

## **The Wisdom of Remembering**

**Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-20, Ephesians 4:1-16 (FNV)**

**By Patty Friesen and Grandma Fern Roth (11/12/17)**

November is a month dedicated to remembering with Remembrance Day this weekend and in our Memorial Sunday, or Toten Sonntag, the last Sunday before Advent when we remember the deaths of our loved ones this year and light candles in their memory. Julie is preaching that memorial service but I'd like to prime the pump of remembering our elders who have died, our grandmothers and grandfathers, especially, our mosom and kokum in Cree, and what they teach us in death and life.

Dr. Kathleen Dowling writes in *The Grace in Dying: How we are Transformed Spiritually as We Die*: I have often believed that the process of death contains some of our most brilliant lessons in the journey we call life. The deep purpose of our existence is more evident the closer we get to death. This is why we must treasure our time with those who are dying and not distance ourselves from them because we may feel uncomfortable with the process. Death is the most important lesson of our lives and will bring us closer to our Creator if we let it.

It is never too late to take stock of our lives, even in the last weeks and days of terminal illness. And for those of us in the midst of life, in the apparent safety and security of our health, it is not too early. No matter how much time we have left to live, the answers to the following questions, voiced in the quiet honesty of our own hearts, provide direction to the rest of our living. Who have I been all this time? How have I used my gift of human life? What do I need to clear up or let go of in order to be more peaceful? What gives my life meaning? For what am I grateful? What have I learned of

truth, love, tenderness, vulnerability, intimacy and community? What have I learned of the human condition and how great is my compassion? What helps me open my heart and empty my mind to experience the presence of the Spirit? What will give me strength when I die?

We learn how to die from our elders who show us the way. This is what I learned from my grandmother, Fern Stutzman Roth. While I was not present for her death at the Lacombe Special Care Home, nine years ago, I am comforted by the fact that people from her church came and sang for her as she had sung for them all her life, first as a young girl singing in a trio with her sisters, then singing in a quartet with my grandfather. She taught me to sing alto and to sing Gott Ist Die Liebe in German. She wrote hymns and devotionals and corresponded with young offenders. She was a force in our lives and in the church. Her funeral was easy to plan – we just played recordings of her singing, sang the hymns she wrote, displayed the comforters she had sewn and used this devotion she wrote about comforters as her funeral sermon that I am using this morning. It's like sharing a sermon with my dead grandma! Imagine her here, standing 4'2", hair in a bun with a whitecap covering, the daughter of a conservative Mennonite minister and she could have been a minister herself. These are her words...

I cut these old dresses into comforter pieces – in themselves they are too small and useless to make a dress or blouse. They are just left over scraps to be thrown out. In the same way we too are remnants, not very valuable just by ourselves. In the big world we may seem quite insignificant, unable to accomplish very much, in fact quite useless until God reached down in love and picked us out and made us of value to Himself.

The scraps of material are many colours as there are many races of people, skin colours, cultures and denominations. There is beauty in Christ's universal church with such a union of saints from every tribe and nation on earth. Within a comforter are primary colours, the brighter ones that attract the eye and also secondary colours which maybe don't attract attention to themselves but mixed with the brighter colours provide a contrasting beauty. Our leaders are like the primary colours because of the leadership they provide in the church. The rest of us may be duller colours but we work with them toward the same goal, just as faithfully yet less conspicuously, but making Christ's church beautiful all the same.

The material pieces are also different sizes. The small blocks are just as much a part of the comforter as the larger ones. Neither can you change the positions of each. In the fellowship of believers, God doesn't classify us by the size of our contribution but rather notices each part we play. We lose our usefulness if we attempt to mimic someone else's position and performance. Because of the unique places we fill in God's comforter, there is no need for envy or jealousy.

Let us notice the different strengths of the materials. Some are firmer and stronger, others of lighter weight but all come together to make the comforter. No piece complains of its weakness or brags of its strength. No piece says, "I'm more beautiful, put me in the middle, or says, "I won't be a patch beside you!" The beauty is in the comforter pieces side by side. No one says, "Look at the lovely individual pieces." No, the beholder looks at the whole as a work of art together. As the world looks at the church, do they see Jesus reflected in the beauty of the whole or do they judge us by individual people?

The designer of the comforter plays an important role. The woman who designs it arranges the pieces where they blend best. If I make a quilt; I have the authority to place each piece where I choose, they have no choice. In the same way, Christ as the designer of the church equips each of us with gifts and talents, which benefit the whole. Gifts are not given for personal glory, but as Paul said in Ephesians 4, gifts are given to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith. As we are surrendered and committed to Christ, he can arrange us where we fit, even in a little corner, yet a very real part of the whole.

What holds the quilt or comforter together? The thread. This is the working of the Holy Spirit. Without the stitching, the material would be flimsy and shirting. Stitching means pricking the pieces, which hurts a bit, but they make the material secure and beautiful. Is God able to make us more beautiful and steadfast in our faith, more useful to others as we are pricked with trials and unpleasant experiences? James says, “Count it all joy when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Finally, when the comforter is all complete, stitched and bound, it is ready to be purchased and claimed and used. What is the purpose of a comforter? We put it on a bed as a cover and to bring us comfort. God comforts us to make us comforters ourselves. This comforter with its four corners spread over the bed reminds me of God’s love covering the four corners of the earth. Not a person is left uncovered or un-provided for as far as God is concerned. I may slip out from under the comforter or toss it back saying, “I don’t need it,” but it is not the comforter’s fault if I get cold! Neither is God to

blame if I, or anyone reject His provision of love. We as comforters belong to Christ and when he comes to claim the finished comforter for himself – what a wonderful time that will be.” Amen.

I’m struck by how aboriginal my white Mennonite grandmother sounds, talking about the four corners of the earth and finding spiritual wisdom within her experience of creating art and describing God’s work as a Woman Who Sews. Her reflections echo Ojibway writer Richard Wagamese’s conversation with a Grandmother of whom he asked, “Grandmother, what is the greatest teaching in life?” She replied, “You have to make your own moccasins.” Richard responded, “You’re kidding, right?” She replied, “No. You make them from the hide of your experience, all the places you have walked. You sew them with the thread of the teachings, the lessons embedded in all the hard miles. You stick them carefully with the needle of your intention – to walk a spiritual path – and when you’re finished, you realize that Creator lives in the stitches. That’s what helps you walk more gracefully.”

Reflecting on her wisdom, Richard said, “I got busy learning how to sew!” May God be with us whether we are sewing moccasins or comforters. Let’s pray: Our Gracious Creator and Comforter of our lives who calls us home in death, Thank you for our grandmothers and grandfathers and all who have been spiritual grandmothers and grandfathers to us, who have led us and encouraged us by their example and prayers. Thank you for their fearless living and peaceful dying. Thank you for their trust in you that leads us into deeper trust in you. Thank you for this season of remembering even if it brings us grief. Be with us in this season of darkness. Amen.