



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Nancy Hodgkins - May 21, 2017 Sermon

Joined and Knit Together

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A long time ago, I attended a continuing education event in Louisville to hear children's author, Katherine Patterson. Born to missionary parents and married to a Presbyterian minister, Katherine Patterson wrote over 30 books, many for children, including *The Bridge to Terabithia*. One of the lines I remember from her presentation that day was... "I laughed, I cried, it changed my life." I wish I could remember the context of that line, but it has long since retreated back into the permanently locked files in my head, but every now and then, I'll have an experience that causes that line, just that line, to pop back to the forefront of my mind.

I recently took a trip to Missouri with my mother. As many of you know, my mother is a quilter. I am not a quilter, more of a quilt enthusiast, but visiting quilt shows and fabric stores are some of the things I do to spend time with my mother. My parents have spent the last few years moving, and neither of them has been able to visit me here in Dayton. I will confess, I am not above bribery... so last summer as my mother was talking about this new quilt shop she was excited about, I did what all selfish children do... I bribed her. If you come to Dayton to visit me, I'll take you to that quilt shop. Little did I know that she would take me up on it, but she did... so the day after Youth Sunday... off we went to Hamilton, Missouri, a very tiny small town on the western edge of Missouri about an hour north east of Kansas City, the birthplace of J. C. Penny and home to the Missouri Star Quilt Company.

Jenny Doan and her husband Ron lost most of their retirement savings in the 2008 financial crisis and as a family, they, Jenny, Ron, and their seven children, began looking for something to supplement their income. Jenny had always enjoyed quilting, and so the children pooled their funds and purchased a long arm quilting machine for their mother. As the story goes, the machine was too big for the house, so they purchased a building for less than the cost of the machine, and the Missouri Star Quilt Company was born. But their real success came after Jenny — with the encouragement of her son, Alan — began making online quilting tutorials and putting them on YouTube. Free online quilting tutorials were a new thing in 2008; after all, YouTube was only a year old. This new approach to teaching transformed quilting and allowed Jenny and her family to launch a business that has grown by leaps and bounds since they opened their first store.

The small town of Hamilton, Missouri, population of 1,800 people, has become a quilting mecca. They have opened 14 themed fabric stores on Main Street in Hamilton, a machine quilting business, and workshop and retreat space. In addition to that, they sell fabric and quilting supplies online. They now employ over 400 people and welcome as many as 30,000 visitors a month. My mother and I had a great time exploring these shops in search of beautiful fabric, innovative patterns, and cool gadgets, but the highlight for us was the night we attended one of Jenny's Trunk Shows in the sanctuary of the local United Methodist Church.

I didn't have any idea what a trunk show was, and only purchased the tickets because I knew that my Mom wanted to go. What a night! In addition to being a creative quilter and a good teacher, Jenny Doan is a fantastic storyteller. It was a night full of laughter, tears, and I think, for some, possibly life changing. Jenny, with the help of her husband Ron, shared stories, quilts, and helps and hints with the crowd of 250 people gathered from all over the country.

The part of the evening that touched me the most was when Jenny starting talking about the stories... all the stories that she has heard since she began this journey. She thought she was just sewing and teaching others how to sew. In the beginning she underestimated the impact of what she and her family were doing. They were just doing something they enjoyed, trying to survive day to day, inviting others to join them, and now, not only have they provided for their family, they have revived a town and provide opportunities for others to provide for their families.

The Missouri Star Quilt Company is a fine quilt shop, but what impressed me was not the store, but the story. Their story...each person, living into their own truth, sharing their specific gifts, and encouraging others. A living example of what it means to build community... to build up the body of Christ.

I have always recognized the connections between quilts and faith. Some of my earliest memories of church are attending the Presbyterian Women's meeting in my home church, running around the vestry while the women pieced, embroidered, and tied quilts.

Quilting together provides opportunities for conversation, encouragement, counsel, Bible Study, and prayer. Before there were small groups in churches, there were quilting circles. I know for my mother and her friends, quilting is not just what they do for fun. It is the place they share their anxieties and troubles, where they ask each other for help and support. It is a place of deep sharing, meaningful moments, and grand adventures.

Each quilt created has a story and tells a story. Quilts have been made and given to mark births, graduations, weddings, anniversaries, and new beginnings. Sometimes made of scraps and found fabric, sometimes carefully crafted from long-searched-for pieces of just the right shade, color, or print. Much labor and love often goes in to quilts that are given as gifts of comfort, hope, and love. Some quilts remind us of our past and others so artistic they are more art than blanket. I find quilts and quilters inspiring and often walk away with insights that reframe life.

