



Message

The cross-stitch I'm holding is an heirloom from my family. Made by my great-step-grandmother, it reads, in German, "Eigner Herd, Goldes Wert." Translated, it means "Your own stove is worth gold." The saying had a special meaning for generations of Mennonite women. In the Southern Ukraine, where Mennonites began to settle in the late 1700s, the social system was such that when you married, it was rare that you and your husband could start out on your own. You joined your husband in his parents' home and lived under the auspices of your mother-in-law. It was her house, her kitchen, her stove, and you worked under her. For some women, this was a good experience and for others it was not. It all depended on how generous and kind your mother-in-law was, and how well she could adjust to sharing her son with another woman, not easy for some mothers.

The day her husband would move onto his own farm, was the day when she got her own household, when she was no longer answerable to her mother in law. You had your own kitchen and your own stove and thus your own power. When that time came, either you, or your mother, would cross-stitch one of these and you would hang it by your kitchen stove, a sign that you had become the mistress of your own house.

This tradition gained new layers of meaning during World War I, the Russian Revolution and the Civil War that ripped through the newly formed Soviet Union. Famine, epidemics, brutal violence and political turmoil took their toll. There might be no mother-in-law to contend with, there might be no farm for anyone. You might be sharing a stove with two other families. There might be no stove at all.

In this uncertain time, Maria Martens, a woman in her early 20s, married a young widower with five children. She took over another woman's stove. A few years later her husband died. According to the tradition at that time, Maria had no claim on her step-children. They were to be divided amongst their aunts and uncles, but she would not let them be separated and fought tooth and nail to keep them under her care. And besides, she had plans to get them all out of the Soviet Union. Life had become too uncertain and she desperately wanted to feel safe, and to build a life with more possibilities for herself and her family. In 1925, they boarded a steamliner for Canada where she had relatives who had already made the journey.

She arrived in Manitoba with nothing but her immigration expenses. As a single mother, her means were limited. She needed her own stove which meant she needed a man. She found another widower also a recent Mennonite immigrant with children from his first wife. So she took on another woman's stove and a second set of step children. While some would have had pity for her, in her eyes, she had made it. She had survived war, famine, disease, violence, poverty, the death of her husband and the loss of her home. Now she had a husband to care for her and her step children, a new home, and a stove. When she could afford it, she bought the materials for a cross stitch like the one that had hung in her mother's kitchen. Indeed, her own stove was worth gold.

So often we think that it was the loud outburst of women spilling onto the streets of North American cities in the 1960s and 1970s that first spoke the truth for women. We tend to look at anything pre-1960s as the Feminist Dark Ages, when women were tragically confined to home and kitchen. We look at the Women's Movement as freeing women from that confinement. There is much truth in this. But,



sometimes this understanding makes it hard for us to see older generations of women as having any power to define their own lives, or any awareness that they had power at all. But if you look carefully, you will see that in every time and in every age and in every culture, women find ways of honoring their lives and accomplishments, of reverencing their place and their path in the world. In the case of these Mennonite women, they took the art of cross-stitching and used it to identify a significant rite of passage, of moving from dependence to independence, from danger to safety, from no home to a hearth to call your own, where you can take care of those who depend on you. Even in the most patriarchal of societies, women found ways to do this honoring and I want us to hold onto that.

We tend to think we have little in common with our ancestors, that life is much more complicated now, fast paced, swept up in technological changes that have separated us from a quaint and unreachable past. While there are ways that life has changed a great deal, our basic needs have not changed much. We need to be needed. We need to feel valued, validated, accepted, recognized. We need to love and be loved. We need to feel safe and secure. We need the promise of possibility and opportunity. We need some measure of control over our lives. And we are joined to every human being who has ever walked this earth in the need for a sense of reverence, that in the ordinariness of our lives, what happens to us has a special meaning, that we are part of something that is bigger and more powerful than we are.

No matter how fast our computers, how many songs you can download into an ipod, how many functions we load onto a cell phone, those needs have not changed. We are joined through the centuries, across races and creeds and cultures by these spiritual needs.

By the time Black Tuesday gutted the stock market in October 1929, Maria and her second husband had bought a farm in rural Manitoba and eked out a living from the rich prairie soil. It soon became clear though that the economy was drying up and they were in trouble. They needed hard cash to keep the farm and support the family.

Maria had heard that many young Mennonite girls worked as live-in maids in Winnipeg. Her youngest step-daughter Annie had just turned 13, considered old enough at that time to work. And so, Annie was sent away. She worked cleaning wealthy women's houses, taking care of their children, washing their floors, doing their laundry, avoiding their husbands, shining their silverware, and ... cooking on their stoves. There were times Annie would feel the loss of her childhood like a knife in her heart. Loneliness was chronic and she waited for her one Sunday afternoon off a month, when she would meet up with other Mennonite girls working in the city. One afternoon a month, when they could be normal teenagers, not maids.

