

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 119:5 (2013) 455-473 by Raymond F. Collins.

It is no secret that among the four writers of the canonical gospels Luke is the best writer. His use of the Greek language and his familiarity with Hellenistic literary devices would merit him first prize were he to be engaged in a literary contest with Matthew, Mark, and John. In so many different ways, Luke’s two-part composition, Luke-Acts, gives evidence of his literary skill.

The prologues to both the gospel and Acts show that Luke consulted various sources in gathering material for his two-part narrative. He found a way to hold this disparate material together in a unified composition. From our earliest acquaintance with the apostle Paul, we have been familiar with the three missionary voyages featured in Acts. This “travelogue” enabled Luke to share so many things about the apostle with his readers.

Equally important is the travelogue that appears in the Gospel according to Luke (9:52-19:27). It encompasses more than one third of the entire narrative. The evangelist composed his account of the journey to Jerusalem with material coming from different sources, Mark, the Sayings Source (Q), a tradition peculiar to him (L), and some material of his own composition.

Various episodes and different teachings of Jesus are often juxtaposed with one another in what seems to be—and may well be—haphazard fashion. They hang together as various incidents on the long journey to Jerusalem. All of the gospel readings during these next two months are taken from the Lukan travelogue.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 1, 2013

LITURGY:

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29 is a passage in which the sage speaks of humility and wisdom.

Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a uses imagery drawn from the Bible’s story about Moses at Mount Sinai as a comparison with the author’s description of the people of God gathering around God and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

Luke 14:1, 7-14 omits the short narrative of Jesus’ cure of the man with dropsy that took place in the home of one of the leading Pharisees. The liturgical reading presents us with the setting of the story and then immediately proceeds to Jesus’ confrontational after-dinner speech (cf. Luke 7:36-50; 11:37-53).

Jesus’ speech has no parallel in the other Synoptic gospels but it does recall Jesus’ rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees who “love places of honor at banquets” (Matt 23:6). The first part of the speech echoes motifs of conventional wisdom. Jewish wisdom and rabbinic literature speak about the importance of humility in social gatherings, as is seen in today’s first reading. The Book of Proverbs includes a passage rather similar to what Jesus says; “Claim n honor in the king’s presence, nor occupy the place of great men; for it is better that you be told, ‘Come up closer!’ than that you be humbled before the prince” (Prov 25:6-7).

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With its contrast of honor and embarrassment, the speech is designed to appeal to a Hellenistic audience in which honor and shame were dominant social values and motivational forces. In that society, humility was a negative quality rather than a positive one. “Humility” was a term used in reference to someone who was of low birth or worked at a lowly occupation. In early Christian moral exhortation, humility was positively regarded not only because of its roots in the Old Testament which speaks of humility in the presence of God (cf. .Prov 15:33; 18:12) but also because of its appreciation of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 10:1; Phil 2:8).

Jesus’ speech takes a decided turn in verse 11, when Jesus says: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” The verbs in the passive voice, “be humbled,” “be exalted,” suggest that it is God who humbles and God who exalts. Ultimately this is a statement of eschatological reversal. In the fullness of the kingdom, things will be different, as is said in Mary’s Magnificat, “He has thrown down the rules from their thrones but lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52).

The speech takes yet another turn in verse 12, when Jesus addresses his host directly. Jesus challenges him to take care of the poor and the disabled, an important motif throughout Luke’s narrative. The beatitude with which the speech concludes (v. 14) is the thirteenth beatitude in Luke’s gospel. Its formulation, adapted to the narrative context of Jesus’ advice to his host, is consistent with such earlier beatitudes as Luke 6:20, “Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours.”

BROKEN FOR US:

Probably all of us need a lesson in humility, at least from time to time. It is so easy for us, particularly in the society in which we live, to want to be numero uno or at least to have others regard us as numero uno. We want others to think of us as being better, more important, more knowledgeable, or more powerful than we really are. And we are generally rather adept at putting others down. Jesus’ words challenge us to remove that chip from our shoulders and be content with who we are, with our strengths and our weaknesses.

