

First Church in Cambridge
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Gather up the Fragments

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John 6:1 -13

My mother had a peculiar way of enticing her children to do housework. She took a page from Tom Sawyer – you recall, the Mark Twain story – where Tom so enjoys painting the fence that his buddies soon are vying for the privilege of doing the job for him.

We were heaped with praise at every little contribution to the home front, and we were allowed to overhear the story of our efforts celebrated when Dad came home from work each evening. We got the impression we were valuable and that what we did mattered.

There was always the promise of more responsibility - and greater glory - held out to us. When we were older, we would get to do even more important things. (I never discussed “works righteousness” with my mother. Nonetheless.)

One of the jobs I longed to be grown-up enough to do was dusting the tshoke shelves. They were filled with mystery and treasure. As Mom tended the collections, and long before I was entrusted with this privilege, I listened to stories of men with enormous whiskers and was puzzled by photos of grim-faced brides. I was entranced by fragile souvenirs and fading mementos. Although not valuable in any obvious way, these things served as reminders of people and times, pleasures and pasts living on in the telling.

Soon enough I was trusted to wind the grandfather clock, and soon enough I was allowed to dust the glass shelves, too.

This graceful approach to everyday chores disappeared from my life, soon enough. I shared rooms in college with people who – gasp! Not only thought differently than my family and me but – believe it or not! Had different approaches to daily living and different cleanliness standards! Imagine that! Soon enough I was secularized and slovenly, sinfully slothful, even.

I recovered a bit when I had my first apartment, and improved another notch when I bought my first home. But the daily-ness of housekeeping chores was never again to be a blessed and grace-filled experience for me.

Until my mother was dying. In this process, she recovered her old habit of extravagant thankfulness as she gradually relinquished household tasks to my siblings and to me. First to go was the heavy cleaning and laundry; then shopping. She gratefully gave up driving and reluctantly stopped cooking. Just before she needed the very same physical assistance

she had provided to us in our helpless infancies – just then, she noticed that the glass shelves were covered with dust.

“Will you take care of that for me, Sweetie?”

Oh, yes – it would be a privilege to do so. As I handled each treasure, I paid attention to the familiar and old stories with a special poignancy, knowing I was hearing them in this particular way for the last time.

Then something distracted me and I turned quickly. My shoulder caught a shelf.

Everything crashed to the floor.

“Oh, good,” said Mom. “This will make things easier. Now there are pieces to share among all four of you.”

There was already more than enough to share among the four of us, of course.

Beyond and far more important than the actual things we inherited, we are congenitally accomplished in the practice of testimony – of telling stories that have meaning, each from our own particular vantage point. So much so, and so idiosyncratically at times, that my older brother describes us as having “shared different childhoods together.”

Well, yes. Like fractious Christian tribes, we quibble and we bicker. We argue about details and dates, we attach different meaning to shared experiences, we mist up at different places in the story. And yet, when all the pieces come together, when we all come together, it is our common story that we share and celebrate and create anew.

I brought one of my inherited treasures to share with you this morning. It’s a Ukrainian Easter egg, made by the secretary who supported my dad’s work for many years. It rests, lopsided, in the olivewood communion cup that is itself a souvenir from a trip to the Holy Land that Mom and I took together just before she got sick.

As a kid dusting it, I imagined that this egg was composed of tiny fragments, little itsy bitsy pieces that were patched together into an egg-like form. To the extent that my early musings were ‘theological’, I imagined that each little spot of color stood for different countries or people, joined together into a unique and fragile whole.

I loved the patterns, and I saw them differently each time I handled this egg. I daydreamed about the Ukraine, and what a marvelous place it must be that amazing things like this Easter egg should come from it.

On a small scale, this egg shares much the same meaning as the patches and fragments of cloth and glitter that compose this marvelous Communion tablecloth. This cloth carries the story of a particular time and the particular people who made it. It is an embodiment of the Open Table we experience – and that we long for. It gains patina with each use. It will be passed on, used, cared for and ‘storied about’ in ways we cannot imagine.

This egg is too small to be an effective sermon illustration in this large sanctuary, so come up here after the service to get a closer look, if you wish.

Don't be afraid to touch it – it's already broken!

We're broken, too. We're scattered, fractured and adrift. We struggle to make lunch appointments with dear friends; we settle for email when we long for voices and touch and time; we pretend that having schedules filled 24/7 is a good thing, when we are self-starving for Sabbath.

We come together in community – in this faith community, in other communities, to be made whole. We all know something about being alone. The vision of the Open Table and the Way of Hospitality we share calls us to imagine how we might be together. It calls us to see how our pieces fit into a pattern and purpose impossible to discern or to form by ourselves. Different each time we come together.

We come together into a whole to be blessed, fed and then broken up and broken out. Broken out, breaking free for service, sent forth to feed and to visit, to heal and to tend. To nourish. To tell stories.

We say good by to loved ones. We tell stories about them. We sing a song that reminds many of Minnie Taylor, a pillar of this community who died a few short months ago. Small clusters lingered long after the service last Sunday morning to say farewell and to bless Steve Carter into a new life of retirement far from here.

At the same time, and in the same breath and Spirit, we welcome and make room for new people. We make room at the table for the child, the stranger, the friend. The person about whom we have reservations at a table that requires no reservations. We are invited to sit down on velvet-covered pews as if they were shady spots on a grassy hill, and to add new stories to the accumulated tales.

We bless and are blessed; we eat of providential abundance. And we then get up – we fracture this unique, one-time, never before and never-again-in-quite-the-same-way-community into fragments. We go out and be, do, rest and serve, eating our daily bread and doing our daily chores, and changing, carrying in our bellies and in our hearts fragments of the whole. Giving away – and receiving – fragments of whole blessing continuously.

This is sufficient. Easter egg, body or bread, it's good news that it's broken.

As Mom, and perhaps Jesus would say, "It's easier to share that way." And all shall be re-gathered. Every fragment. Every one. No one forgotten or neglected. All accounted for, treasured and storied about, gathered and used to nourish, all blessed forever. Amen.