

“Puzzles, Predictions and Possibilities!”

Easter 7, John 17:1-11, May 24, 2020; 9:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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Jesus Prays for His Disciples

17 After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all people,^[a] to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶ “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified

in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

I. PUZZLES AMONG US

I am a “watcher of culture.” An observer of humanity—of habits we find ourselves getting into. Trends that seem to pop up out of the blue and take off like wildfire!

Sometimes these trends make *all* the sense in the world—say, like the trend to get creative with masks, if we’re all going to have to wear them. Suddenly, masks have appeared made out of all *sorts* of fabrics, prints, designs. They’ve become quite the fashion accessory!

Other trends are puzzling and amusing all at the same time! I stand back and ask the question: “Why is this so popular all of a sudden?” “Why is everybody doing it?”

From my observation, in this puzzling time we find ourselves, the number one thing a *bunch* people are doing—in our culture anyway—and yes, it’s a bit puzzling to me—is jigsaw **puzzles!**

Raise your hand if you’ve been doing puzzles during this quarantine time! Drop a comment on the You Tube Chat – stand up and be counted!

(And, if you haven’t yet **subscribed** to our CUCC You Tube Channel, please do so today! We’re creating a big puzzle called “100 Subscribers,” so we get to the Advanced Level and can do all sorts of great things with outreach and building our wider community.)

II. WHY PUZZLES?

Why this has become such a craze? Puzzles—everybody’s doing them! I even saw a group was doing a “Puzzle Exchange” like a “Cookie Exchange!”

Clarke and I couldn’t begin to do them at our house—laying anything out on a table is an invitation for crazy cat and play!

The cats would conspire with the dogs, knock them on the floor and you can only imagine where the puzzle pieces would turn up later!

I love to throw questions out into the ether: why do you do puzzles? What have you learned about yourself, your housemates, your spiritual life by putting puzzles together in these times?

One grandmother said:

Oh, my little kids get so mad if a piece is missing! So very annoyed—especially if the puzzle came from Newbies and was missing pieces to begin with!

One couple (that we might know ☺) stays up way too late at night doing puzzles, and then had to set down a rule that if one person gave up and went to bed, the other was *not* allowed to continue without him. No solitary progress permitted.

Another (or several) people accused a family member of always hiding the last piece.

My cousin in Montana chimed in:

Just finished a puzzle I had made from one of my photos of the Big Blackfoot River...I think I need **Puzzle Intervention!** While on our last hike, I saw puzzle pieces on pine trees, on the ground! I even had a dream of doing a puzzle that I put together only to find that Gus (our dog) had eaten three of the pieces! Good grief!

(Puzzle intervention?! P.I. Support groups?)

Another cousin threw up her hands in exasperation and said, “I had to quit!” I asked her why, but then I saw the picture and I got it. The colors all bled into each other. It was the hardest puzzle I’d ever seen! I gave my cousin some sympathy and told her she “did the right thing.”

Others dove a little deeper into the metaphors for life that can be discovered:

If you lose a piece, how important that piece is to find.
What piece to this puzzle am I?

Am I part of the blue sky? Or the wallpaper?
Or part of something else?
Every piece matters.
Everybody is important to the overall picture.

III. THE PUZZLES OF OUR LIVES

What do *you* puzzle about, in these unprecedented times? Whether you’re *doing* jigsaw puzzles, or think that’s the last thing you’d want to spend your time and brain cells on!

I asked myself that question, and then realized it would take ten sermons to list them all—as I watch the world around me and its inhabitants and happenings.

Right now, though, for me the #1 thing that I puzzle about is this:

That we are pushing toward 100,000 deaths from Covid-19 and this horrendous virus; this planet-wide pandemic has NOT proven to be the unifying force we’d hoped it might be.

We as human beings are *so* bent on dividing into camps and drawing battle lines that even a non-human, non-partisan, non-classist, non-discriminating biological agent can’t bring us to the realization that we truly *are* all in this together and **MUST** work together against the common enemy of Covid-19, *instead* of making each other the enemy.

That’s not only puzzling for me, but heartrending and exasperating to the depths of my being!

IV. A FAMILY STORY OF A PUZZLE

I have a family story about puzzles, great and small. Back in the day when my nieces and nephews were small, and we all pretty much lived in Oregon, my extended family would get together at the beach, in a house or cabin, for a few days every summer.

We’d play board games and play on the beach and make meals together and just be family. But, what we most enjoyed doing, was sitting around doing puzzles. Why? Because, unlike a Scrabble game with concentrated thinking and fierce competition, a puzzle could be done *with* conversation. We

could catch up on each other's lives and interact with the kids all while putzing away on a puzzle.

One year, we had something more serious to talk about than the latest antics of the kids and dogs. My husband and I had come to a major life turn and needed to talk with the family. We waited till the kids were in bed, and we all gathered around the jigsaw puzzle, and nervously explained that we were parting ways.