What held her in those years was her growing faith. She would pray to God to protect her, and often she would feel him, and to her it was him, respond to her. But sometimes, all she heard was silence. Sometimes, on a particularly hard day, she would curse God for not protecting her, for abandoning her, for stealing away her youth and ripping her from her family. But then she would collect herself, ask for forgiveness, remember that her work supported her beloved family, and keep going.

The years passed. 5 years, 10 years, 15 years working as a maid sending her pay check home. She saw women her age getting their own stoves as they married and started families. She would dream of the day



when she would see her reflection in silverware that belonged to her, dress children that were her own, and prepare meals on her own stove. But her chances for marriage were getting slimmer, for who wanted to marry someone pushing 30. In those days, she might as well be an old maid.

We all need our own stove. We all need some power to determine what happens in our own lives. When the women's movement did burst onto the scene, it declared an assault on all those things that kept women from making their own choices. Feminists pointed out the fact that, metaphorically speaking, not every woman could get her own stove. Some have large new stoves while others have stoves that barely work. We live in a world that is beautiful and cruel, generous and harsh, marked by injustice and inequality. The women's movement sought to speak the truth of that inequality. Not only should every woman to have her own stove, every woman should have the ability to be unchained from that stove so that she could make other choices about her life, choices that Maria and Annie did not have.

The women's movement among many others made clear that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere. Injustice separates us from each other, from our own potential, from seeing each other and being with each other. To speak of this using religious language, injustice from its smallest to largest form is systemic spiritual violence that separates us from the image of God in which we are made. Whether it is the case of one woman abused by her partner, the death-row inmate waiting for their final day, an inner city school that can't get books while a suburban school makes another series of capital improvements, a mass shooting in a public building, to a nation that engages in torture for the ostensible purpose of protecting freedom, injustice is an evil that like a silent poison seeps through the soil of our society into its foundation. As it seeps through the cracks of the foundation it is ingested by everyone. No one is untouched.

One of the more difficult religious tasks is to sand away the protective coating we build up that allows us the luxury of turning a blind eye to injustice. When you hear yourself or someone else saying, "It's not my problem. I didn't cause it. Nothing I do is going to make a difference anyways. It's just too much I can't handle it. I wouldn't know where to start. I'm too busy. I already recycle." When you hear things like this, you're hitting that protective coating. We are protecting ourselves from pain we're afraid to feel if we allow ourselves to touch that systemic violence in ourselves and in others. In our fiercely individualistic society we learn a whole library of ways to distance ourselves from feeling, hearing, and seeing each other's cries for help. And especially as religious liberals, with our theological heritage of focusing on the goodness of every person, it is much harder for us to look at our complicity in systems of injustice. The allure of purity and distance is like an addictive drug. But, this is the issue: like any drug, it numbs us to life itself. If you cut yourself off from the pain, you are cut yourself off from the joy. You can't have one without nurturing the other in your life. So long as we allow fear to hold us away from the truth of our world and our part in it, we will be held back from that life transforming power of all-encompassing love, that some call God.

In her late 20s, Annie grew tired of being alone, tired of serving other women. She decided to move to Ontario, where two of her brothers had settled. She was followed by her step-mother, Maria, once again widowed, who soon found another widower with another set of children, and set up house with yet another woman's stove.



She was ready for her own stove. At the age of 29, she found herself a man, married him, and claimed her stove. And that's when Maria made her this cross stitch which hung in Annie's kitchen for the next fifty years. This was no happily ever after. Annie's marriage was no picture of bliss. She turned to her family and her strong faith in God, was thankful when she felt his presence, and questioned him when he seemed absent. She had cultivated a strong sense of abundance to survive her years as a maid and it stood well by her as she raised her five beautiful sons. She always found ways to give thanks, and one of those ways was service. She lost count of the number of blankets she and her friends made for refugee camps. She lost count of the hours she spent at canning parties preparing food for the hungry. She lost count of the hours she spent gathering and sorting donated clothes. She lost count of how much money she and John dropped in the collection plate. She understood her faith to be empty without giving back, empty if she did not give to others who suffered as she suffered. Even as she struggled with five babies and no indoor plumbing, she never questioned that this was what she had to do.

To walk into the pain and the beauty of this world is to walk back into life itself, back into that image of God in which we are made. It is to open doors that have closed, and wrap our arms around a greater loneliness that saturates this fragmented society. We have a deep spiritual need to bring together that which has been separated. That spiritual need is drawing 25 of our members and friends to New Orleans next week on a volunteer work trip. That spiritual need has unleashed the desire to create a Community Service Team which will do our work in this community. That spiritual need compelled this congregation to open its sanctuary to a production of the Vagina Monologues. We are united across generations, cultures, creeds, and religions by the spiritual hunger to bring together what has been torn apart.

Fifty years after my grandmother received this tapestry from her step-mother, she gave it to me. I was 28, and had finally moved out of shared housing into my own apartment because I desperately needed my own stove. There was no husband to be seen, but I think she figured this was as good as it was going to get, and so she told me the story of this tapestry, and she gave it to me and she said something to this effect, "I waited for my own stove for a long time, and I'm so glad you have yours."

May we never forget what that means and what it asks of us.
Amen and Blessed Be.