

"GOD'S CRAZY QUILT" ©Joyce Kelly
Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly
Supply Minister of Worship and Pastoral Care
Bloor Street United Church
FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – June 20, 2010

Readings: See verses from Genesis 1 and Colossians 3 at end

Sanctuary decorated with dozens of quilts by the Quilters

Down the centuries, quilts have expressed faith, love, comfort, beauty. Early Christians provided "coverings" to widows and orphans, (I guess men didn't get cold back then!) In Moses' day, "coverings" draped the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31, "clothed in fine linen and purple, makes coverings for her bed."

The first "covering", of course, without needle or thread, had a distinct fig-leaf shape.

I dedicate this sermon to all makers of coverings, especially to the Bloor Street Quilters who have decorated our sanctuary so beautifully this morning.

As you may have guessed, I'm a quilter. Bruce and I have many grandchildren, and over the years, I've made a quilt for every one of them. Most for single beds, but because it takes a long time to make 18 quilts, some were king-size by the time our tallest grands received them. Over the years, with fabric collected from distant places, I designed and stitched every quilt to be as unique as each child, in favourite colours, with pictures of personal passions - dogs (all 6 families have dogs), and books, Christmas, bugs, seashells, Halloween, and sports, lots of sports (baseball, hockey, soccer, golf, fishing.) Now I'm on the lookout for figure-skating + dirt-biking fabric +

pet bunnies - all for the same little girl, our youngest, almost a teenager, who says she'd like a grown-up quilt. On the corner of every quilt, I embroider full name and birth-date, a poem of blessing (written for them), and the words, "stitched with love by Grandma especially for you." They all seem to love their quilts, maybe as much as I love making them.

I

Quilts express love, also struggle.

For 90 years, England exported criminals – some to Australia. With pride, friends showed us family documents – convictions, one for stealing bread, another, for murder. In April 1841, The Elizabeth Fry Society, convinced of the virtues of stitching, gave 180 women setting sail for Van Diemen's Land, fabric, thread and needles. Two months later, they arrived in Hobart with a huge wonky quilt, on the back, a heartfelt message of gratitude, "To the Ladies of the Convict Ship Committee."

Quilts were signposts for the Underground Railroad as slaves escaped to the north. Made from worn-out work clothes or their owners' castoffs, with the one precious sewing needle allowed, they worked long into the night, despite sore fingers known only to hand-sewers. Oral history says that slaves (not allowed to learn to read or write) stitched signs of freedom into their quilts, symbols they'd brought from Africa. Quilts were so common they were invisible to slaveowners, but very visible to those seeking the path to freedom. They knew the names of the patterns.

Flying Geese quilts were hung with arrows pointing up (north) like spring's migrating geese. *North Star* - another compass. *Monkey Wrench* meant: gather all the tools you have – physical and mental and spiritual. *Drunkard's Path* meant: take a zigzag path, some of it heading south, to confuse slavehunters and their searching dogs. *Wagon Wheel* meant: wagons are ready, some with compartments big enough to hide. *Crossroads* referred to Cleveland, Ohio, an important turning point to freedom, to new life. *Shoofly* marked the home of someone who could read the codes, and guide travelers. *Tumbling Blocks* meant: it's time to go; a conductor of the Railroad is in the area. *Broken Dishes* meant: watch for some on the path; there will be another sign. *Rose*

Wreath meant that someone had died on the journey - African tradition, leaving floral wreathes on graves. *Log Cabin* quilts hung outside safehouses.

Do you remember Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*? From 1975-79, she and 400 artists from around the world created this massive quilt depicting 39 guests of honour (mythical and historic), whose accomplishments had been, mostly, erased by male-dominant history. Later, Judy and more friends spent 5 years creating *The Birth Project* - praying, thinking, visioning. What fabric/colour/ texture/design? They sketched, laughed, stitched, ripped out, re-stitched, laughed, prayed - until, gradually, images (some pretty graphic) began to emerge. Words, too (stitched at the edge): "Out of dark chaos nothing rises a sigh, which arches into a moan, crests in a wail, then crowns in a scream. And mighty is the birthing, for it is the birth of the universe."

