idea that prayer to the Father will be answered reprises recall the motifs of last week's gospel reading, John 15:1-8.

The lection's fourth unit (v. 17) brings closure to this part of the Farewell Discourse and reinforces the notion that Jesus has commanded one thing, namely, that his disciples love one another.

BROKEN FOR US:

The obvious topic for today's homily is love, but the homilist would be well advised to speak about the theological aspects of love that arise from today's gospel reading rather than using the homily merely as an occasion for a moral exhortation. One theological point is that by loving one another not only do we obey Jesus' commandment but we abide in Jesus and ultimately in the Father. By loving one another in response to Jesus' love for us and participating in that love, we are one with Jesus and one with the Father.

Another point that can be made is that just as Jesus' love unto death is the sacrament of the Father's love, so our love for one another is the sacrament of Jesus' love. Perhaps the most striking example of this is that spouses' love for one another is the sacrament of Jesus' love for them.

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Thursday, May 16 or Sunday, May 20, 2012

LITURGY:

Acts 1:1-11 is the Lukan account of Jesus' ascension into heaven.

Ephesians 1:17-23 contains a prayer that believers be enriched with the gifts of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ. The alternate reading, **Ephesians 4:1-13**, contains a reminder of the tradition of Paul's imprisonment, the seven-fold basis of Christian unity, and the gifts that the exalted Lord gives to the church.

Mark 16:15-20 is part of the so-called "longer ending" of the Gospel according to Mark.

Most biblical scholars consider that the original gospel ended at Mark 16:8. External and internal textual evidence, the subject of extensive study by textual critics, have led them to this conclusion, as a

result of which some recent commentaries on the gospel do not include substantive commentary on Mark 16:15-20.

Because Mark 16:8 mentions the silence and fear of the women who visited Jesus' empty tomb—not a happy ending to the Jesus' story, especially in the light of the Gospel according to Matthew, the most widely read gospel—the textual tradition includes several different added endings for Mark. Among them is the longer ending, Mark 16:9-20, which the Council of Trent deemed to be the canonical ending.

The opening verse of the reading appears to be based on Matthew 28:18-20, the conclusion of Matthew's account of the Great Commission. Verse 16, with its reference to belief and condemnation, is similar to John 3:18 (cf. also Acts 16:31). Verse 17, with its mention of exorcisms, recalls that casting out demons was part of the mission charge addressed to the Twelve (Mk 6:7, 13; cf. Mt 10:8; Lk 10:17) and the stories told in Acts 8:7 and 16:8. Speaking in tongues recalls not only the glossolalia associated with the Pentecost event (Acts 2:5-13) but also the speaking in tongues that was associated with Paul's ministry (Acts 19:6; 1 Cor 14:2, 6). As for picking up serpents (v. 18), Acts 28:2-6 contains an account of Paul's encounter with a viper on the island of Malta. The ministry of laying hands on the sick is otherwise attested in James 5:14-15. In sum, this segment of today's reading appears to be a construct based on otherwise attested stories about some of the activities of various leaders in the early church.

The gospel reading's short account of the Ascension (v. 19) is similar to what is read in Luke 24:50-51. It includes an allusion, sitting at the right hand, to Ps 110: 1, the Old Testament verse most often quoted or referenced in the New Testament. The final verse of the reading, the finale of the longer ending of Mark, sums up the Acts of the Apostles which mentions that the word that is proclaimed is confirmed through signs (Acts 14:3).

BROKEN FOR US:

It is not the task of the homilist to speak about textual criticism, but it is useful for us preachers to be aware of these issues lest any Bible-reading church-goer be confused when he or she looks at today's reading in the New Testament.

The homily might well focus on the continuity between the preaching of the gospel by Jesus' disciples which was accompanied by wondrous deeds even during Jesus' ministry on earth (Mk 6:8, 13), and the preaching of the gospel throughout the Greco-Roman world and the miracles that took place at that time in the decades immediately after Jesus' ascension. Included as well is the preaching of the gospel throughout the world and the marvelous works accomplished by believers in the twenty-first century.

