

“GOD’S GIFTS: I – PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER”

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Psalm 51:1-17

Luke 19:1-10

Around about November of 1986, I was looking at the course catalog for Wesley Theological Seminary, trying to pick out my classes for spring, which would be my very last semester. You know, by the time you get to your last semester, you’re pretty much done with all the required courses, and you get to pick those that really excite you, or truth be told, courses that might be an easy A! Thus it was, that one of the courses that I picked for that last semester was entitled “Arts and the Gospel.”

How hard could that be, I thought! We would spend a semester looking at paintings and stained glass windows, studying great artists throughout the centuries, visiting places around DC to see works of art, create our own work of art. So, I signed up for it and took it. Alas, when my grades came in for that semester, I got all A’s, except for one B – and yep, you guessed it – it was in “Arts and the Gospel.”

Well, that disappointment notwithstanding, I love the arts, and I admire people who are gifted in the arts. When I came to Elkton, it didn't take me long to realize that we had some great artists in this church, and that is true to this day. So when I was laying out my plans for worship for this entire school year, the Spirit nudged me in that direction – to look at some of the artists in our church, the works they create, and see how they help reveal the character of God.

The hard part was whittling it down to just four artists, since there are so many in our congregation. But I did. I chose Andee McKenica, who creates stunningly beautiful quilts, Anna Smith who dances and teaches others how to dance, Bart Funke who is a very talented woodcarver, and Charlotte Mehosky, an incredible painter. Over these next four weeks, it is my hope that we'll learn more about God and us through them.

So today we start with Andee McKenica and her quilting. If you've spent any time with Andee at all, I'm sure you've seen her take fabric and needle and thread out of her bag, and work on a quilt. I've seen her do it in meetings, in classes, she's amazing. And what she creates is amazing, and a beautiful gift for anyone who receives one.

All of us have seen quilts a lot, haven't we, since we live so close to Lancaster and the Amish, who make amazing quilts. They have always fascinated me, and I couldn't imagine what it took to make a quilt. So Andee and I sat down the other day, and she walked me through the process.

The first step is to consider the purpose for the quilt. For whom or for what occasion is the quilt being made? Once you know that, you begin on the design for the quilt – the pattern. Andee says that you can buy patterns or you can create your own.

The next step is gathering the fabric or pieces of fabric. That is no small task, because you want it to be right. You want the colors to work together well.

The last thing before you begin to create the quilt, is to gather all of the equipment that you need – cutting boards, measuring instruments, cutting tools and so on.

Now, it's time to begin. The secret to quilt-making is that you do it little-by-little, step by step. You start with small pieces, putting them together into the shapes you'll have on the quilt. Then the smaller pieces get put together into big pieces.

Then once you get the shapes made, you sew them onto the background fabric – the big piece of fabric. The purpose of that background fabric is to, of course, make the shape of the whole quilt, but more importantly, to highlight or draw your attention to the shapes on it.

Once that's put together, it's time to attach two layers on the back. The first is called the batting. It's made of either wool or fabric, and its sole purpose is to provide warmth. You never see the batting after the quilt is completed, but from it you get warmth.

Finally, the backing is attached. One big piece of fabric that covers the entire back of the quilt. Oh, but it's not finished yet, because you need a border around the edges. That is made with long, long strips of fabric sewn together and then

sewn on the material. Once again, its color is designed to draw your attention to the shapes on the quilt.

The last thing you do as a quilt maker is attach a label to the back of your completed creation, and on that label is printed the quilt maker's name or initials, sometimes the name of the person for whom it was created, the date it was completed, and sometimes where it was made.

There's one more thing I want to tell you about the process. All along the way, and I mean at each step, there's an iron standing by for pressing. There's constant pressing so that there's always a smooth surface with no wrinkles, and so that everything fits together well.

The care that the quilt maker takes – from picking the colors, to putting all of the parts together, to constantly pressing to make it look the best it can, to finally putting all the pieces together into one creative and coherent whole, and then presenting the gift to a grateful receiver – is an amazing process, a wonderful gift, and it is, I believe, a perfect metaphor for what God does as well. So let's turn now and look more closely at that.

Friends, the Bible is, in many ways, a great quilt story – from beginning to end. For it is the story of our God who has created, is creating, and always will be creating.

Open its very first pages, and we see God, the great quilter, picking pieces out of nothing, and creating – the heavens and the earth, the sea and sky, plants and animals, and of course, human beings. Genesis tells us that out of the dust of the earth, God created Adam, and using a rib from Adam, God created Eve.

From those days to this day, God has continued to create human beings, and each one unique. But God made each one, in his eyes, just right, just the way he wanted us to be. Some tall, some short, some dark haired, some light haired, some dark skinned, some light skinned. But everyone just as God desired – the works of his hands.

And, in everything that God created, God called it “good.” Each of us was hand created by God. We were “knit together in our mother’s wombs”, “fearfully and wonderfully made,” as the scripture says. And God calls each of us “good.”

