

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 3/26/06
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: John 6:4-15

One of my favorite books about preaching is called *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process*. In it, twelve different women write about their own experience of conceiving and giving birth to sermons. Almost every one of these authors describes sitting with the Scripture text for several days before beginning to look at the commentaries. And they caution that it's often most difficult to preach on a passage that's familiar both to the preacher and to the congregation, because we all assume that we already know what's there.

We have such a text in today's reading from the Gospel of John. The account of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand is very familiar to us, in part because it's the only miracle attributed to Jesus that's reported in all four of the gospels. The advice from the seasoned women preachers in the book to which I constantly refer is to approach such familiar texts as though we've never read or heard them before, and to ask questions of the text.

When I read this very familiar passage closely, I find that I do have some questions. For example, I wonder why Jesus specifically asked Philip where they might buy bread for the people. Why "test" him, and not the others? I wonder whether the little boy with the bread and the fish offered his food voluntarily, or whether Andrew confiscated the boy's lunch. And why in the world would the writer of this story feel the need to point out, "Now there was a great deal of grass in the place?"

But a different question was the one I found myself thinking about all week. After Jesus had blessed and distributed the loaves and the fish, and after all had eaten until they were satisfied, I wonder why Jesus would say to his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost?" The miracle was the feeding of this huge crowd of people with five barley loaves and two fish – next to nothing. Why spend the time and energy gathering up the leftovers? What difference could it possibly make if those fragments were lost or not? What's the big deal about the fragments?

A fragment is "a small part broken off, something incomplete." A fragment is the invisible sliver of glass that cuts my finger when I'm cleaning up the tea mug that I've dropped and broken. A fragment is the portion of a dream that I suddenly remember which sheds light on something that's troubling me. A fragment is a piece of pottery that gives the archaeologist a clue to a lost civilization. A fragment is the part of the message that gets through when we don't have a decent signal on our cell phone.

We might also think of fragments as the many and varied pieces of our lives that we try desperately to hold together in some kind of meaningful way: the limitless errands and projects that are required of us just to maintain day-to-day life; the juggling of the calendar to try to accommodate entirely too many good opportunities; the anxiety over a loved one who's having difficulties; the hope that mounts around a dream that might possibly be realized; the deep disappointment when that particular dream dies; the

business travel that creates distance between us and our family, but that's critical for the job to be done well; the medical condition or addictive behavior that affects every decision we make; the attempt to plan for the future for ourselves and our children when the world is in such a mess; the effort required to nurture the creative spark in us that tends to get buried under all the other more mundane stuff. Our lives contain so many fragments.

What do we do with all of these fragments? Do we try to piece them together into some kind of presentable package so that they look better than they feel? Do we attend to the more pleasing fragments, and try to ignore the others? Do we deal with the discomfort of our fragmentation through less than healthy behavior? And how is God present in the midst of such fragmentation?

My first husband and I began dating when we were fifteen. My life, through high school, college, and my mid-twenties, was "our life." In my mind, I didn't exist apart from him. During those years, I kept a diary, saved tickets stubs from the movies, plays, and concerts we attended, and dried and pressed the flowers from corsages and bouquets. I saved the notes and letters that we wrote and the pictures we took. I had boxes and boxes of the fragments that defined who I was between the ages of fifteen and twenty-six. When we divorced, I simply couldn't reconcile who I had been with who I had, most reluctantly, become. I discovered that I couldn't hold the good things about that relationship with the pain of the divorce, so I threw everything away.

The fragments of our lives reflect all of who we are. And we are cherished by God, even in all of our fragmentation and brokenness. God doesn't love us more if we present to the world an image of wholeness and perfection. God doesn't love us more if what we perceive to be our "good" fragments outweigh the "bad" ones. Jesus said to his disciples, "Gather up the fragments, so that nothing may be lost." There is no fragment, no aspect of our lives, that is not embraced by a loving God; that cannot be used by God; that cannot be redeemed by God. Ours is a faith in which fragmentation and redemption are intimately connected. The crucified Christ is the ultimate example and symbol of brokenness and fragmentation. The God of the crucifixion is also the God of the resurrection. There cannot be one without the other.

During Lent, this season of the church year set aside for reflection and self-examination, we have the opportunity to consider the fragments of our lives ... to gather them, to look closely at them, and to offer them – all of them – to God. God's promise to us is that in the gathering of our fragments, nothing will be lost. When we gather our fragments and offer them to God, God's promise is that we will find that we have more than what we started with. And when we gather up our own fragments alongside others within our community of faith – the body of Christ – God's promise to us is that all of our fragments together will amount to baskets and baskets of abundance. Amen.