

*Sermon by Pastor Molly Doreza  
Based on Mark 6:30-34, 53-56*



During pandemic, my husband and I put together four jigsaw puzzles. It kept us occupied and was fun – at least with the last hundred pieces.

But the first part of assembling the puzzle? Not so much. The dumping out of pieces, the sorting – just turning all the pieces right side up – makes you wonder why on earth you started it in the first place.

I don't know if I'd have done these puzzles alone. When I was about to throw in the towel, Tom put a segment together; when he was stuck, I pushed forward. After a while, the pieces started making sense, in relation to each other. And finally, there was a great sense of satisfaction when it all came together.

We let those finished puzzles sit for a while on the dining room table, even as we began to assemble others; they reminded us of the goal, the satisfaction of finishing, as we dumped new puzzles on the table.

At the time, I didn't quite see the analogy of these puzzles with what was going on in the world. We knew pandemic would change things, but now that we are "reentering" the world again, I really feel overwhelmed and intimidated at trying figure out how we are going to put the puzzle of life together – especially for the church.

There are some pre-assembled pieces, for sure. We still have buildings, staff, pastors and somewhat of a mission to follow. I say "somewhat" of a mission, because I think that is where our new puzzle gets really confusing and complicated. We've never had a puzzle like this before. Its pieces go together differently; our orientation has changed.

For example, two years ago many churches were facing issues of sustainability and growth. Studies have been tracking the steady decline in church membership, and we've wondered together how we turn the tide on that. We've revamped our efforts at evangelism and stewardship, hired consultants, set up social media presences and enhanced our signage and developed new strategies for attracting youth and young families.

All this has been good, and we've hoped to see some trends shifting – at least in congregations who were willing to put their mission puzzles together in new and creative ways.

Then pandemic hit. During these past months all of us have had to try to figure out how to assemble ourselves – safely. Some plowed ahead, keeping in-person worship with social distancing. Others, like our congregation, didn't want to risk members' lives. Most all of us provided some level of virtual connection – whether it be for worship, study or congregational meetings.

Virtual connection has provided interesting possibilities for us, and the way we put things together again after pandemic. And yet, we resist this template – wondering if “ChurchFlix” (my word for on-demand, virtual worship) won't disrupt some of the essentials which in-person, regular worship brings.

As we wrestle with these questions, we realize that pandemic has brought us a new urgency to figure out the puzzle of our mission. People have left congregations, joining others, or just plain disappearing. We are afraid that pandemic might have been the death blow to many of our churches. It might well be.

It is indeed a new puzzle with lots of pieces to put together. Where do we begin?

You can't help but empathize with Jesus and his disciples, as they faced the monumental challenges in front of them. Where to begin? How to deal with so many people in such need? Maybe we can learn a little from him.

First, he took a deep breath. He got away from it all and rested. At first, this seems counter intuitive, especially when one has such a big puzzle to deal with. But it is important.

When I was in seminary and doing my Clinical Pastoral Education at St. Luke's in Milwaukee, one of the first things we learned about helping others in medical crisis is that you can't help others when you yourself are in crisis. Before we went into the ICU, or to the bedside of a dying patient, we learned to take stock and remind ourselves about our roles. We weren't there to “save” people from suffering, but to be there with them.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, walked along with the sheep. He differentiated his role from the problems surrounding him and took the time and space to do that. It is a good example of how the church can respond to this confusing, anxious time.

We need to take time to be together, to nurture the relationships among us, to be at the Table and in loving conversation, before we tackle the bigger needs. It is easy to jump the gun. But when you start working on a puzzle without a break, (or at least a chance to look at the front of the box to see what you're putting together), you get discouraged and probably take more time than necessary because you don't have perspective, let alone *enjoy* the work in front of you.

Secondly, our "time outs" to refresh and rejuvenate help us to move from anxiety to something more important: compassion.

Right now, it is easy to be frustrated and angry. Upset with people who don't respond to things the way we think they should, or to be offended that people haven't hung in there with us. Worse, it is tempting to want to put this confusing puzzle away completely. To walk away ourselves. To give up.

The road ahead of us is very unclear. What is clear is that we face a brand-new puzzle, and it would be insane to try to put things together as if it were the old one.

But here is the good part: as we all try to figure things out, Jesus is right there with us. And we follow him, not the other way around. We draw on his unlimited compassion so that we can reframe our lives in love. We believe that he still casts our vision, no matter how confusing the puzzle around us is framed. We understand that mission may be messy and confusing, but that – in Jesus – all are healed.

Like all the confusing pieces, in a jumble on my table, Jesus loves each one of us. And each one of us, through him, can find healing.

The church has been assembling puzzles throughout her history. It is easy to think that the particular confusion of the Covid pandemic is unique – but it really isn't. All one has to do is revisit history to see that the church has always had to adapt, and to revisit her main mission – to bring Jesus to suffering people. And if we remember this simple mission - to bring Jesus to suffering people – we will have gone a long way in assembling our current puzzle.

We need to take time to remember that. Not to charge in, but stand back for a moment, to look at the cover of the box of God’s puzzle – and see there the face of the Good Shepherd, Jesus – who will guide us through the difficult and challenging days ahead.

**Amen.**