In the first-world soup kitchens and Catholic hospitals are signs of the gospel. Clinics and the efforts of so many health-care workers who dedicate weeks and sometimes years of their lives to care for the sick in the third world are wonderful expressions of God's power at work in the twenty-first century. As I write I think, with real gratitude, of my dentist who spends a week every year just pulling teeth in Haiti with no time to do any other dental work there. I am also thinking about people like Ashley, a young nurse who once lived in the parish where I preach, and who has just begun a two-year stint in Honduras.

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 20, 2012

LITURGY:

Acts 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26 tells the story of Matthias, who was chosen to replace Judas and bring the number of "The Twelve" up to its full complement.

1 John 4:11-16 speaks of our love for one another as our response to the love of God for us.

John 17:11b-19 is part of the high priestly prayer of John 17.

The reading begins with Jesus addressing God as "Holy Father," a phrase that does not otherwise occur in the New Testament. In the Fourth Gospel, God is often presented as the Father of Jesus; the

attribute "holy" comes from the Jewish tradition which presents holiness as an attribute of God and a quality of those who belong to God. The section of Jesus' prayer to the Father that has been chosen for today's reading can be divided into two parts. In the first part (vv. 11b-16), Jesus prays that the Father show himself to be father to the disciples. In the second part (vv. 17-19), Jesus asks the Father to demonstrate his holiness in regard to the disciples.

The first part of the prayer asks that the disciples be kept "in your name," that is, in the godhead insofar as it can be known. Almost as a motivation, Jesus tells the Father that he has taken care of the disciples. The apparent exception, "the son of destruction," is not Judas; it is Satan, the evil one—mentioned explicitly in verse 15—the description with which Satan is identified in the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:13), as Frank Moloney correctly argues (*The Gospel of John* [*Sacra Pagina* 4. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998], 467-468).

As Jesus is on his way to the Father, he asks that the Father take care of the sometimes weak disciples that he is leaving behind. They are in the world, but they do not belong to "the world," the realm of the evil one according to the jargon of the Fourth Gospel. That they do not belong to the world emulates Jesus' own condition; he did not belong to the world. Because not of the world, the disciples of Jesus have been hated, just as Jesus himself was opposed by the forces of the evil one. Despite the hatred directed toward the disciples, Jesus prays that they experience the joy that he experiences in his union with the Father (cf. Jn 15:7-11 16:24).

The second part of the reading asks that the Father demonstrate his holiness vis-à-vis the disciples. Jesus has addressed the Father as "holy," the adjective *hagios*. Three times his prayer speaks of the consecration of the disciples, using the verb *hagiazo*, a verb that literally means "make holy." Made holy, the disciples belong to God. The disciples are made holy, "consecrated" in the NAB translation, in the knowledge of God, the "truth" —once again, an example of Johannine idiom. Jesus has consecrated himself in the fulfillment of his hour, his death/glorification.

This part of the prayer includes an important mission statement, "As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world" (v. 18). The disciples are to continue Jesus' mission but they will only be able to do so if they abide in the holiness of the Father just as Jesus himself abided in the Father. We are Jesus' latter day disciples; we are to continue his mission and thus abide in the Father.

BROKEN FOR US:

In many ways the high priestly prayer of Jesus is one of the most consoling parts of the New Testament. Jesus prays not only for the disciples who accompanied him in his Galilean and Judean ministries but also "on behalf of those who believe in me through their word" (John 17:20, the verse that immediately follows today's gospel lection). In the high priestly prayer Jesus prays for us who believe.

His prayer for us is that the Father allows us to experience his paternal love and care even in the circumstances of our "worldly" existence when we feel the oppression of the evil one, the son of perdition. Jesus' prayer for us is also that we abide in the knowledge and experience of God. He prays that we possess the "truth" and remain holy—set apart, in some sense, from "the world." Jesus does not pray that we become pious; rather, he prays that we belong to God, that we are holy as God is holy (Lev 11:44).