So that is the first way, I want to suggest today, that quilting helps us see who God is and what God does more clearly.

Secondly, just as quilters start out with the bigger picture in mind, so too, I believe, does God. But, the power and majesty of God is that, first he takes all of the smaller parts and fits them together. Let me explain that by way of a story – my own.

I think I've told you before how, after I graduated from college with a degree in history, I couldn't find a job. Nobody wanted to hire a history major without a teaching degree, so I was forced to look for any kind of work I could find. For about seven years (which isn't a long time, but felt like an eternity), I worked in a series of different jobs.

I worked as a title searcher here in the Courthouse in Elkton, I typed up transcripts of court trials for court reporters, then for a while I did a couple of temp jobs, including working at the New Castle County Airport for a helicopter company as a secretary. From there, I went on to a job at a tank and manufacturing company, also in New Castle. Fun, huh?

After that, I landed at the University of Delaware, again as a secretary. I worked in three different places over a period of five years – Housing and Residence Life, the Dean of Students Office, and then back at Residence Life. And I have to say, I was good at it. I was a good secretary, but I always knew, deep down in my heart, that that was not supposed to be my life's work. Many times during those seven years of different jobs, I would come home depressed, sometimes even crying, because I was frustrated and knew there must be something more for me.

And indeed, there was, for in 1984, I felt the call to ministry and went off to seminary. But here's the point of the story – what I discovered as the years unfolded in ministry, was that every single one of those jobs, taught me something valuable that I have since used in my ministry. The research that I did in title searching certainly prepared me for researching sermons. The careful listening to transcripts of court proceedings, gave me the skill to listen more closely to people. Working with people in the secular world of business helped me understand what it's like to work under pressure and deadlines. And working at the University of Delaware gave me great exposure to working with young people, and that proved to be invaluable to my ministry as well.

You see what God did? God saw the bigger picture of my life, and used those bits and pieces of fabric, those job experiences, to create something better in me. I never saw it at the time, but looking back now, it is crystal clear. Like a great quilt maker, God brings many pieces together to make one, cohesive whole.

Then, one final quilting image this morning, and it perhaps, is the one we human beings most need to hear. And it is that God can take even the most torn and tattered pieces of life and make something good come out of them. We see that beautifully in the scripture lessons this morning.

Consider the first lesson, the one from Psalms about David. You need to know that this psalm was David's prayer after he had the affair with Bathsheba, another man's wife. David, as you remember, was anointed the Chosen One at a very young age, and over the course of time, he began to believe that about himself, sadly in a destructive way. He began to behave in selfish, self-centered ways, taking whatever he wanted for himself, including another man's wife. Here he was, God's chosen One, and he couldn't have been farther from what God intended for his life at that moment, had he tried.

God could easily have given up on David, found another King and moved on. But that's not God's character. God doesn't give up on us, and he didn't give up on David. He punished him, yes, but then, he gave him another chance, and David rose to the occasion, becoming the great King of Israel God intended. In spite of all his self-destructive actions, those torn and tattered pieces of his life, God took all of that and made a way for David into a new future. He, in fact, quilted a beautiful, productive, faithful life for David out of tattered and shattered pieces, because that what God does.

We saw it in the Gospel lesson, as well. Zacchaeus was torn and tattered inside. For years, he had been living for himself and himself alone. Being a tax collector, he collected taxes, but he also skimmed money off the top for himself, and people knew it and looked upon him with disdain. He was lost and lonely, going down a dangerous path, when one day, his path was crossed by a man named Jesus. Hiding up in a tree, he watched as Jesus came and stood at the foot of that tree calling him down. I would imagine Zacchaeus was pretty nervous, wondering what in the world Jesus would say to him.

Imagine his surprise when Jesus treated him like a child of God, which he was but certainly didn't feel like. Jesus invited him to a better way of life, to throw

off his selfishness and open his heart – which is exactly what Zacchaeus did. So many people gave up on Zacchaeus, but not the Lord, the great quilter. He saw a bigger picture, a bigger design for Zacchaeus' life. He took those tattered and torn pieces and quilted them into something great, because that's what God does.

Oh friends, flip through every chapter in the Bible and you'll see it – with Adam and Eve, Ruth and Naomi, Peter and Paul, Mary Magdalene and the woman at the well. Over and over again, when life is shattered or tattered, God is there to quilt something more, something beautiful, something graceful and grace-filled.

God is indeed like a great quilt-maker, always seeing more, always seeing a bigger, more beautiful picture, always ready to take the pieces of life and quilt together a cohesive and beautiful whole. There is no one so shattered, and no situation so bad in all of life, that God cannot redeem it, and pull the pieces together into something new and beautiful.

So today, I thank Andee and all quilt makers, for reminding us in such a beautiful way of the nature of our God. Thanks be to God. Amen.