

Bound with Cloth

Rev. Carroccino's sermon for Sunday, November 1, 2015 – The Feast of All Saints

Readings: Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9 ▪ Psalm 24 ▪ Revelation 21:1-6a ▪ John 11:32-44

Archaeologists tell us the humans begin wearing animal skins as clothing anywhere from one hundred to five hundred thousand years ago. The first sewing needles, however, are much younger, having only been around for about forty thousand years. And then, around twenty-five thousand years ago, we start seeing the first evidence of woven fabrics, the rudimentary precursors to the modern plethora of textiles available to us. The earliest examples do not consist of fur or hair - this would come later - they are made of flax. Curiously, many of those first textiles were put to use as shrouds for wrapping the dead - perhaps as a way to honor them without also burying useful animal hides. Whatever their reasoning, these prehistoric people began a skill which survives in a form largely unchanged from their own. Cloth is an essential part of being human, from the blankets we use to swaddle newborns to the shrouds still in use around the world. And good fabrics, like good people, take time to develop.

The bible has quite a lot to say about textiles: from the rich tapestries that adorned the palaces of kings to the lowly strips of cloth that bound Lazarus as he lay silent and lonely in that dark tomb. Jesus mentions the eternal value of giving away your cloak and shirt to those in need, and he too spent his life wrapped in cloth. It was flaxen cloth that lay folded in his tomb at his resurrection - what we today would call linen. So Jesus called Lazarus out of the grave, and John makes a point of saying that Lazarus is bound in strips of cloth. What Jesus said to the people is significant: "unbind him."

On a different day, Jesus told his disciples that whatever they bound on earth would be bound in heaven, and whatever they loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven. Binding and loosing are popular terms among the rabbis of Jesus' day. To bind was to make a thing essentially off-limits, while loosing created a freedom to act. These ideas represent two sides of the same social function: justice. Both exist primarily to protect and nurture human freedom - at least in theory. When Lazarus walks out of the grave in his shroud, the fabric represents a bond to death. Even as he stumbles out of the ground, he is literally tied to his mortality. But Jesus does not untie him.

The prophet Isaiah uses the image of a shroud that covers all the nations and people of the earth. Isaiah says that God is going to destroy that shroud, that he will swallow death forever. This is the core of our faith - that we are by nature eternal; that God intends everlasting life and blessing for us all. All this, and yet our story ends with Jesus delegating the unwrapping for the crowd of bystanders. Jesus has unbound Lazarus from death, but how is Lazarus to know that with his eyes covered and his movement restricted? He is alive, but still very much bound by death. And he needs help.



This story is sometimes understood to be an allegory of the church. As individuals, we are Lazarus; as the church, we are the bystanders. We have been freed from death, but we have to help one another break the bonds. At our best, that's what we're up to - breaking death's bonds, and - paradoxically - making new ones. Today is All Saints' day, and in a few minutes we will all stand up to renew our baptismal vows: we are together reenacting a moment of binding that defines us, we are binding ourselves to one another and to Christ in his death and resurrection. Through the sacrament, we are bonding ourselves to one another and to all of our spiritual forebears in the faith. It is a bond that creates freedom rather than restraining it. You may have heard me say that church is a correctional institution, and this is perhaps the greatest correction - that we are freed from living in fear of death, that we have the power to loose the bonds of others, even as we wait for help to loose our own. It is a process that takes time and patience - sometimes more than we'd like to give.

We're not just celebrating all the saints who have walked that path, however. Today we are rededicating the kneelers that have protected all this granite from the dirty knees of saints for over forty years. They represent a labor of love by people working to free one another, people patiently walking a spiritual journey. The cushions represent the creativity of a group of women who gave generously of their time and effort to benefit the worship of this parish. After we bring them up and bless them, be sure you take a look at them when you come up for communion. Each image represents a verse or phrase from the Song of Creation - a canticle we'll be singing together in a few minutes. Take note of which one you kneel upon today, and as you pray and take communion, think about this:

The cushions were made by needlepoint, a method that differs from other forms of stitching in that instead of modifying or adding embellishment to premade fabric, you are actually creating a whole new cloth, custom to the project at hand. This is significant on a day when we talk about the power of textiles to bind. Even as we work to loose one another from the shroud of death, and after renewing our binding of baptism, we are bound by this cloth, created wholly within our midst, with us in mind. And we will be, week after week, month after month, year after year. It takes time to make a saint, and we are thankful for the saints who came before to pave the way to our share in God's eternal blessing.