

“Dressed in Love” by Peter Bankson

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Christmastide



INTRODUCTION

In this week's Scripture readings we're already down the road from the manger in Bethlehem. In two of the lessons we get a glimpse of the nurturing power of parental love. And the other lessons invite us to weave robes of that healing love to help heal a hurting world.

In the Hebrew Scripture reading we have Hannah patiently making a new priestly robe for her son Samuel, each year, as he continues to serve in the temple. In the Epistle reading Paul encourages us to clothe ourselves in robes of love, suggesting a variety of things that might be woven into those robes. And the Gospel lesson gives us a brief glimpse of Jesus at age 12, responding already to God's prophetic call, yet still willing to honor his loving parents.

The image that caught my attention this time was those “Robes of Love:” where to find them; how to weave them; where to share them. It took my imagination quickly down the road from baby Jesus in the manger. As we turn our attention toward the

new year emerging, a time that seems particularly turbulent here, looking for ways we can clothe ourselves in love seems really important and really, really challenging. How can we learn better to “[b]ear 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.” (Colossians 3:14)

As I thought about Hannah sitting in the light of a bright morning, filled with love for her son Samuel as she worked on his next linen ephod, I wondered who had woven the fabric, and whether someone else who had seen Eli recently had given her an update on how he had grown. I’d guess that Hannah was part of a community, and her call to make him a love-filled robe every year was part of the life of that community. Thank God she was not alone.

And what of us, as we contemplate the call to clothe one another with love? What does it look like to be clothed in love as we reach out in all our separate ways to answer the call of this community, “... empowering others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for service and witness.”

Here are a few thoughts about creating robes of love. I hope they give you some small thing to ponder as we get back on the road together after the holidays.

Hannah’s robe for Samuel was a labor of love

Samuel’s mother Hannah was late in life when she was given him as a son. As was the custom in those days, the eldest male child was offered to God to serve as a priest, so when he was weaned, Hannah took him to the temple to live with Eli, the senior priest.

He lived at the temple full time, supporting the work of Eli. He only saw his family once a year, when they came out of the

hills to make their annual pilgrimage to the temple. Every year Samuel's mother Hannah made him a new robe to wear when he was serving there. I'm sure that weaving his robe was an act of love for her. She had to make it differently each year, so it would fit her growing son. And I'd guess that it took strong, loving focus to keep his growing presence alive in her memory as she spun, and weaved, and sewed.

This story of Hannah's robe for Samuel reminds me of a remarkable day 23 years ago next week. Marjory and I were in Viet Nam on the 30th anniversary of my service in Duc Pho. In early 1996 we were visiting Sa Pa, a remote village in North Viet Nam near the Cambodian border. That day, while on a hike west of the village, we met a wood merchant, who invited us home for lunch. After giving us the meal his wife had prepared for him, an act of hospitality that still stands out in my memory, we shared stories.

While we visited with him, his wife sat by the open cooking fire in the family yurt, working on the next year's shirt for one of her children. She was sewing together pieces of fabric she had woven from the thread she had spun from the flax she had grown in her garden. It took about a year to make new shirts that way. But as she told us, her son was growing, and he needed a new shirt every year. It was the only shirt he had, and it got pretty worn during a year of hard work in the fields and jungle.

When I read about Samuel in the robe his mother brought him each year, I see the hospitality of that settled family in the highlands near Sa Pa. A robe of love.

What does it take to weave a robe of love?

In addition to time and careful attention, it takes some tools and some fiber to weave the fabric to make a robe.

There are different roles for the materials that will become

the fabric. Weaving requires threads that perform at least two functions Who knows what they are?

(Pause for answers: Warp and Weft)

Warp threads form the longitudinal structure of the fabric, holding the weight and tying the fabric together. Weft threads are woven from side to side, introducing the pattern and adding warmth and protection.

(Show placemat where warp is evident only as the fringe)

Here is one of the placemats that we use all the time here at Seekers Church. It's from the collection gathered by those of us who have gone on pilgrimage to Guatemala over the years to support PAVA in their ministry to bring education to Mayan children in Chimaltenango. In these placemats the warp that holds the placemat together in its solid, rectangular form is nearly invisible, appearing only as the fringe. The weft threads are bright and carefully woven into an abstract pattern. Sometimes what holds a placemat, or a robe together is only visible on the fringe. Its that way with garments of love as well.

(Show my Chimayo vest, where weft completely covers the warp)

Sometimes the warp that holds the cloth together doesn't appear at all. Look at my vest. It was woven by the Ortega family in a native American family studio in Chimayo, New Mexico. In this vest the strong cotton warp holds the wool weft together in a fabric tough enough to survive for a century. Here the warp is completely covered, doing all its work from within. (This is beginning to sound like a version of Paul's teaching about "One body, many parts..." Does the eye say to the hand, "Because you do not see, I have no need of you!") In weaving, with linen or love, every part has a role. Its up to the weaver to use them carefully in a way that builds up the whole. That's the way it is with robes of love, too.

(Show Mimi's lap robe)

As I thought about the traditional division between warp and weft, I was reminded of the lap robe on the daybed at home. Here's a garment where the warp and the weft are both clearly part of the visible design. Here the part that holds the structure also contributes equally to the image. It was woven by Marjory's sister Miriam.

Mimi spent much of her time as an adult weaving. She had a foot-powered treadle loom that filled a main bedroom in their house, the house she shared with her husband and three growing children. Her designs are wonderfully intricate, and this blanket is an ideal comforter for my "timed-outs" on cold winter days.

