An excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* 117:5 (2011) 460-478 by Raymond F. Collins. September 2011

A Sunday homily should not be a lesson in exegesis. What I offer in "Breaking the Word" are exegetical comments that hopefully enable the reader to better understand and proclaim the text that serves as the basis for the Sunday homily.

While the homily should not be a lesson in exegesis, it should, nonetheless, respect the nature and purpose of the biblical text. As is to be expected, publication requirements demand that my comments be written months in advance of their appearance in *Emmanuel*. I am writing the current installment of "Breaking the Word" in late May. This past Sunday I attended a retiree's final liturgy. The retiring celebrant who was also the homilist deftly made use of the idea that the gospel reading, John 14:1-12, belonged to Jesus' farewell discourse. Jesus was about to depart and so was the celebrant. The homily, the celebrant's "farewell discourse," was a good example of fidelity to the biblical text without making an exegesis of it and was particularly appropriate to the day's circumstances.

The readings from Matthew's Gospel that appear in the current series of Sundays in Ordinary Time require particular attention. Matthew's Gospel was written in the 80s, more than a half century after Jesus' death and resurrection. The readings reflect the circumstances of Matthew's Jewish-Christian community almost as much as they reflect what Jesus "actually" said and did. In effect, the Matthean readings are almost like a homily on the traditional material that had been handed down for several decades.

The homilist must bear in mind that several of the Matthean texts were directed against the Jewish leaders of his day. They critique Jewish leaders, Sadducees, scribes, and Pharisees, for the way in which they exercised their leadership. The proper application of these texts is to ourselves as homilists and leaders of the church. Preaching them requires tact and sensitivity as well as frankness and honesty, along with a good examination of conscience.

A pitfall to be avoided in preaching several of the Matthean texts is a blanket condemnation of Jews and Judaism. That gospel texts not be used in such a way that they promote anti-Semitism is a particular concern of Pope Benedict XVI. All of us must share that concern. The reading of a gospel passage, such as the reading of Matt 21:33-43 on October 2, whose final verse is "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit" is not a condemnation of Jews nor is it a rejection of Jews. The homilist must take care lest the congregation leave church with a the wrong impression.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
September 4, 2011

LITURGY
Ezekiel 33:7-9 contains an oracle of the Lord which instructs people to admonish the wicked so that they abandon their evil ways.
Romans 13:8-10 sums up the Decalogue and all other commandments in the one command, that we love our neighbor (Lev 19:8).
Matthew 18:15-20 is directed to Matthew's Jewish-Christian community of believers, the "church." The evangelist has used a Q saying on admonishing a sinful fellow believer and forgiving the person should that one repent (Luke 17:3) to lay out the disciplinary practice of his community. The traditional saying should serve as a reminder that the goal of the disciplinary practice is that a sinner be led to repentance.

The first part of the reading describes a three-step procedure of rebuke similar to that in

use in the community from which the Dead Sea Scrolls came (cf. *Manual of Discipline* 5:23-6:1; *Damascus Document* 9:2-9). The first step is a one-on-one attempt to bring the sinner to repentance (cf. Lev 17:19; Jas 5:19-20). The Leviticus text and James (cf. CD 9:7-8) indicate that confronting the sinner in this fashion has the additional purpose of preventing the one who rebukes the sinner from becoming complicit in the latter's sin. Deut 19:15 provides the basis for the next step. If the one-on-one rebuke is not successful, additional witnesses should be called. The biblical text properly describes a judicial procedure, but Matthew applies it to a disciplinary matter.

Should the presence of additional witnesses not lead the sinner to repent, a third step is to followed. The attitude and behavior of the sinner are to be reported to the local community. The local community is identified as "the church" in Matthew (*ekklesia*; cf. Matt 16:18) and as "the Many" in the Qumran texts. If following the three-step procedure is unsuccessful, then the sinner should be shunned by the community (cf. 1 Cor 5:1-5; 2 Thess 3:6-15; 2 John 10). This kind of "excommunication" also has the reform of the sinner as its aim. Matthew's mention of "Gentile or tax collector" serves as a reminder that the procedure was in use in a Jewish-Christian community.

The second part of the reading provides a theological basis for the disciplinary procedure. Its first element is the power to bind and loose. The power given to Peter in 16:19 is now given to the community of disciples. The tense of the verbs suggests that some discernment is involved in the decision to shun the sinner and, hopefully, forgive him when he repents. The second element points to the importance of prayer in the disciplinary process (cf. 1 John 5:14-16). The NAB's "anything" translates the Greek *pragma* which clearly means "case" in this context. The third theological element is likewise relevant to the disciplinary procedure. The context is judicial rather than liturgical. Jesus words resemble what the Mishnah says apropos the study of the Law: "If two sit together and words of the Law are spoken between them, the Shekinah rests between them" (*m. 'Abot* 3:2). In rabbinic literature the "Shekinah" is the manifestation of the divine presence. Similarly, Jesus will be with the community in its effort to bring the recalcitrant sinner to repentance.

