**The Puzzle of Power**

**Psalm 46
Colossians 1:11-20**

I have never been a jig saw puzzle enthusiast. I think it takes a certain personality type on the Myer’s Briggs personality inventory to look at all those little pieces scattered about and think, that looks like fun. Let’s spend an entire day staring at fragments of a picture, many of them looking almost identical, and see if we can put them together. I’d rather read a book.

 This past summer one of my relatives brought a jig saw puzzle to our family gathering in New York. Almost immediately folks began the process of assembly. During the course of the week, little by little, the puzzle began taking shape with different members of the family taking turns, often working together. I took pictures with my camera as they stared intensely at the table, picking up various pieces in hopes of finding one that would fit.

 As I observed, I did notice several keys to puzzle assembly that seem to help the process along, which I am sure those of you into jig saw puzzle assembly already know. It can help to get the outside frame assembled first. Those pieces are easier to recognize because they are all flat on one side. Next, you begin grouping puzzle pieces by color and pattern association. If you have a blue section that looks like it could be a sky for example, you know that deep green pieces probably fit somewhere else. The other thing I noticed and this is especially crucial, it helps if you have a picture of what the completed puzzle will look like. Throughout the week those working on the puzzle would pick up the cover to the box, get a good look at the picture, and then return to their assembly. The thought did cross my mind that it would have been fun to swap out the pieces in one puzzle box with those in another box before anyone really noticed. Unfortunately or fortunately that thought occurred too late.

 A primary concern in the letter to the Colossians that we read this morning is that the Colossians are attempting to assemble their understanding of what it means to be a Christian with what Paul considers to be a substituted picture of the faith found in Christ. Paul is especially concerned about how this swapped out picture on the jig saw puzzle box portrays the power given to those who follow the Risen Christ. “May you be strong with all the strength that comes from Christ’s glorious power”, says Paul. In Paul’s jig saw picture following Christ means that the power of God is at work in us and through us. It is through what we do or don’t do that the Realm of God’s justice comes into being. We have an important role to play. This is the image Paul has on the cover of his box.

Unfortunately the alternate image which some are seeking to substitute is an image that sees God’s power completely separate from this world. In Paul’s day it was referred to as Gnosticism. The Gnostics saw the spiritual world of God and God’s power as absolutely distinct from the fallen world of human beings. Today, this particular jig saw image of Christianity is carried on by those who argue that having the right understanding about Jesus and God is the only thing that matters, because what happens to us when we die and enter this separate spiritual realm is the only thing that matters.

 Paul insists you will never be able to put together the picture of God’s love and justice by using this swapped out image from another box. Admittedly it can get confusing, because the images share some common characteristics. The outer fragments that create the frame are virtually identical. You right away see the outline of some very familiar elements, like the Bible, Jesus, the church. But, according to Paul, there is no question that if you start putting the pieces of your life and world together with this faulty picture of what it means to follow Christ, you will have problems. God’s cares about our lives in this world and it is through our love, our compassion, our forgiveness, our work for justice that the power of God is at work.

 The Gnostics and their latter day descendants are, of course, only one group among many who seek to swap out the jig saw picture of God’s power with a substitute picture of God’s power. Paul insists that the power of God works in a grass roots, turn everything upside down kind of way, by “making peace through the blood of Christ’s cross.” Rather than exercising power through the standard means of domination and control, intimidation and threat, the image Christ gives is one whose power is made evident in the apparent weakness of love, a love that is willing to sacrifice one’s very life.

This power is the love of every parent who puts his or her needs aside for that of her child, the love of a tutor who gives his time for a someone else’s child even when it would be easier to stay home, the love of one willing to forgive even when there is ample reason for hatred, the love of a community leader who refuses to let either violence or racism have the final say, the love of every prophet who stands up for justice even when it means incredible sacrifice, including one’s life. The power of love found in the cross is the power turned to by someone struggling with addiction, acknowledging I cannot do this on my own. When Paul says, “you are made strong with all the strength that comes from Christ’s glorious power,” Paul is pointing us toward a jig saw puzzle picture that focuses our lives on the strength of love found in the cross.

 It comes as no surprise that this jig saw picture of power spoken of by Paul is one that is often rejected in favor of a picture of power that is more accommodating to the interest of those who already see themselves having power. As soon as Christianity was adopted by the Emperor Constantine he and many ever since quickly realized that domination and control, all done in the name of Christ is more convenient and conducive to maintaining dominance than the power of love found in the cross. In short order the Emperor swapped out the picture of love revealed in the cross for the power claimed by those who wish to maintain authority over others.

 It is this swapped out picture of power that has been and is claimed by men who wish to have authority over women. It is this swapped out jig saw picture of power that was claimed by Christian missionaries and colonizers, as they appropriated the land of Indigenous peoples around the world, all in the name of Christ, including here in Minnesota. It is this swapped out picture of Christ that provides cover for capitalism with its extremes of wealth and poverty. Rather than the discomforting image of the power of God’s love at work through the cross, we substitute the power of domination and control and do so in the name of Christ and Christ’s rule.

 As I mentioned earlier, watching my family assemble their jig saw puzzle I noticed that one of the ways you put together a puzzle is by getting certain parts of the picture together first, before trying to assemble the whole thing. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul reminds us of distinctive elements found in the image of Christ’s power that can help us in our assembly.

 If you are seeking to put together the jig saw puzzle of Christian faith and Christian living here are some things for which you can be looking. According to Paul, the image should include patience. If the picture of faith we are creating is one that expects direct results today, than we may be working from the wrong picture. According to Paul the image should include joy and thanksgiving. If we see no reason to rejoice or give thanks, than we may have the wrong image. Paul is especially insistent that our image be one in which we see the presence of God in everything and everyone. “Christ is the image of the invisible God,” says Paul, “the firstborn of all creation, for in Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things are created through Christ and for Christ.” Paul’s picture has nothing to do with validating domination and everything to do with the fundamental unity of our world. If we believe that we can do whatever we wish to the earth because it is ours to exploit, or deny the humanity of those with whom we disagree or ignore those who suffer, than somehow we have gotten the wrong image of Christ’s power.

 All of us are attempting to assemble our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. There are a lot of pieces. It sometimes gets confusing. It helps if we work together. It helps even more if we are working from a picture that actually reflects the power of God’s love.

**Psalm 46**

***In our first lesson the Psalmist reminds us that those whose power and authority is maintained through violence will experience the power of God at work as desolation. But, those who seek after the God of peace will find a refuge and source of strength even in the most difficult of times.***

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake  in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. There is a river whose streams make glad  the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city;  it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; God's voice resounds and the earth melts. The God of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Come, behold the works of God; see what desolations God has brought on the earth. God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; God burns the shields with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." The God of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

**Colossians 1:11-20**

***Anyone who lacks an appreciation for poetry is going to have a very difficult time with this text this morning. One could go so far as to say, if you are unprepared for the poetic, you might as well quit listening now, because in a couple sentences your mind will be off in other places. In this letter attributed to Paul, Paul uses the poetic imagery of an early Christian hymn to counter what Paul considers to be false image of Christ and the power of Christ at work in our world.***

*Rejecting the power of domination, Paul insists the power of Christ is found in the cross.*

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the Realm of God’s beloved Child, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through Christ and for Christ. Christ is before all things, and in Christ all things hold together. Christ is the head of the body, the church; Christ is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that Christ might come to have first place in everything. For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile to God’s self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of Christ’s cross.