We still loved each other and were the best of friends, but he had, thankfully, come to the point in this life where he could acknowledge his authentic self—and say, honestly, that his authentic self is gay.

And as we shared that story, around that puzzle, God showed up. There were listening ears, surprising tears, thoughtful questions and expressed concerns. There was shock and disbelief—we'd never had a divorce in our family before. But, there was no judgment, no anger, no blame.

There were plenty of tears, hugs, questions, different understandings of scripture and beliefs. Remember - this was 1990 and a *lot* was still being puzzled over about sexual orientation—in life, faith communities, and the Bible. There still is, of course!

“What will my church think? My friends and relatives?” my family asked aloud.

We had to reconfigure our lives and the puzzle of our family starting then. Our family was different now. Where would we each live? What would we do with the house? What to tell the kids? They LOVED their Uncle John and he wouldn't be around as much now.

Was it easy? Not in the least. It was one of the most difficult conversations and situations we've ever lived through—as individuals, and as a family.

But, we did it with great love, much prayer, and unquestioned, unconditional support all around. God was with us, in that most puzzling time. God was inside our family puzzle, in the midst of our questions, conundrums, confusions and care for one

another. In that season that was incredibly difficult, and the next seasons to come.

V. PUZZLING TIMES AMONG US

We do live in puzzling times. In some ways, incredibly difficult and unnerving times. Too many surprises; too many unknowns. We are unable to make plans, decide how best to proceed; know what or whom to believe, and how to move forward.

Yes, our very lives are puzzles. God watches us try to put them together and gives little hints and unique shape and color swaths. When the pieces finally fall together, from time to time, what better sign of God's presence among us can there be?

We work at it diligently, trying to line things up, trying to remember who we are and Whose we are. Figuring out, with God's help, where the puzzle pieces fit. And, how our Creator wants to help us make them fit together. Wants to help us be our authentic selves.

Claiming our piece of the greater puzzle, being our authentic selves—fully embracing the fact that we are a unique and needed piece of the Puzzle, makes our own life puzzles fit together. We are disciples, beloved of God, and *that's* where we fit.

VI. HOLY BOX LID

But, what if it just doesn't come together? Do we throw it all back in the box and give up? What do we do when we can't make sense of it? When the pieces just aren't fitting together? We reach for the Box Lid!

Oh, wouldn't it be great if we had a Box Lid with all the answers for ourselves?! We don't usually get that in life--like the pattern ahead of time for the tapestry. It's just not usually that clear!

But, remember, even with that picture, you STILL have to figure out where all the pieces go and how they fit together! It's still a challenge, even if you're look at the big picture vision with your Creator alongside.

VII. DON'T GO TO THE BAR!

There's a meme going around, with a man sitting at a bar, and next to him is a puzzle piece. The man asks: "What are you doing here? The puzzle piece responds: "Driving someone crazy right now!"

Confusing and frustrating forces or people in our lives! (and I don't mean the spouse that hides the last piece from you, or does the puzzle after you've gone to bed and made all the progress without you! Oh wait! Maybe I do. ☺)

Don't be that piece sitting at the bar, purposely making someone crazy! Not being part of the team; holding out your participation. It's funny in the cartoon, but not when you're the rest of the puzzles pieces and the puzzle doer.

Jesus' prayer for his first disciples, and for all disciples down throughout the eons (yes, that means us!), is "that they may all be One."

⁹I am asking on their behalf, Jesus prays to God, I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours....protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

VIII. CALLED TO BE ONE BIG PUZZLE?

What if?

What if that spout I gave a moment ago about the crazy battle-lines we draw as humanity could be answered with Jesus' prayer *and* a solved puzzle?

What if we saw ourselves as not only one with our Creator, but as one Big Puzzle? All coming out of the same box—Mother Earth—and spending our lives getting acquainted, coming to understand one another; our particular shapes and sizes, hues and tones?

What if we didn't scatter *too* much, or knock each other off the table? Didn't knock *ourselves* off the table, choosing to pull away and go hide somewhere (or go to the bar!), when the going got tough, but stayed there, in the mix?

Stayed at the Table, bumping elbows and rubbing shoulders with those pieces who look like us and those who don't. Those who are probably going to be near us when it's all said and done, and those who are going to land in a completely different section?

What if we looked at all the possibilities—for putting our puzzles together that we haven't considered before? How might things fit together that we didn't think were possible? Maybe we had them turned the wrong way or hiding under others. Still in the box! Under the table or in the other room! Feeling left out and not welcome to the table. Maybe that piece that didn't want to fit in before will find a good place for itself.

And the Holy Box Lid will be smiling down, watching it all come together—colorful, unique, snug and secure. "Well done, good and faithful puzzle-makers! With you I am well pleased." Amen.