The words that Jesus addressed to the Pharisees can be relevant to this holiday weekend. This weekend is Labor Day weekend, the traditional last weekend of the summer season. Many families will be hosting Labor Day gatherings, with food and drink to spare. We could easily reach out to the poor and the disabled with a gift to the local food pantry or homeless shelter as we plan our parties. The gifts would really be appreciated. Indeed a gift equal to about 10% of the cost of our party would be a meaningful way of having the less fortunate share in our abundance.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 8, 2013

LITURGY:

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Wisdom 9:13-18b speaks of the human mind’s inability to comprehend fully the ways and will of God.

Philemon 9-10, 12-17 is a passage from the shortest of Paul’s extant letters. This Sunday is the only Sunday in the three-year cycle when a passage from Philemon is read.

Luke 14:25-33 is a complex lesson on discipleship. The narrative setting is Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem (9:52-19:27). As Jesus draws nearer to Jerusalem, the number of those following him increases. So Luke writes about the great crowds (*ochloi polloi*) that were travelling with Jesus.

The first two sayings in the instruction on discipleship come from the Sayings Source (Q; cf. Matt 10:37-38) which Luke has used in composing his story about Jesus. The first saying is rather harsh--so harsh, in fact, that Matthew has softened its language. Nevertheless, even in its Matthean form, the saying says that all relationships including the most personal and most important human relationships, must be relativized in order to follow Jesus. Indeed, life itself must be considered to be of less importance than following Jesus.

In its present form, the second saying on the radical nature of discipleship comes from a time after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The mention of carrying the cross hearkens back to Jesus’ carrying the cross on the way to his death y crucifixion. The point of the saying is that Jesus’ disciples must be as resolute in their life of discipleship as was Jesus in following out the will of the Father.

In such circumstances, the decision to follow Jesus cannot be made hastily. Would-be discipleship should not be the result of a snap decision. Jesus gives two examples of the kind of deliberation that should go into the decision to become a disciple. The first is that of a builder who thinks about erecting a tower. Prudence requires that he think about the completion of his project. Does he have the resources to carry the job through to a successful conclusion? If not, and he nonetheless starts to build, he will become a laughing stock.

The second example is that of a king leading his troops into battle. He would be foolhardy to take on an enemy who has a vastly superior fighting force. Knowing that he will certainly lose if he goes into battle against superior odds, the prudent king will stand down and try to negotiate a peaceful settlement that will cut losses that would be otherwise sustained on the field of battle.

BROKEN FOR US:

The bottom line of today’s gospel reading can be summed up in the well-known phrase, the cost of discipleship, which serves as the English-language title of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s 1937 essay. If a person wants to be a disciple of Jesus, that believer must be willing to pay the price of discipleship.

To this day, I remember well an Army sergeant whom I met on a U. S. army post in Germany when I was a young priest in graduate studies. He wanted his Japanese Buddhist wife to become a Catholic. She was taking instructions, as was the custom back then. The soldier drove his wife and their children to Mass every Sunday and dutifully came back after Mass to

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pick them up. I asked him why he did not attend Mass. “Then,” he said, “I would have to change my life.” Ironically, that soldier understood the cost of discipleship.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 15, 2013

LITURGY:

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14 describes Moses pleading with the Lord on behalf of the sinful and idol-worshipping Israelites.

1 Timothy 1:12-17 is a posthumous reflection on Paul’s “conversion.”

Luke 15:1-32, the entire fifteenth chapter of Luke’s gospel, is a powerful three-part composition on God’s mercy. God not only forgives; God also takes the initiative. God reaches out to forgive.