BROKEN FOR US

The gospel reading tells us that Matthew's Jewish-Christian community took very seriously the presence of sin in its midst. Together with other Jewish communities, it developed a process for dealing with sin. The reading provides a theological rationale for the procedures to be followed in trying to bring about the sinner's repentance.

When I met with a womens' bible study group a few weeks ago, one of the women present remarked that we never hear about sin any more. Today's gospel reading gives us an opportunity to talk about sin, about the community's stake in sin, about the believer's responsibility to help others to repent, and about the importance of forgiveness.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
September 11, 2011

LITURGY

Sirach 27:30-28:9 contains a number of the sage's aphorisms, including one that says, "Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your sins will be forgiven."
Romans 14:7-9 urges us to live and die for the Lord.

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Matthew 18:21-35 is the second part of a section of Matthew's gospel, whose first part was read last Sunday. Last week's passage was built on the Q saying preserved in Luke 17:3; today's has the saying in Luke 17:4 as its basis. The sub-unit is an extended exhortation to forgive repeatedly.

Today's gospel reading begins with a short dialogue between Peter and Jesus (vv. 21-22). The scene is one of several in Matthew in which the role of Peter is highlighted. The scene is not found in any other of the gospels. Jesus' response to Peter's question makes Peter's question absurd. In a relatively short 1995 article which appeared in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Eugene Boring insightfully observed, "Whoever counts has not forgiven at all."

The dramatic illustrative parable that follows (vv. 23-34) explains why the question is absurd. Forgiveness is grounded in the nature of God whose forgiveness knows no limits. The first verse (v. 23) sets the scene, using a typical Matthean formulation, "the kingdom of heaven is like" (cf. Matt 13:31, 33, 44, 45, 47; 20:1; 22:2).

Thereafter, the action moves quickly in three scenes. The principal actors are introduced in the first scene (vv. 24-27), a servant who has received a loan from the king and the king. The amount of the servant's loan (v. 27) was "huge." Many older translations reflect the words of Matthew's Greek text; the servant owed his master ten thousand talents. The amount was astronomical, the debt irredeemable. A single talent was roughly equivalent to sixteen years' wages for the ordinary day-laborer. In effect, the debt owed is really not able to be quantified, let alone, be fully understood. The servant, unable to pay back what he owes, pleads for mercy and the forgiving king remits the debt. The whole scene is clearly imaginative. Not only is the amount owed off the chart, but in Jesus' day wives and children of Jewish debtors could not be sold to pay off a debt.

In the second scene (vv. 28-30) the recipient of the king's mercy encounters a fellow servant who owes him a "much smaller amount." Again the older translations provided Matthew's number, a hundred denarii. A denarius was the amount that a day-laborer would expect to receive for a day's work. The amount owed was, in fact, very large, but not so large and to be unserviceable. Throttling his fellow servant, the recipient of the king's largesse turned a deaf ear to his plea and has him cast into debtor's prison.

The third scene (vv. 31-34) begins with the pair's fellow servants reporting the whole affair to the king. Incensed, the king demands that the unforgiving sinner be brought into his presence. He upbraids the servant for having learned nothing from the mercy that he had received. The irate king hands the servant over to jailers who would torture him until he had paid his debt—obviously an impossible thing for the man to do. Torture was, in fact, forbidden under Jewish law but the detail is added to illustrate the severity of the punishment.

The story is just a story. Its details are truly fantastic. The difference between the two debts is almost unimaginable. The point of the story is that we should learn forgiveness and mercy from the forgiveness and mercy that we have received from God. Jesus's final words are the story's denouement, "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart" (v. 35).

The parable is dramatizes the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:14-15). If we want mercy from God, we must show mercy to others.

BROKEN FOR US

The self-righteous society in which we live is one that all but rejects the notion of forgiveness. We want our pound of flesh. Justice demands no less. This tenth anniversary of

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9/11 is a stark reminder of our thirst for justice. We wanted justice to be done, no matter how much injustice our nation would cause as we sought justice for the perpetrators of those who had killed so many in the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon and wounded our national pride in the process.

The dramatic parable in today's gospel teaches us that such should not be the way of those who believe in God. Those who accept God as their king and master should learn from God's mercy. As God forgives us, so we must forgive one another.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
September 18, 2011

LITURGY
Isaiah 55:6-9 speaks about God's generosity, especially with forgiveness.
Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a is the first reading in the triennial cycle of the semi-continuous reading of Paul's Letter to the Philippians.
Matthew 20:1-16a begins with the familiar "the kingdom of heaven is like..." Like the parable in last week's gospel, this story is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. It is a true parable, not an allegory. Hence, the reader should not try to find an equivalent for each of the details in the story. He or she should also be aware that the kingdom is likened to the entire parable, not simply to the householder.