Remember the NAMES project of 1987? 2000 3x6 foot panels traveled the world - each one naming and celebrating the life of someone who had died of AIDS (before the name of that cruel disease was said in public), the love of friends and family, women and men, stitched into every panel. Bruce and I stood among them (hung, as they were, high in the air in town squares, a kind of maze blowing in the wind), our faces uplifted, hearts refreshed.

Quilting, traditionally known as women's work, hasn't always been that way; it had been men's work in Africa before they were stolen away. A Thomas Wood painting of 1856 called "Portrait of Private Thomas Walker" shows a soldier propped up in his hospital bed sewing a patchwork quilt in regimental colours. Quilting magazines today sometimes feature men designers/ quilters - but it's a feature, not a norm - at least not in our culture.

II

Quilting is meditative, so inspiration comes, seemingly, from nowhere. And it seems to me that God is making a Crazy Quilt. You know the kind - irregular shaped patches, small, large, a bit of this, a bit of that, no apparent overall design, joined together and

overlaid with fancy stitching or lace or some creative leap of substance. And when it's finished, it's absolutely stunning, a surprise beyond anything we could imagine, a design we can't see until it is finished, until we are finished here.

But – surprise! The idea of God as quilter is not original with me. One poet wrote:

I think God is a quilter

who, with needle and thread,
pieces our world from nothingness
and gives it form instead.

I think we see God's perfect stitches,

textured everywhere:
in velvet moss, and grainy sand,
in silky strands of hair.

I think God cuts the pattern

from stuff we'd throw away,
and shows us how to use each scrap
in God's own redeeming way.

I think quilts paint the lessons

God uses just to teach
that our pieces and our remnants
have kaleidoscopic reach.

So, in the life we're living,
odd pieces everywhere,
let's give them to the Quilter
to work into a masterpiece
with extra-loving care.

III

So here we are, odd pieces of God's crazy quilt, our needs/hopes/dreams a wild variety of shapes. Some patches light, some patches dark, every one needed to create contrast and contour. Some patches new, some patches old – every one essential to the beauty of the whole.

The shape of our individual piece is determined by choices we make, what we create out of this life that God has given. So, what is the shape of your need, of your hopes and dreams - of all you've done? not done? Are your edges soft or hard, frail or jagged? This is important stuff; it determines how we overlap others. In a crazy quilt, the pieces are stitched onto a strong base (that I'd call faith), and, every little piece overlaps (or is overlapped by) all that lies around it. That's what makes each of us (and all of us together) strong.

In the quiltpatch that we are, there are lots of mistakes. Mistakes are opportunities to rip out, re-cut, reshape. "That'll do" does not belong in God's quilt. No matter how many times we cry, "God, I've already done that lesson; please not again," it'll come back at us until we get it right. God is not finished with us yet.

IV

And there are lots of odd and difficult pieces in this world that must be hard for God to fit together and harmonize into God's design.

One patch, 25 years in the making, leaves a trail of unfinished ends from Canada's worst terrorist attack ever - Air India flight 182.

400,000 people, 1/10th of the population, are fleeing civil war in Kyrgyzstan, 2000 already dead. Israel/Palestine! Ugly patches! But so was Ireland, South Africa, the United States - and with Canada!

Nelson Mandela grieves his great-granddaughter. And I remember the quilt I made for another beloved bright light, our 17-year-old grandson Patrick; it became his funeral pall, draped across his casket.

We don't yet know if the G8 and G20 will make a pretty patch or an ugly one, a weak one, or strong. But we do know that, already, some adjacent patches are lovely.

- Twenty people from the People's Summit are living in our Upper Club Room.

- Belinda Stronach has brought together twenty young women from around the world, working toward a better life for women, for the world.