The setting provided by Luke is one in which a group of tax collectors [“publicans’] and sinners were listening to Jesus. Once again, Luke draws attention to the size of the crowd by saying that “all” (*pantes*) were drawing near to Jesus (cf. Luke 14:25, the first verse of last Sunday’s gospel reading with its mention of large crowds). The Pharisees and scribes took umbrage at Jesus’ association with these kind of folks and voiced their complaint (cf. Luke 5:30 Matt 9:11; Mark 2 16). In response, Jesus told three short stories, three parables. All three speak of the lost and the found.

The first two parables constitute a pair; they are much shorter than the well-known parable of the Prodigal Son (vv. 11-32). Luke’s gospel frequently features similar stories about men and women. Such is the case of the pair of parables in today’s gospel: a story about a shepherd with a lost sheep (vv. 4-7) and a story about a woman who lost a valuable piece of money (vv. 8-10). The parable of the lost sheep comes from the Sayings Source (cf. Matt 18:12-14; *G. Thom.* 107)) but the parable of the woman is found only in Luke’s gospel. Its presence is another instance of Luke’s including stories about women in his narrative.

The story of the lost sheep in Luke (vv.4-7) is different from the story in its Matthean version because each of the evangelists has his own theological points to make. In Matthew, the story is used in order to teach about leadership in the church. In Luke, the sheep wanders off on its own. The shepherd goes off to find the sheep, ostensibly leaving the ninety-nine to fend for themselves. Luke offers the tender detail of the shepherd putting the sheep on his shoulders as he brings the sheep back to the flock. The picture is captured in many pieces of Christian art. The scene dramatically speaks about Jesus’ mission of calling sinners to repentance (cf. Luke 5:32). The reader should certainly be aware that repentance/conversion (Luke 3:3, 8) and joy (Luke 1:44, 46) are important themes in Luke’s gospel.

To be understood, the story of the woman who lost the coin (vv. 8-10) must be seen within a setting where barter and the exchange of services were dominant features of the economic system. The exchange of money was relatively rare. People had few coins. Hence,

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the woman’s loss of one of her coins was a serious loss. She goes looking for it. Luke takes pains to describe the intensity of her search. When finally she finds the lost coin, she invites her neighbors to join in her joy. Luke “personalizes” the joy in heaven (cf. v. 7, “in heaven”) by talking about the angels’ joy when a sinner repents. Their joy parallels that of the woman’s friends and neighbors.

The story of the Prodigal Son easily divides into two parts, the story itself (vv. 11-24) and the epilogue. (vv. 25-32). The story uses a family relationship to dramatize the importance of conversion and reconciliation. Notwithstanding Jewish inheritance laws, the son demands his inheritance. The inheritance is quickly squandered and the son sinks about as low as he can sink. He is reduced to feeding pigs, a task that was particularly abhorrent to Jews. He comes to his senses and decides to go home, seeking only to live like his father’s hired hands. The ever vigilant and compassionate father can hardly wait for his return. He runs to meet the son whom he espies in the distance. All joy breaks loose. A great banquet is laid on and everyone is overjoyed. But not quite!

The older son is upset by the father’s embrace of a loser. He’s angry. The father comes out to plead with him. Talking about his younger brother, the older brother adds insult to injury by saying that his sibling had squandered his money on prostitutes. This thought had not previously appeared in the parable. The father would have none of that. He praises the elder son for his loyalty and pleads with him to join in the celebration because “your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.” Given the narrative setting of the parable, one can only think that the elder son represents the loyal Pharisees and scribes who were scandalized by Jesus’ acceptance of tax-collectors and sinners.

BROKEN FOR US:

Joy when the lost have been found is the dominant theme of today’s gospel. Carefully proclaimed, it speaks to many who treat as pariahs friends, relatives, and neighbors who have gone astray. They have and not measured up but now want to change their lives. Many people would rather ostracize the fallen than welcome them back.

The parable can also be contemplated in a liturgical setting. What place in our liturgical services is there for the divorced or for those who had been incarcerated for their crimes? What role do these people have in our Sunday eucharist? Are they consigned to the back pew, subject to incriminating glances when they come forward for communion? .How joyful is our celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, the welcome-home of a repentant sinner?