So of the many great things that Jenny Doan had to share with us at the trunk show about her work and quilting, there were two that stuck with me... "You have to use all the pieces, even the ugly ones." and "You have to love what you are doing." You have to use all the pieces... Good advice for anyone trying to put together a puzzle, or build a bookcase, but quilters pick and choose all the time.

When The Missouri Star Quilt Company began selling fabric, they couldn't afford to purchase it by the bolt as they did not want to go into debt in order to offer fabric to their customers. So they began selling precut fabric. Pre-cuts are bundles of fabric offering a sample of every fabric in a particular line. They come in different sizes: 5-inch squares, 10-inch squares, and two and a half inch by 42-inch strips. The first patterns and tutorials Jenny developed used these packs of fabric to make quilts. Jenny tells a story on herself about how in the beginning she would go through the packs and pull out all the pieces she didn't like, all the ugly ones. Those early quilts were never as beautiful. Eventually, her daughter Sarah told her she had to use all the pieces so that nothing was wasted. To her delight Jenny discovered that each piece added to the beauty of the whole. This image offers

us a simple reminder about the importance of each person and their gifts.

Each of us is a beautiful, unique creation of God. Each of us has been given gifts to use in the building up of our families, our communities, and our church. These gifts work together in beautiful simplicity and sometimes frustrating complexity. It is the intentional unity of our lives and gifts in service to Jesus Christ that allows us to be the church. The unity of the church requires every effort to create spaces of grace where diversity in life and practice is honored, a space where the recognition, acceptance, practice, and celebration of unique gifts is the norm. Unity is not uniformity. The beauty of any quilt — and I dare say the church — is found in the variety.

As we mature and grow, each of us is constantly living into our understanding of the gifts God has given us, continually honing a long-honored gift, and at times delighting in the discovery a new one. Sometimes these new discoveries are all it takes to revitalize our faith and effective ministry.

Quilters lay things out, move things around, and turn pieces upside down and sideways as they look for the right design, color sequence, or simply until it feels right. It's not about whether or not you should use the piece... it's about where the piece fits.

Many of us have found opportunities to share our gifts that seem to be a perfect fit, but for those of us who are still looking, trust that God is at work. Listen to the invitations to get involved, volunteer, or join a new group. Not only may you find a place that fits, you may also find that you bring gifts that bless others.

Many quilters quilt because they can't stop. They love it! They love to sew, to create something from nothing, or to play with the hues and patterns to create something unexpected. They sew to manage stress or to create beautiful, functional things for those they love. They use their gift of sewing to create prayer quilts for hospice and cancer patients. They make quilts for children who are sick or in foster care. They make quilts for families who have lost their homes to fire or natural disasters. Many quilters donate as many quilts as they keep or gift to others. They are a generous group of people who share their gifts to bring warmth and comfort to others.

When we give out of love, bonds are created and strengthened. Communities are formed. Truth is shared: real truth about who we are and what our greatest hopes and fears are. When we do what we love, and love what we do, we are being our best selves. Honoring those talents that God has given us while at the same time meeting the needs of the world around us. We live our truth.

Unfortunately, we do not always have the privilege of loving all the tasks that are set before us. Sometimes we just have to do what needs doing. Life can be hard, and the tasks before us may seem insurmountable, but there can be great support in turning to those around us for help. Like a quilt, the church, the body of Christ, is joined and knit together by love and truth creating community and unity of purpose. When each person offers their best gifts in love, the community is strengthened, and new opportunities abound. When we work together to discover and honor our God-given gifts and the gifts of others, only God knows what will be accomplished.

I'm very thankful to be the daughter of a quilter and not just because of the many beautiful quilts I now own. No, I am thankful for the stories. I am thankful for the friendships I have witnessed. I am thankful for the community I have seen. I am thankful for the many, many quilts my mother and her friends and hundreds of groups like them have given to warm the bodies and souls of those in need.

And I am also thankful to be a part of this Christian family called Westminster. I am thankful for our stories. I am thankful for the friendships I have witnessed. I am thankful for the community I have seen. I am thankful for the many acts of love and service that we as the body of Christ provide to those who are grieving, struggling, and searching.

In the church, each person matters. Each person is important. Each person is needed to build up the body. You are important. Your gifts matter. The Holy Spirit is at work here in this place joining each of us together in love and shared purpose. We have Good News to share.

Living faithfully in love, following in the footsteps of Jesus, and using our best gifts gives us many moments of laughter, and occasionally tears, but most importantly, moments of growth and change — moments where we are changed into the people God is continually calling us to be. Amen.