For me, these "timed-outs" are a new spiritual practice. Here's how it works. When I get to the point where I know I need to take some action, but I don't know how to begin – or I'm afraid to begin because I can imagine all the ways things could go wrong – I focus on what the task is, then set the timer on my phone for five, or sometimes ten minutes, then crawl under this comforter and start the timer and enter into the silence.

When the timer goes off, I jump up and make the call or start the e-mail. I'm surprised and encouraged by the energy and affirmation I often feel through these little quiet times, and the sense of being clothed in love. It's a physical example of the kind of relational support we are committed to helping each other find and share with the wider community.

((Pause))

WEARING a robe is different from weaving one. Weaving a garment of fiber takes materials like thread or yarn, some tools to move the process along, and a safe place to do the work ... as well as some idea of the process of weaving.

Once the thread or yarn is in hand, we need the tools to help. For weaving, the biggest tool is the loom. Warping the loom preparing it for the task of creating fabric, takes experience and careful attention to detail. There needs to be experience and preparation in there, as well as a safe place to do that work. As we think about weaving garments of love, there are some interesting parallels. But let me start with Paul's call to the Colossians:

As 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.
(Colossians 3:12-17)

Paul offers some ideas about threads: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience and forgiveness ... all parts of love. These seem to me like the bright, soft shining threads that bring the warmth and protection of a robe of love.

If that's so, then, what's the warp? I'd suggest that its commitment. It is commitment to being loving – to friends and families, and strangers and enemies alike – its commitment to being consciously on the Way together that ties these attributes and attitudes together, particularly through the stress of weaving them into a robe of love.

And if we think of Seekers Church as a weaving studio, we have the opportunity to help each other create garments of love that will help us, and others we meet, weather the cold winds of winter, cultural and relational, that storm around us, help us do the kind of forgiving and confessing we need to do to be the Body of Christ, just arriving again to show us the Way.

Before I close this focus on weaving as a way to clothe

ourselves in robes of love, I want to return to a related idea from my own experience with fiber. I've never warped a loom, but I have made a few garments here and there. The altar cloth this morning is a lap robe that I crocheted for possible use in the meditation Room upstairs. I didn't have a pattern and had to do some fresh learning as I went along.

Crochet and knitting are different from weaving in several ways. One is the fact that there's a lot more flexibility in shaping the garment. The down-side of that flexibility is that there's no warp to hold the fabric in alignment either while it's being formed or later in the final garment. In this lap robe all the yarns help hold the garment in place even as they offer their color and texture.

As I thought about how the differences between weaving and crochet might affect the metaphor for creating robes of love, the image of Seekers Church came easily to mind again. Unlike some other places, here we don't really count on some of the threads to hold the space while others get to bring the color and creativity. Here we count on each of us to bring what we have been given, and offer it into the emerging fabric, offering what is needed in the moment, each of us sharing what we have been given to add to the emerging creation. Maybe one way to think about what we're trying to do here is that we're helping each other learn how to be part of the process of making robes of love to share, contributing in different ways at different times. So...

As we weave together, what part of the process might you be?

When we turn our attention to weaving blankets of love, there are lots of places to join in. Some help hold it together, like the quiet warp of that placemat. I think of Elizabeth and her colleagues this year, holding together all the bright savory pieces that came together in our Christmas Eve celebration. And there was Glen, snaking open the clogged kitchen drain as we set up for Christmas Eve dinner, then

leading the carol sing downstairs and others transformed the dining room into our sanctuary for the evening.

And there are Will and Kenny who are encouraging us to keep our supply of Care Packs filled and ready and give them to those in need. Some bring toothpaste for the care packs; others give the bags of care and comfort to those in need.

Some bring a bright and warm and fuzzy point of gratitude into our sharing as we gather and our time of community prayer, or a memorable song or sermon, or an opportunity to help support the visit of the team from Bokamoso.

Some serve as the loom, like Learners and Teachers and Celebration Circle Mission Groups, that hold space for learning in our School for Christian Growth, and worship here on Sunday mornings. Or our Living Water mission group that nurtures our inner journey and supports silent retreats.

Each of us has the opportunity to share with others in the wider world the love and support we help weave together here. It's at the core of our call to be church:

For us, Christian servanthood is based on empowering others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for service and witness.

Each of us has the opportunity to add to the emerging garment of love, even as we are wrapped in its forgiving comfort.

CLOSING

A warp of commitment – weft of compassion: a slowly emerging lap robe of love.

How can we live into that in the year to come? We can listen to the guidance from the Apostle Paul:

[C]lothe 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.

Seekers is like crochet, each strand serving as both warp and weft, contributing to the comfort and warmth of the whole even as we help support the shape that is emerging. Like Jesus and Samuel in their early years, we grow in wisdom and stature as we step into the future, engaging the wider world even as we honor the love that holds us.

As you reflect on the path before you, you might ask yourself

1. What do you have to contribute to our growing garment of love? And where would it fit the emerging pattern of Seekers Church?
2. What do you need, and who can you ask about it?
3. What would help you clarify and nurture God's call on your life?

If something fresh comes to mind, I encourage you to talk with your spiritual companion about it. And if you don't have a spiritual companion at the moment, you might talk with the Servant Leadership Team or one of our Stewards about that.

May God wrap us all in love as we step into a new year together. Amen