The parable is readily divided into two parts, the hiring (vv. 1-7) and the payment (vv.8-15). It is unusual for the householder to do the hiring; typically that role would be assigned to the steward, the master's chief of staff, as it were. The hiring takes place at different times of day, at dawn, about 9 A.M, noon, 3 P.M., and 5 P.M. Once again, older translations followed Matthew's words more closely and said that the master went out at dawn, the third hour, and so forth. This was in keeping with Jewish practice which counted "hours" as of sunrise. It would have been unusual for the master not to hire a sufficient work force but that is not the point. In parables, many details are introduced, not for the sake of verisimilitude but the overall point of the story. The first hired were promised the usual daily wage, a drachma or denarius (cf. Tob 5:15). Those hired at 9 A.M. were promised "what is just," a detail that prepares for the first workers' grumbling and the owner's response.

In the second part of the story, the household delegates the task of paying the workers to the steward. Payment takes place at the end of the day in keeping with Jewish law. It was not permitted to defer the payment of day workers until the following day (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14-15). That the workers were paid in reverse order of their being hired prepares for the grumbling of the first hired and the response of the owner, "I am not cheating you" (literally, "I did you no injustice").

The response suggests that the parable should be seen within the framework of the Matthean theme of justice/righteousness. The vineyard where the action takes place is a symbol of Israel (cf. Isa 5:1-7; Jer 12:10). The owner is a symbol of God. That more workers are needed throughout the day may suggest that the time of the harvest is near.

The parable offers a figurative description of the last judgment. At the last judgment God will generously reward those who have heeded the call. At that time, the usual human standards of status and achievement will be overturned. God's generosity is not to be measured by ordinary human standards. Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:13; 11:19)

attests to this fact, despite the grumbling of those who saw the people with whom Jesus associated.

BROKEN FOR US

This parable is generally called "the workers in the vineyard;" in fact, it is a story about the generous owner. It might more appropriately be named the parable of the generous employer.

God's generosity at the last judgment is the point of the story. God's gift of final salvation cannot be earned. The apostle Paul made a similar point when he wrote about justification by faith in his Letters to the Romans and the Galatians. While we must generously respond to God's call, what God will give us does not correspond to what we have achieved. We cannot present a bill to God for services rendered, as if God must meet our terms.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
September 25, 2011

LITURGY

Ezekiel 18:25-28 is an oracle that speaks about those who turn from a virtuous life to a life of sin and those who turn from a life of sin to embrace what is right and just.

Philippians 2:1-11 contains the beautiful christological hymn that also serves as the second reading on Palm Sunday.

Matthew 21:28-32, in its Matthean context, is a parable that relates the controversy about John the Baptist (Matt 12:23-27) to the dispute between Jesus and the chief priests and elders. The long last verse of today's reading (Matt 12:32) makes the connection explicit. Even when the Jewish leaders saw taxes and prostitutes accepting John's message of righteousness, they did not accept what he had to say.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the parable is followed by two others, the parable of the vineyard (21:33-46) and the parable of the wedding feast (22:1-14) that also relate to the controversy. These parables will be read on the next two Sundays, October 2 and 9.

The Matthean parable has some similarities with the Lukan Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) but the parable is found only in Matthew. Matthew's parable is an expanded proverb which is similar to stories found in Hellenistic (e. g., Seneca the Younger, *De beneficiis* 6.11.1-2) and Jewish literature (e. g., *Rabbah Exodus* 27.9) of that era. The point of the proverb is rather simple. Better to have a son who at first refuses to obey but changes his mind and obeys than one who says that he obeys but does not.

Matthew's setting of the little story in the parable makes it refer to a Jewish setting. The vineyard represents Israel, as it did in last week's gospel reading (Matt 20:1). Applied to the Jewish leadership, the chief priests and elders—note that in the Matthean narrative, Jesus is already in Jerusalem (see Matt 21:1) where his principal opposition comes from the priestly class rather than from the Pharisees, as it had when he was in Galilee—are those who professed their readiness to follow God's will but did not do it. They did not heed the warnings of John the Baptist; neither would they listen to Jesus.

BROKEN FOR US

The proverb that lies at the heart of today's gospel reading expresses what is in some ways a truism. It really is better to have someone reluctantly do something for us than to have

someone who says that they will do something but then doesn’t get the job done.

The gospel reading, however, applies the parable to Jewish leadership, its religious leadership. We should do the same. How often political candidates say the right thing and then do not produce what they have promised! Often they are supported by religious figures who laud them for what they say but do not hold them accountable when they do not produce.

We must never forget, however, that the parable was addressed to religious leaders. How often do we shy away from the promises that we made when we were ordained! How often have we who have been commissioned to preach the gospel failed to do so, perhaps because doing so would not be politically correct!