

Sermon for Sunday, June 4 2023 Trinity Sunday

One of the traditions of my husband's family is a great love of jigsaw puzzles. The big ones, 1000 pieces or more. The more complicated the better.

My sister-in-law Laurie is such a fan of jigsaws that she got a very large and relatively low table where jigsaws in progress would stay until they were completed. Often over the Christmas holidays when we would visit, my husband Doug and Laurie would stay up into the wee hours working on such a puzzle while the rest of us, the sane ones, were fast asleep. Some of us would do a little bit of helping out here and there, but this puzzle was largely theirs to solve. There were particular strategies that had worked well for them in the past, such as doing the edges first, grouping all the pieces of similar colors together, and referring on occasion to the picture on the box. But the most recent one upended the old strategies.

This past year Doug brought a particularly vexing puzzle. For starters, it was round rather than the usual rectangular shape. It was a picture of the great blue ball that is the earth, with all of its subtle blues bleeding into greens blending into browns, with white and gray and violet clouds streaking across the image.

They opened the box, and dumped out all the pieces onto the jigsaw table. Where to begin? There were few sections of the puzzle that had solid colors. The pieces were particularly small and working the edge went very slowly. There's something about finding corner pieces that usually helps in the early stages, but this puzzle had no corners. It took longer than usual to find the edge pieces even with help from the rest of the family.

Then there was the question of sorting. It was hard to imagine what would work since it seemed each piece had multiple colors without a clear pattern. But they came up with something that worked for them. And slowly, slowly, they got clumps of it clicked together until there were more and more and larger and larger sections done. Unlike the usual timeframe for such puzzles around the Thorpe clan – nothing usually takes more than four or five days – this one wasn't solved at the end of the week. Laurie soldiered on and it was finally done several days after we were home.

Compare that, if you will, with the story we hear from Genesis this morning.

In some ways, it's very similar. The image of the pre-Creation is described in the Hebrew as "Tohu vavohu." A literal translation of the two words here would be "confusing nothingness." Try to wrap your head around that one. Although our translation uses the phrase "formless void," I love the translation one scholar used: "all higgledy-piggledy."

And then a wind that is probably the Spirit of God starts blowing across this mess.

I have an idea that if a heavy wind started blowing across the jigsaw table after Doug and Laurie dumped out all the pieces on the table, they might be mightily annoyed...except if the wind started sorting the pieces. And that seems to happen in Genesis, because God starts doing things when the wind stops.

On the first day, God separates light from darkness. On the second day, God blows a cosmic bubble between the waters up above and waters down below the bubble. On the third day, God separates the waters down below into land and sea. It's a sorting, just as one would sort the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Like is sorted with like, because there is more work to be done, and you have to get your materials in order. And that's the first three days of God's work.

What happens in this creation story next? There are three more days, and watch how they parallel the first three.

On day four, God gives the earth the tools to function with light and darkness, day and night: sun, moon and stars are placed in the firmament. For what purpose? To create time. To mark the days and the years and so on. Those cosmic presences are a transcendent clock for this creation in progress.

On day five, God puts birds in the sky – living creatures in the space of the top of that bubble – and all manner of creatures in the water below. God populates these vast expanses defined by that bubble with creatures who are suited to it.

Then on day six, God populates that dry land that he separated out on day three, including the final creature added to this new environment, a human being.

Finally, having done this great body of work and pronounced it good, God rests. All the steps for this great jigsaw puzzle have been put on the table, sorted, at least to some extent, and are ready to keep evolving into the great picture of earth.

We are invited to continue sorting and clicking puzzle pieces into place. Sometimes we put them in the wrong spot; they don't fit, and we still insist on trying to force them in, until we give up and start looking for the right place for it. The complete picture is what God sees; we are not yet ready for the whole of it, I suspect.

And now the question that may have been at the edges of your consciousness as I walked you through to this point: this beautiful story of the chaos, the nothingness, the tohu-vavohu and the great wind that starts the sorting of the pieces and God's work to continue the construction...what does that have to do with Trinity Sunday, this day when we remember the three persons in one God, that great mystery?

Even in these first sentences in this first book of Scripture, there are clues: that wind is often read as God's Holy Spirit. God sends that wind to blow across the chaos and prepare it for what is to come. Is that not what Jesus says that the Spirit will do, breathe into us and prepare us for what is to come? And what do we make of the phrase "let us make humankind in our image."? What's this "us" and "our" in that sentence? It could be something like the royal "we" where monarchs always refer to themselves in the plural because they represent the whole of the kingdom they rule. But God refers to Godself as "I" - first person singular - through the whole rest of the passage. Or it could be interpreted as something that tied back to earlier creation myths from ancient near eastern polytheistic traditions, such as the Babylonian Enuma Elish. There's much in this story that echoes that tale. But the whole rest of the passage is fiercely monotheistic, one God, I am who I am, until we get to that one phrase. "Let US create humankind in OUR image." I don't think it's a scribal error. I'm not alone. The great church fathers, including St Augustine, read this clearly as the Trinity present from the very beginning, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as is said in the Athanasian Creed: "the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one, the glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal." Co-eternal. From the beginning.

Imagine a great cosmic God, dumping that jigsaw puzzle on the table, and God's spirit blowing on them. I have a slightly puckish image of the Son of God watching and saying "I hope you don't expect me to do all the sorting," knowing that it will be his task to do exactly that.

Perhaps the better image is that Creator God sorts, the Spirit sorts, the Son sorts, each in their own fashion as needed.

And so, too, we need to sort it. We regularly break parts of it both big and small. We need to sort ourselves, sort the world, fit things together as they should be, not necessarily in way that will give us pleasure but in a way that will make a perfect picture. That great blue ball, complexity interlocked into that which is what creation was for.

Good thing we have the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to help us.

Amen.