

## “When Quilts are More Than Quilts”

Sermon: Year C, Pentecost 15, Proper 20, Lectionary 25

Texts: Luke 16:1–13, Amos 8:4–7

Preached: September 22, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who lifts up the poor from the ashes and enthrones them with the rulers of the people. AMEN

I love Quilt Blessing Sunday for a host of reasons. I love the visual beauty of walking in and seeing the astonishing results of these useful works of art displayed for the pleasure of the eye. I love the tactile sensation of touching the different fabrics, laid out for the pleasure of the hand. I love the knowledge that a band of dedicated volunteers have gathered and enjoyed fellowship so many times across the course of the year to create what you see before you. I love watching these quilts being carefully piled into boxes that will be taken and loaded onto a semitrailer, to be shipped off to join hundreds of thousands of quilts from ELCA congregations around the country to be stored in warehouses before being distributed around the globe to refugees and displaced persons struggling to survive the worst that life and the broken systems of this world can dish out. I love the spiritual power that unites us with the poor in every warp and weft, in every stitch, in every knot. These quilts are not just pretty bed coverings. They are God’s justice made visible.

Say what? We don’t often think about quilts as justice. When we hear the phrase “God’s justice,” we usually tend to hear it in a very different way. We tend to hear it as “God will zap those who do wrong.” We think of “justice” as wrongdoers finally getting what they deserve. But you see, that’s not really what is being referred to in scripture when it speaks of “justice.” When scripture refers to justice, it is usually referring to something that is more like “the setting right of communal relationships.” In scripture, lifting up the poor is “justice,” because it is setting right something that is broken. In scripture, paying workers fair wages is “justice.” In scripture, distributing food to the hungry and clothing to the naked is “justice.” In scripture, the fact that there is poverty is a proof of things having gone wrong, an indicator of the effects of sin on the world. It’s not seen as the natural state of things...it’s seen as a perversion of the way God desires the world to be. Does the lack of justice anger God? Absolutely. That is said over and over again. And the passage from Amos we heard today, after reproaching the people for their abuse of the poor, for their business practices that cheat those with no economic power, for selling adulterated products to unsuspecting consumers, reminds us that God simply will not forget those deeds. Why? Because ours is a God who lifts up the needy from the dust and enthrones them with rulers. That is “justice,” from the biblical perspective. It’s about setting things right.

So how do these quilts that surround us today have anything to do with justice? Well, there’s the obvious level that they will go around the world to directly serve the needs of the “least of these,” focusing on refugees and people displaced by war, famine, or other natural disasters. In one recent year, more than 350,000 quilts were sent to 16 countries, aiding some 535,000 beneficiaries, who use them for warmth, for shelter, for floors in tents, for carrying belongings and babies. That is the fundamental aspect of justice here. But justice is not simple charity. By stitching these quilts, by tying these knots, we are reminding people who believe that they have been forgotten, people who have been ground up by the mechanisms of injustice in this broken world, that they are not forgotten. Lutheran World Relief (LWR) tells of one woman who was recounting how hard her family had worked to survive, and how much hope receiving help from the outside world had given her, and then she began to shout with joy, saying, “Zion is here! God has remembered us, and things will never be the same again!” That, sisters and brothers, is justice. God’s justice. God remembers the poor in their poverty, and lifts them up. When you and I donate to the quilt ministry, or give of our time and creativity, or shuttle quilts to Park Ridge for shipping, we are participating in God’s justice.

But there are other layers of justice at work here, as well. You see, there are powers in this world, powers that work against God’s kind of justice, powers that thrive precisely because of injustice. There are powerful systems in this world that are in place to make sure that the poor stay poor, and there are any number of mechanisms for doing that: wars that drain resources to the powerful who profit off the weapons and who grab useful land and resources for themselves; corruption that lines the pockets of those with power and privilege; unjust taxation systems that take larger percentages of wealth from those with the least than they do from those with the most; industrial systems that exploit natural resources, pollute the environment, and cause potentially irreversible harm to the world’s climate. It is the poor who suffer the most from these effects. When we work to establish justice for refugees, we in small ways undermine the systems that produce the injustice.

There's even an aspect of justice in some of the very fabric these quilts are made from. Did you know that the U.S. generates more than 15 million tons of used textile waste every year, and that that number has doubled in the past 20 years? Seventy percent of the world's population wears only secondhand clothes, yet the average American throws into the garbage more than 80 pounds of used clothing each year. The average American purchases 60% more items of clothing and keeps them half as long as we did only 15 years ago. Some of the synthetic fabrics will take hundreds of years to decompose. The pace of our consumption and discarding of our textiles is proceeding at an unsustainable rate. This, sisters and brothers, is injustice. But by reclaiming even the small portion of fabric in these quilts that is reclaimed, we act with justice. And by reusing, recycling, or donating our used fabrics and clothing, we upend in small ways the injustice.

The challenge for us is that we are enmeshed in these very systems that produce injustice. We each play a role in the brokenness, simply by being consumers, or by participating in the economic systems, or by clinging to our own comforts even when we know that we enjoy them only because others are being deprived or exploited, or because we are mortgaging the future of our children. Like the dishonest manager in the parable of Jesus, we ourselves have benefited from, and benefit daily, from the unjust use of the world's resources. And the sobering reality is that we cannot fully disengage ourselves from these systems. To some extent, we are at their mercy. But we can choose which master we will serve. We know that if we serve the master of wealth, we cannot serve the justice of God, the kind master whose desire is that the poor be lifted up from the ashes.

Jesus says that if we are faithful in small things, we will be faithful in larger things. By consciously choosing to serve God's call to justice, God's call to setting things right in our communal relationships in the world, by consciously taking even small and imperfect steps to establish justice and right relationship where we can, we move closer and closer to God's vision of a world redeemed and restored. We do not do this under our own power. By our own power, we find ourselves only enslaved to the broken systems of this world. But by the power of the Spirit, we can choose to act with justice, with kindness and compassion, with mindfulness, with generosity. With God's help, we can choose more often to subvert the sinful systems of our world through acts of mercy and lovingkindness.

If we want to know what matters to God, we have only to look at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, where we hear a couple of manifestos about God's justice, God's establishment of right relationship in society. First, we hear Mary's song, the Magnificat: "God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." And Jesus himself, declaring his mission, recites the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Justice. God's kind of justice.

Will we by ourselves throw down the unjust systems of this world? No. But we can each be faithful to God's justice in small ways, because even those small things can build and grow, working against the powers of injustice. As Jesus says, we need to be as clever at creating justice as the powers of this world are at creating injustice.

As we prepare in a few moments to bless these quilts and send them on their way to those who wait for good news, I want you to reach out and touch a quilt near you. Run your hand over it. Picture in your mind's eye the people who will receive this gift. Say a prayer that they will know safety and security, and that they will know the love of God through this gift of love from a neighbor. Pray for God's justice for them. Feel the fabric? Feel the stitches, all sewn with care? Feel those knots, tying everything together? That is what the setting right of the world feels like. That, sisters and brothers, is what justice feels like.

May Almighty God establish you in the ways of setting things right, in the ways of God's justice.

AMEN