

FROM THE PULPIT OF ST. PAUL'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
Don't Take My Quilt Away!

Matthew 18:18-20 David Orendorff September 4, 2005

Jesus is speaking to his students about the power and meaning of community. It is in the gathering together of ordinary people who live common lives that God comes and makes heaven.

Matthew 18:18-20

I sometimes think of our gathering, or our being a Christ-centered community, as if it were a quilt. We are a diverse variety of materials, patterns, colors and age, stitched together by the loving hands of God and meant to be safe and warm for all who seek its comfort.

I inherited a notebook of poems collected by my Methodist minister grandfather. In it is this quilt poem:

I found last night upon my bed
An extra cover, neatly spread;
A patchwork quilt my mother made
From bits of cloth of every shade.
'Twas just a quilt like you often see,
But it brought fond memories back to me.

There was a tiny piece of plaid;
"Twas part of a dress my mother had
When I was a girl of nine or ten-
I remembered how pretty I thought it then.
Here was a bit of calico;
Part of her apron long ago.

Patterns in flowers by the score,
All from dresses my mother wore.
Here was a piece of polka dot
Saved from rompers I wore when a tot.
There were browns and blacks, and a bit of blue,
Pieced together so nice and true.

Now the colors have begun to fade;
'Tis many a year since it was made.
As I looked at the quilt upon my bed
and thought how fast the time had fled,
Just as plainly as could be.

And then, as I lay beneath the fold
Of the patchwork quilt, now getting old,
I seemed to feel upon my head
The gentle hand that drew each thread,
And I thought, "If she came back to me,
Would she find the woman she would have me be?"¹

Lives lived long before our lives came together making us who we are. We are a community of quilted lives.

¹ The Patchwork Quilt, My grandfather's notebook does not indicate the poet.

The folks in charge of sanctuary banners at St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Helena, Montana wanted to explore the idea of quilted lives for the banners that would hang from after Pentecost until Advent, Ordinary Time. And they decided they wanted to make the quilt banners from material supplied from the lives of the congregation. They put out word that they were looking for the material and it poured in. Each piece of material came with a note of its significance. The resulting banners were a patchwork of the congregation's long life and shared ministry. The resulting banners were beautiful not only to the eye, scenes of a peaceful river and a flowering tree, but to the heart. I have chosen to share some of the notes with you.

Some of the stories are about quilts:

(A child writes in a child's hand) "These are some scraps of a quilt my mom made me."

"My children hosted a surprise 70th birthday party for me 3 years ago. They and several friends contributed quilt blocks for a quilt. This is the material left from the quilt."

"From a quilt that never has been made - maybe it will be useful in the banner. It reminds me of younger days. Also a reminder to do the unfinished quilt."

There are several stories of celebration. There are baptism stories:

"Material used for outfits for Ted, Terri, Trudi and I when Ted was baptized"

"From a dress worn during my baptism in 1986 at St. Paul's. I was 28 years old."

And there is an ordination:

"Vickie made this Pentecost stole for David for ordination in Butte at the 1978 Yellowstone Annual Conference."

There are several wedding stories:

"Fabric from our bride's maids' dresses."

"Wedding tie, wedding dress - 1986"

"This handkerchief of my grandma Larson symbolizes (our) wedding...on August 20, 1983 at St. Paul's..."

"This is from our daughter's wedding...."

There was one from another church:

"Fabric from a garage sale held by Evangelical United Methodist Church in Billings...from their church to ours."

Several spoke of relationships, particularly mothers to daughters and granddaughters, but not only the women.

"This material is special to us because it is from a dress that our daughter ...wore when she was a baby."

"A piece of my grandfather's shirt."

"From an old blouse given me by my parents long ago!"

"These fabric pieces were used to make the "Little Lamb" blanket and stuffed lamb animal for my babies..."

"This is a piece of a woolen shawl that Mother got for me when I was a baby. The winters were often cold and there was lots of wind at Chugwater, Wyoming. The cars were open and, sometimes, not even a top and, at times, we went to town and church by horse and buggy. Mother would wrap me in this shawl to keep (me) warm. It means a lot to me."

One family in particular evidently loved to use and reuse material. One in particular caught me:

"Lace bought in Russia by Polly Holmes for Dorothy Harper but totally co-opted by Rebecca Campbell Harper as her dress-up costume when all the Harper granddaughters played dress up in the Robin-Molly-Emily-Hannah-Rebecca roost."

Pieces were contributed to include our fuller creation:

"This T-shirt reminds us of the first whales we ever saw and a glorious vacation in

Carmel...."