- Prayers of many faiths rise from the flame being tended right now at the G8 Prayer Vigil in Muskoka, and prayers from this church, this city, and all over our country.

This week in Winnipeg, Moderator Mardi Tindal addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said, “May we all have the courage, the heart, to live by Creator’s ways of truth and reconciliation. I am here as someone with a broken heart who has witnessed truth about how others’ hearts, bodies, minds and souls have been broken. I am here to witness more truth in the hope that pain may be transformed and that we may take heart together.”

Also, on Thursday, Mike Weir gave us a brief flurry of hope; the Jays have won three in a row; World Cup fever is flag-waving strong. The garden is glorious; birds are singing, summer officially arrives tomorrow. And students and teachers all round shout, “Hurray, it’s June!”

V

God has so many patches to deal with - some ugly, some beautiful. All we know for sure is what our faith tells us - that God has a pattern in mind, and will work with us through all the stages.

And there are several stages to making a quilt! First, the TOP - the part the world sees, to which we must bring - not just our resumés - but the best lives that we possibly can. Life is not a dress rehearsal.

Then the BATTING – the stuff that goes in the middle. Never mind that nobody sees it; our Quilter God sees it very well. Never underestimate the importance of inner stuff. It’s what makes the quilt warm. Just because it isn’t visible to the human eye doesn’t mean we can use cheap stuff – that’s poor spiritual economics.

The BACKING, its full beauty never known until the project is finished, when we can turn it over and have a good look. A spiritual crazy quilt is backed by the seamless garment of God’s Love, that supports all that we are, sustains us through all the wear

and tear that comes, through everything that will ever be spilled on us, through all the cleansings that, inevitably, must follow.

The QUILTING - almost invisible perfect stitches to enhance the whole creation. The Holy Quilter Spirit stitches all the layer together, keeps us from shifting, quilts us right up the edges, no weak place unsupported, no careless work anywhere. Quilting strengthens the essence of who we are, and defines each piece with our own dignity and integrity and beauty.

The Holy Quilter has a universal DESIGN, with Star of David, Muslim Crescent, Celtic crosses. And the Great Quilter stitches the Light of Christ with incredibly beautiful embellishments – the Mercy and Grace and Love that we meet in Jesus, spangled like shot silk through the complexity that we are.

Crazy Quilts have yet another layer - overlays of lace, silk, satin, velvet, ribbons, bows. I think God is making a Crazy Quilt, adding overlays of extra fine blessing after we've done the best we can, enhancing whatever colour or shape we have become, no matter how many times we've been ripped apart and redone. I think God puts extra fine trimmings on those who've reworked (and been re-worked) most.

Now - the final stage, the BINDING. Sometimes, it's the backing brought to the front, and stitched around the edges, and sometimes it's a separate strip that's sewn on, binding the whole of who we are into one, finishing us off sturdily, beautiful enough to last a lifetime.

Here's my quilter-version of what Paul wrote to the Colossians. "You are God's chosen, holy and beloved; take on the shape of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience - especially gratitude. Let your dullness be beautified by the one next to you. Let your brightness transform the dullness in you, and those around you.

Bear with one another; re-stitch and reshape until you can forgive (yourself, too), just as God has forgiven. Above all, take on shades of Christ's Love, imbue yourself with the Peace of Christ until it rules your heart, for it binds all of God's creation together in perfect harmony.

Whatever you do, do everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God through him. Amen

Listen to these words from the first chapter of Genesis.

On the sixth day, God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.

And there was evening and there was morning the 6th day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.

And on the 7th day God finished the work, and God rested. So God blessed the 7th day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all work that God had done in creation.

And to the Colossian church (in chapter 3), Paul says:

God's chosen ones, holy and beloved - clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

Bear with one another, and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Let the peace of Christ rule your hearts; that's your calling in the One Body.

And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;

teach and admonish one another in wisdom;

with gratitude in your heart sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.

May this Word of God clothe us. Amen

