

## **NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

July 29, 2012, John 6:1-12

*What About the Fragments*

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I have been in ministry for almost 25 years. By my count, during that time, I have either preached on the several versions of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes or used the miracle as an example of sharing, at least a gazillion times. I was ready to move on to another reading but stopped at the description of the collection of 12 baskets of fragments.

How strange that description is, don't you think? Can you imagine 5,000 people, most of whom lived a hand to mouth existence, leaving a crust of bread behind? The majority of Jesus' followers from all over Galilee were simple farmers or fisherfolk who did not have much in the way of resources. Having had a feast of fish and bread, they were, I am sure, grateful for the picnic and if there was anything left over, eager to wrap and pack away what had not been eaten.

What I imagine they did was not unlike the experience we have in finishing a meal at a restaurant. I don't know how many times following a meal I have food left on my plate or how many times I have asked for a container. The uneaten food becomes the next day's lunch. That is, of course, if I remember to take the Styrofoam box with me when I leave. But I can imagine that all those people in a Galilean wilderness did not forget to carefully pack away the crust of bread or the bite of smoked fish to bring home for supper.

So why the emphasis on the 12 baskets of fragments? There is a great deal of theological symbolism attached to those 12 baskets that is related to early Christianity and Judaism. But in my reflection, I have found other meanings that may not be directly theological but provide some insight into fragments drawn together into wholeness. When one Patiently matches the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, putting them into their proper place, that patience is rewarded in the wholeness of a lovely picture. So let us reflect on fragments. I found a story that describes how, in a fragmented society, a woman found the gift of wholeness:

*Mamie Adams always went to a branch post office in her town because the postal employees there were friendly. She went there to buy stamps just before Christmas one year and the lines were particularly long. Someone pointed out that there was no need to wait on line because there was a stamp machine in the lobby.*

*"I know," said Mamie, 'but the machine won't ask me about my arthritis.'" (Bits and Pieces, December, 1989, p. 20*

We can find meaning in fragments all around us and every day; at home or work or at play. And we can consciously or unconsciously give the gift of recognition of wholeness to an individual in the midst of fragmentation as those postal workers gave to Mamie. But do not confuse fragmentation with fragments.

Fragments are an intrinsic element of nature and an invisible component of all creation. You may have noticed that sitting out on the parking lot are fragments

of our church history. In fact, some of those fragments also contain other fragments; those of the fossils that tell earth's history. Those stones that are sitting out on the lot connect us not only to our church ancestors who walked down the street to church wearing bonnets and top hats but also to the very foundation of our planet and the tiny creatures who were the original settlers of the Champlain Valley. We are only the latest residents and so, the fragmented stones remind us that all creation is a miracle.

In a few days I will be enjoying one of the most beautiful beaches in the northeast; the Cape Cod National Seashore. I will be digging my feet into miniscule fragments of rock that has eroded over millennia and become soft, white sand. Those large and small fragments of stones link us to our creator and remind us of how indomitable and yet how fragile all of nature is.

When we look up from the parking lot and take a fresh look at the church building, we see bricks laid carefully so to be interconnected. Each brick could be said to be a fragment of the whole and that whole would be lacking without each brick. That whole protects us from snow and rain and from heat and cold but only because of that interconnectedness.

I doubt that there can be much creativity without fragments. I have several mosaics that I brought back from my Middle East trips. Those mosaics are composed of fragments of colored stone carefully put together to create a picture. Quilters use fragments of fabric sewn together to create brilliantly designed artworks that are handed down through generations. Knitters create scarves and sweaters and socks out of the fragments of yarn. In fact, the latest style in socks is found in colorful mismatched pairs. My grandmother used to collect fragments of old clothing and use those bits and pieces to braid beautiful rugs. Children, when handed a box of crayons, take those fragments of color and turn them into rainbows and forests and home with a great yellow sun beaming down on a unified whole.

Composers take fragments of music and the sounds of various instruments put them together and turn them into the wholeness of magnificent symphonies. And choirs of singers add their creative harmony to the music of hymns adding richness to the beauty.

Fragments or pieces or dashes or handful's of different produce or seasonings are mixed together into casseroles by great chefs or family cooks needing to clean out the refrigerator. Bread Pudding, that creation composed of fragments of stale bread has always been one of my favorites.

During my year in the Novitiate as a Maryknoll Sister, my classmates and I were subjected to cruel and unusual punishment once a week. Everything that we had been served during the previous six days, fish and meat and various vegetables, was put together into the most disgusting casserole one could ever imagine. And even as we groaned at what awaited our taste buds, we were warned that we had better eat up because if we didn't, we'd see the same casserole for breakfast. Not all fragments work well together.

Each of us has within us what I unscientifically call DNA fragments which map our personal and family histories going back thousands of years. There are surprises in that mapping that coincide with the movement of tribes and peoples who are really larger fragments of the wholeness of humanity. In that DNA testing

we often discover that further back than our genealogy notes, there are hints of ancient cultures. My husband's parents and grandparents and on back beyond records came from the farmland of County Donegal, in the northwest of Ireland. Just a few years ago, Neil would have sworn that he was 100% Irish; but a DNA mapping took him by surprise. His DNA included some Danish contribution. It made sense when he remembered the history of Ireland that included incursions and settlements by 'Norsemen.'

That leads me to wonder at the mystery of sustained life. The wholeness of the original identified humans became increasingly fragmented as our ancient ancestors spread around the earth, growing, adapting and changing throughout the years.

Today, we Americans find ourselves bemoaning our fragmented society. We are divided by race, by nationality, by religion, by regional accent, by age, by sexual definition, by income, etc., etc. And yet, if we stand back and take a wide view, we discover that there is cross-pollination, so to speak, among us. Surprisingly, it begins with advertising. Have you noticed that in most television ads, Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, Caucasians are pictured together, all enjoying a barbeque or dining out or singing the praises of the latest wonder drug or cold beer. Television series feature diverse casts including persons with disabilities. One series includes a blind star and another, a student in a wheel chair. Does it seem odd to you that the visionaries of inclusivity are not faith communities or even government agencies; rather, the contemporary prophets of our emerging age are actors and producers and companies who have a goal to sell their product to the whole community. In their commitment to succeed, they are doing us a favor. By holding up a mirror to our society and encouraging us to reflect that image in our interactions with one another, they are shining a light on inclusivity. In other words, Pharmaceuticals, Car companies, credit card agencies and the insurance industry are putting all of the varied fragments of society together in a whole and inviting all of the diverse fragments to come in and enjoy the party.

Within those twelve baskets of fragments were breads of different texture, different size, different taste; yet they were all nourishing fragments of the staff of life. We are all fragments of humanity collectively drawn together in our formidable and fragile selves. Theologian Pierre Teilhard deChardin was one of those who see a glass half full. He believed in the eventual union of the fragments into one caring human community.

He writes:

*Driven by the forces of love, the fragments of the world seek each other so that the world may come to being.*

Perhaps energized by the ad of an Insurance Company, we separate fragments might be drawn together into the wholeness that is our eventual destiny. God works in mysterious ways and has a sense of humor. I am convinced of this by the insurance ads. Yet Know that even as we trip and fall on our road to wholeness, each of us fragments is precious in God's sight. May we humans learn to be precious in one another's sight. Amen.