PENTECOST SUNDAY

May 27, 2012

LITURGY:

Acts 2:1-11 contains Luke's account of the Pentecost experience.

1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 speaks of the different gifts of the Spirit and of the Spirit-facilitated unity-in-diversity of the body of Christ. The alternate reading, **Galatians 5:16-25**, contrasts a list of vices and a

list of virtues, describing the former as the works of the flesh and the latter as the fruits of the Spirit.

John 20:19-23, the Johannine account of the gift of the Spirit, was used as the gospel lection on May 1, 2011, the Second Sunday of Easter in Cycle A, and again on June 12, 2011, Pentecost Sunday in Cycle A. My exegetical reflections on that reading can be found in *Emmanuel* 117 (2011) 261-281. The alternate reading, **John 15:26-27; 16:12-15**, is a composite of two short passages in Jesus' Farewell Discourse that speak about the Spirit. The "Spirit of truth" is the catch-phrase that links the two passages with one another.

With its promise of the Advocate, John 15:26-27 interrupts the flow of Jesus' discourse in the discourse to such a degree that some scholars think that it was addition to the text at some point in its history. Jesus promises the "Paraclete"—a transcription of the Greek *ho parakletos*, a term that is notoriously difficult to translate. The Greek suggests that a paraclete is one who has been called to one's side, much as a lawyer is called to the side of a defendant. Thus, the New American Bible opts for "Advocate" as a translation. This description of the Paraclete coheres well with the Fourth Gospel's constant picture of the disciples testifying to Jesus in hostile circumstances (cf. John 1:19). The "Advocate" will assists the disciples as they bear witness to Jesus.

The evangelist also identifies the Paraclete as "the Spirit of truth," one of the Johannine idioms that also appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls. This double terminology appears in an earlier passage in the Fourth Gospel when Jesus tells his disciples that he will ask the Father to give them another Advocate (J 14:16-17; cf. 14:26). In the earlier passage, the Father is to send the Advocate; now Jesus is associated with the Father in the sending of the Advocate. The evangelist's notation that the Advocate "proceeds from the Father" speaks of the priority of the Father in the mission of the Spirit; nonetheless, the Father and Jesus are one as we hear in John 10:30.

The second passage, John 16:12-15, talks about the role of the Spirit of Truth. The Farewell Discourse is coming to a close. Jesus' mission on earth is coming to a close. There is a lot more for Jesus to say but there is little time and the disciples are weak and fragile. So, the promised Spirit of Truth will lead the disciples to the fullness of truth, the full knowledge of God, after Jesus' departure. The Spirit of Truth is the other Advocate (Jn 14:16) who will bring the disciples to the fullness of truth.

The message of the Spirit of Truth is the message of Jesus, articulated for a new era. Ultimately, the Spirit speaks what he hears from the Father, just as Jesus testified to what he had heard (Jn 3:32; cf. also 7:16-18; 8:26-28; 12:49-50; 14:10).

BROKEN FOR US:

Pentecost is the celebration of the Spirit's presence in and with Jesus' disciples after his return to the Father. The Spirit's revelatory role is to articulate the meaning of the message of Jesus, the message that comes from the Father, in new and hostile times.

Although there is no new revelation, the meaning of Jesus' words and ministry must be unfolded in ever changing sets of circumstances and conditions of life. The Spirit is not sent simply to remind us of what Jesus said; the Spirit is sent so that we understand the meaning of Jesus' words for the times in which we live.

The "world" that Jesus lived in and that we now live in is hostile to his message. It does not want to hear and accept the message of Jesus. It puts us on the defensive, just as Jesus was confronted by those whom the Fourth Evangelist calls "the Jews." The Spirit is sent to strengthen and encourage us as we speak a truth that falls on deaf and sometimes hostile ears.