



A Thanksgiving Meditation on Patchwork Quilts

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I learned at least two new things this week. The first thing I learned is that quilters take their avocation very seriously. I ran across a list entitled, "You Know You're a Quilter When..." You know you're a quilter when, for example, you insist that the floor tiles in your new den be 12 inches square, so that you can lay your quilt down on it and square it up perfectly. You know you're a quilter when your spouse no longer mentions the pieces of masking tape stuck to your backside; he or she just politely removes it. You know you're a quilter when you look at the skirt of the person next to you in an elevator and envision it cut into 6 inch squares. You know you're a quilter when there's more fabric in the house than food, and you know you're a very serious quilter when you wait for the bedroom scenes in movies not for the steamy bits but to see if they've got a cool quilt on the bed!

Mennonites take their quilts seriously as well. Last year the Quilt Auction at the Ontario Mennonite Relief Sale raised \$115,000. The Quilt Auction's catalogue was eagerly snapped up this year, with extra copies disappearing quickly, and instructions have already gone out to congregations preparing quilts for the "Last Quilt Auction of this Century," to be held in May of next year. St. Jacobs Mennonite Church has hosted a display of "Quilts for the World" several times and donated the money raised to Mennonite Central Committee. We have our own quilt, lovingly crafted by Ruth Dyck and others -- the "Peace-It- Together" quilt hanging in the entrance.

There is something attractive and compelling about quilts, not only for those who use them and those who make them, but also for those for whom the quilt is a compelling literary image. Many authors find the quilt image irresistible, including our own Margaret Atwood. Quilts and quilt blocks are woven into the story of a young servant girl in Atwood's 1996 novel, "Alias Grace".

The quilt image emerged for me again several weeks ago when I heard Kim Wideman, a minister from Pool Mennonite Church, speak at a wedding. In her meditation Kim said to the couple, "We" -- pointing to the wedding guests -- "We are the people that make up the patchwork of your lives. Each one of us has helped to stitch together a small piece of who you (are) ... You've welcomed each of us in, to become a small yet significant piece in the quilt that makes up who you are.... Each person here has been stitched into your life with love and care and much time and energy." (Kim Wideman, September 17, 1998, at the wedding of Pamela Fehr and Peter Katona)

It's not uncommon to use the quilt as a metaphor for Christian community. The Apostle Paul uses what might be a fabric image when writing to New Testament congregations, talking of the church being "joined and knit together" (Ephesians 4:16), "knit together in love" (Colossians 2:2; see also 2:19). It's a good image to remember when our congregational fabric threatens to unravel.

I found it intriguing, however, to think of an individual as a patchwork quilt. Each of us is made up of a multiplicity of patches of various colours, shapes and sizes -- pieces that have been hand-crafted by people and places that have touched us at various times in our life, both for good and for the not-so-good, or so it may have seemed at the time.

I find it interesting that three groups of people -- Shakers, Mennonites, and Amish -- often collectively referred to as the "Plain People," produce the most exquisite quilts. "To collectors, says one collector, the words, 'Amish quilt' have come to mean graphic designs, rich colour combinations, and a striking modern sensibility." (Sara Lowen, "A Stitch in Time," Travel Holiday. October, 1996) I am also told that it is no great surprise to find a stain or a tear in an expensive Amish quilt. You would prefer it wasn't there, but you can't wish it away, and it does little to lessen your pleasure in the form. It finds its place in the overall pattern of the quilt.

A local retreat centre (Bethesda) is promoting a Quilters' Retreat for next May as "an opportunity to look at some of the surprising ways God turns the 'discarded scraps' of our lives into instruments of healing and strengthening." Which brings me to the second new thing I learned this week -- a new word -- the word, "tessellation". It means the "act of tessellating," or the "state of being tessellated," which means "the careful juxtaposition of elements into a coherent pattern". What a wonderful image for the various pieces of your life that get stitched together into the uniqueness that is you!

The psalmist, reflecting on God's part in his own creation, says "...it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works...made in secret, intricately woven...." (Psalm 139:13-15)

It's not hard to imagine God as a Master Quilter, tessellating each one of us, arranging both the noble pieces and the less noble pieces, including our mistakes, into a coherent pattern. It's often only as we learn to apprehend and appreciate the pattern that, like the psalmist, we are moved to gratitude and praise.

This morning I have asked two individuals to reflect on their own tessellations, and to share with us a few of the patchwork pieces which evoke their gratitude and praise. I invite you to join in their gratitude as you reflect upon the patchwork pieces of your own lives, which you will have occasion to share later.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.