"The tie pattern is ginkgo leaf - prehistoric fossil tree which may be the forerunner of the pine with its needles. The tie was my father's."

Some gave pieces in memory of someone they loved:

"This jacket (was) worn by my mother, who passed away this past October."

"Material from my mother's favorite dress. She lived to be 98 years old. She taught a Methodist Bible class for over 60 years..."

"This piece of cloth was bought by my mother - and expresses to me her love for nature (one of our common bonds). When my mother died I took the cloth. My mother loved the Methodist Church, was very active, and I know it delights her to see what a home I have found in St. Paul's."

"A piece of bed-room curtain in (my daughter's) bed room. In memory of (her death at age 14)."

"This was my mother's handkerchief. She died in 1988. I present it in her memory."

Some of the cloth is multi-generational:

"This child's dress was hand made by my aunt and first worn by my sister in 1949, myself in 1957 and my daughter in 1989. Although my aunt has been gone for 20 years it carries the love of the generations."

"In high school (1948-1949) I made a long skirt as was the fashion then out of this corduroy. Later on, I cut it down and added straps for a jumper which all three of my daughters wore. Now the granddaughters are wearing it! Plus, just this last Christmas I made microwave heating bags (for each daughter) from the old cut off section still in the cloth drawer."

"This pair of long underwear belonged to my father...who died in 1983. Dad was fond of winter sports and wore these while he was growing up. When he introduced me to ice skating, sledding and snowman making, he gave these long johns to me to help keep me warm. I wore them for many years while I learned to enjoy the wonders of winter. I consider the appreciation of winter sports a precious gift from my father, especially as I pass that gift on to my sons. This garment has always been special to me as a symbol of my father's fun spirit and shared times."

Some stories were of tragedy and resurrection:

"When I was growing up, I was a very frightened and lonely child. I had a doll, named Becky, from the time I was five. I was till clinging to her even in pictures when I was eleven. As an adult, I realized how important this doll had been to me as a child - she was the only thing I loved which didn't abandon me.

"My mom had made the doll lots of pretty clothes - frilly dresses. I wore lots of pretty dresses. But I was sexually abused as a child and being female and pretty became a bad thing. By the time I was 18, anything pretty was bad.

"When I remembered this doll, I got it out of my mother's attic. I dressed her in a T shirt and overalls and put her on my shelf in my home. A few years later, after much healing, I was once again able to accept being female and pretty, I went and bought my doll a new outfit - it was feminine, white and pink. I put a pink bow in her hair.

"This was a symbol that I was now able to be who I am and still be safe. Much of my healing has occurred because of the support and guidance I've received from St. Paul's. I am grateful."

There is a moving story of a daughter's blanket:

"This is a piece of the original fabric from our daughter's "blankee." (She) is nine years old now, and she has had this blanket with her since it was given to her as a gift by a family friend the day she was born.

"This fabric is what (her) blanket looked like when new. If we were to give a piece of the real blanket, it would likely fall apart when sewn into the banner. It is almost threadbare and no longer pink, but a kind of nondescript gray color. To wash it would risk total disintegration.

"This blanket reminds us of St. Paul's and our spiritual life here. It was given to us unconditionally as a gift. We take it with us wherever we go and we are comforted by it. It is made up of many people and programs, just like (our daughter's) patchwork blanket, which gives it diversity and makes it very interesting."

I am certain that Bear Creek, though only 13 years old has similar stories to tell with pieces of cloth; stories of gathering lives into a quilt of faith, made of joy and sorrow, death and new life. And when these pieces are brought together into the great quilt we call Bear Creek, it is a thing of warmth, safety, care and beauty. By giving ourselves to each other we stitch ourselves together that we might hold each other in place through Autumn and Winter, Spring and Summer; that we might tell each other of our encounters with God. Quilted together we are the family of God.

I began with a poem on quilts my grandfather saved. I finish with a poem that Andrea Atwood, the chief designer of the quilt banners, brought to me:

The faded quilt grandmother stitched
Now warms my youngest son.
In the big house built by grandfather,
Descendants laugh and run.

Proof to a Doubting Thomas
That love survives the grave-
That what we have and what we are
Are partly what they gave.²

We are the love that survives the grave, partly because of our own lives and partly because of the Saints who have made this place for us, but mostly because God's love is manifest among us. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The patchwork quilts of our lives tell the story of God's presence. I love the quilt that is our gathered life. It is rich, warm, worn and comforting. May God never take our quilt away. Shalom and Amen.

² Mary C. Ferris, Proof to a Doubting Thomas