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 22, 2013

LITURGY:

Amos 8:4-7 is an oracle addressed through the prophet to those who abuse the needy and the poor all the while fulfilling their religious obligations, which they are anxious to get over with.

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1 Timothy 2:1-8 is one of the most important passages in the Pastoral Epistles. In addition to its significant teaching on prayer, it proclaims that Jesus is the one mediator between God and human beings.

Luke 16:1-13 tells the story of the unjust steward, another powerful parable that it is found only in the Gospel according to Luke. In Luke’s society, more often than not, the steward (*oikonomos*, the household manager) was the slave in charge of a householders’ contingent of household slaves. He was an overseer in charge of running the household (*oikos*) of some wealthy person. As Jesus tells the story, the steward had been called to task for the misuse and appropriation of his master’s property. He was in a bind. What could he do? His soliloquy led him to come up with a plan. Additional fraud would make his master’s debtors indebted to him, the dishonest steward.

A parable does not require a lot of detail in order to make its point. So, in Jesus’ story the steward is presented as calling in two of his master’s debtors. The steward instructed the man who owed 100 containers of olive oil to change the IOU (*grammata*, literally, “letters”) so that it read 50. In similar fashion, the steward told the man who owed 100 quantities of wheat to change the IOU so that it read 80. The numbers are not important. What is important is that the steward would go to any length to ingratiate himself with his master’s debtors with the expectation that after he was let go, these debtors would find a place for him in their own households.

In verse 8, we are told that the master commended the dishonest steward. The master (*ho kyrios*) is not the defrauded householder. Rather it is Jesus, identified as *ho kyrios*, who commends the dishonest steward. He is commended, not for acting unjustly but for seizing up the situation and acting accordingly. He did what he had to do. Jesus adds that people who belong to this world act with more resoluteness than do people who belong to the light.

“Children of light,” as a designation of members of the community, is a well-known expression found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (e. g., 1QS 1:9; 2:16) and some passages of the New Testament (e. g., John 12:36; 1 Thess 5:3) but this is the only time that the expression is found in the Synoptic Gospels. Since “light” is the opposite of “darkness,” the expression naturally sets the members of the community apart from others, outsiders.

There follow three logia on wealth that are difficult to understand. The sayings use the term “mammon,” to describe wealth. In verses 9 and 11 the NAB translates “mammon,” another term found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (e. g., 1QS 6:2; CD 14:20), as “dishonest wealth.” The transliterated “mammon” is retained in verse 13.

The sense of the first logion is that those with money should show their love for others by sharing it with those in need. When the money runs out, that is, at the end of one’s life, the generous donor will be rewarded in heaven.

The enigmatic second saying describes earthly wealthy as a very small matter. It belongs to another since all material possessions ultimately belong to God. Those who do not use their possessions justly and responsibly cannot expect to receive true wealth. The rhetorical questions

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demand a negative response. No one will give an unjust person real wealth; no one will give that person a permanent possession.

The third saying has a parallel in Matt 6:24. The saying portrays a person as faced with a choice between two masters. Either he will be devoted to idolized wealth or to God. It is impossible to serve both the idol that is mammon and the Creator.

BROKEN FOR US:

In the third saying, Jesus tells us that when we treat money as a god, we reject God. His words were echoed by Pope Francis on May 16. In his Vatican address on that day, the pope said: "We have created new idols. The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly humane goal."

The Pope went on to say that the growing inequality in society was caused by "ideologies which uphold the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation, and thus deny the right of control to States, which are themselves charged with providing for the common good." Let the one who has ears to hear, listen!

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 29, 2013

LITURGY:

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 is an oracle of the Lord that condemns luxurious living.

1 Timothy 6:11-16 describes the righteousness that Timothy, Paul's "true child" (1 Tim 1:2), was to pursue and speaks of our hope in the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ at the proper time.

