

**A Sermon preached at the Funeral Service for Madeline Peeler held  
at St Columba's Church, Washington DC, on Saturday,  
January 2 1010, by the Rev. Martin L. Smith**

There is a poignant moment in the one of the stories that come to us from the early days of the Christian movement, recorded in the book of Acts. A beloved member of the Church has died, woman called Dorcas, described as "devoted to good works and acts of charity." The story tells us that when Peter hurried over to visit her family and friends in their grief, they were waiting for him with examples of her needlework in their arms to show to him the instant he arrived, "things that Dorcas had made while she was with them."

This is such a human touch, just the kind of thing we do when we mourn. "Just look at the kind of things she used to make." The story came to mind because, although Madeline didn't do needlepoint herself, she was brilliant in recruiting others to take it up, and her passion has born fruit in so much beautiful work done for our church, especially the decorative kneelers in the pews.

Of course handling physical objects that a loved one has left behind is something we all do when we grieve, even though it brings such sweet pain as we hold them to our faces, smell them, and run our fingers over them. They are tangible symbols that help us hold things together when the bottom has fallen out of our lives. And as symbols they represent something much larger, a person's whole life. The pieces of needlework that Dorcas' friends just had to show Peter were symbols of all that goes into a life well-lived. Think of the patience she had all those stitches one by one! Remember how imaginative she was! How creative! And how practical too! And a piece of needlepoint is a pretty good symbol of all that we celebrate in the life of a woman like Madeline. Creating stitch by tiny stitch, and crafting slowly with patience a picture, an image, because there is no greater work of art than a life well-lived.

Think of all the stitches made day by day in a life well lived as a faithful follower of Jesus. All the creativity that goes into a home, into a marriage, into raising children, all the patience it requires, all the imagination, all the practicality, all the willingness to have a long term perspective, all the hope in the future. Think of all the daily actions that went into her work, and her life as a very committed citizen devoted to the betterment of our community,

and the innumerable small gestures and gifts that make up devoted and active membership of a church.

It would be unbearable to think of all this as coming to nothing, but of course the beauty and gift of faith in God comes to our aid at this point to remind us that all the giftedness of a unique life lived to the full doesn't come to nothing, it comes to God. Our lives don't come to nothing when we die, they come to Everything, they flow directly into the all-embracing and all welcoming Life we call God, who keeps it all. Faith tells us that our lives in fact are part of a larger whole, a big picture, like a giant tapestry, all the tiny stitches that make up an individual life, are stitches in a huge work of art. We work close up, don't we, and as we struggle to be as creative as we can be in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, for better or worse, we have little idea how vast is the slowly emerging big picture in which we are a vital element. In fact, as you know, those who weave tapestries weave them from behind. They only see the confusion of the back and have to ply their stitches in trusting that, hidden from sight on the other side, the big picture is gradually emerging from the chaos of hanging threads.

At a Christian funeral, in this service of Holy Communion, this is the aspect of faith that brings us most consolation when our hearts threaten to sink under the weight of grief. Every single thread of Madeline's life has been worked into the very life of God, every action, every prayer, every suffering, every achievement, all the loss and the joy, the rewards and the mistakes, even the ordeal of the final round in her struggle with cancer, have been stitching her more firmly day by day into the fabric of Christ's risen life. She seems to have disappeared from us but she has already reappeared in the intimate presence of God and is learning that her life has been part of God's great work of art, and that it would have been incomplete without her, God needed her to be just exactly who she was and who she is now, enjoying a life that we can't yet imagine, but awaits us all soon, very soon.

The colorful threads of gratefulness and affection and memory that link us with Madeline are strong and real. And in the long run, prayer will prove to be the strongest of them all. Today at our Eucharist, we start the practice of sending Madeline our love through prayer. Isn't that how we pray at the Eucharist? Isn't prayer a matter of saying to the Lord, "Jesus, give Madeline our love"? And as we gather to lay Madeline's earthly remains in their resting place we know that that is what he is doing and what he will continue to do until we are all reunited.