Luke 16:19-31 almost immediately follows the passage on wealth read last Sunday. In Luke, only a series of short and isolated sayings, on the Pharisees (vv. 14-15), the law (vv. 16-17), and divorce (v. 18), come between last Sunday's gospel reading and today's liturgical lection.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus, one of three parables found only in Luke's gospel that articulate the evangelist's message of social message of social and economic justice, is addressed to the Pharisees whom Jesus had just described as those "who loved money" (v.14). The anonymous rich man is sometimes called "Dives," the Latin for "rich man" found in the Vulgate. The poor man is called Lazarus, a common name which means "God helps." In the New Testament, the brother of Martha and Mary is also called Lazarus. (John 11:1-12:11). In its Hebrew form, Eliezer, it is the name of eleven biblical characters, including Moses' second son with Zipporah (cf. Exod 18:4), and the name of two prominent early second century C. E. rabbis, Eliezer ben Jose ha-Galili and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. In the context of today's story "Lazarus" is certainly a symbolic name.

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The story of the rich man and the poor man gives dramatic expression to the first of Luke’s beatitudes and its corresponding woe, “Blessed are you are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours . . . But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:20, 24). The bosom of Abraham is a metaphorical expression that describes the blessed state of the righteous who join the patriarchs in paradise after death. The expression is found only in Luke’s gospel and may derive from the idea of a family gathering after death (cf. Gen 49:33; Num 27:13; Deut 32:50; Judg 2:10).

The gospel story has some parallels in ancient literature, both Hellenistic—for example, Lucian of Samosata’s *Dialogues of the Dead*—and Jewish—for example *1 Enoch* 94:8, “Woe unto you, O rich people! For you have put your trust in your wealth. You shall exit your riches, for you do not remember the Most High.” This oracle, dating to about 100 B.C.E, not only reminds us of today’s parable and the woe of Luke 6:24 but also about the incompatibility of serving both God and mammon, the final verse of last Sunday’s gospel reading.

Commenting on today’s reading, Luke Timothy Johnson notes, “there is an appendix which complicates the simple story and gives it a polemic sting” (*The Gospel of Luke* [SP 3. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 256). The epilogue (vv. 24-31), a real zinger, is similar in form to the encounter between the older brother and his father that follows the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The rich man seemingly wants to take advantage of his hitherto privileged position and asks Abraham to intervene on his behalf by sending Lazarus to mitigate his punishment. The situation is, however, hopeless. His fate is final. So then, he tries to intercede on behalf of his siblings. Abraham refuses his request, telling the deceased rich man that “Moses and the Prophets” are available to them.

There are, in fact, dozens of passages in the Scripture that talk about taking care of the poor (e. g., Exod 22:21-22; Deut 10:17-19; Amos 2:6-8; Jer 5:25-29). In fact, the Babylonian Talmud equates failure to heed the cry of the poor with idolatry (cf. *b. Bab. Bat.* 10a). The rich man did not heed the biblical teaching about caring for the poor. Apparently his brothers were no more responsive to the word of God than was he.

In the final two verses of the dialogue between the rich man and Abraham, the conversation segues into a reflection that some people will refuse to listen to the counsel of someone who has risen from the dead. This is a subtle allusion to the Pharisees’ rejection of the teaching of Jesus, divinely authenticated by his resurrection.

BROKEN FOR US:

One can hardly preach about today’s gospel reading without focusing on our obligation to take care of the poor. The homily should address two issues. First, the issue of local poverty, with the hunger, homelessness, and all else that follows. The donation of an occasional dollar or two is but a weak response to the need about which we read in the newspapers or experience in the pan-handler on the street corner.

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There is, however, a bigger issue. That is the gap between the rich and the poor to which so many politicians are committed and seek to increase, generally under the guise of cutting the budget deficit or allowing people to be self-sufficient. “Let them get a job,” they say, but few jobs and even fewer jobs with a living wage are available. The “entitlement society” is the problem but there is plenty of money available for tax cuts for the rich and subsidies for large corporations with powerful political connections.