

Bits and Pieces ~ May 19,2009**Acts 8:26-40; I John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8; Psalm 22: 25-32**

If any of you have ever worked a jigsaw puzzle, you understand how difficult it is to get an idea of the whole picture until some of the many bits and pieces begin to fit together. The picture on the box gives us an idea of what it is we are working toward and that is a blessing. I always seem to begin with the edge pieces and bit-by-bit work the whole puzzle. I try to do this before one of the cats comes along and jumps up on the table to help by pushing all the pieces to the floor.

Working a jigsaw puzzle is much like working our various ways through life. Wherever we might find ourselves at the present moment is just a piece of the whole puzzle. It takes time and patience to put all those pieces together so we come to an “aha moment”—that time when we think we’ve finally got it. At last, we understand how and why things fit together.

That Ethiopian eunuch riding along in his chariot was puzzling over the meaning of the passage from Isaiah he had been reading. He was probably turning it this way and that trying to figure out how it fit into life, as he knew it.

Suddenly, Philip appeared bearing another piece of the puzzle. Philip, full of the Holy Spirit and inspired by what he knew of the story of Jesus, shared his interpretation with the Ethiopian. The joy and excitement of the story Philip relayed was infectious, causing the Ethiopian to ask to be baptized. He had found another piece of the puzzle he needed to understand the broader story.

Long after the days of Philip, both Hebrew and Christian scholars noted that prophetic readings from the Hebrew Scriptures were not pointing specifically to the person of Jesus as their fulfillment. They were pointing to the coming of an un-named and hoped for Messiah. But this knowledge does nothing to diminish the wonderful story of Philip and the Ethiopian. It helps us see how the “good news” of Jesus was spread far and wide to different cultures and nationalities through the efforts of the Disciples of Christ.

We know the letters of the New Testament were major players in the spread of the gospel. These bits and pieces circulated among the early gatherings of Christians. We need to remember that people were hungry for the reinforcing messages these letters brought to sustain them in times of trouble and despair, hardship and persecution.

The author of the First Letter of John wrote the beautiful piece of scripture we read this morning speaking of God’s love for us—a love we are called to have for one another.

He tells us that God loves and cherishes us so deeply that our Creator expressed this love through Jesus. It is our task to continue to reveal this love to our brothers and sisters. We are not to be judgmental, non-forgiving, unloving beings if we are of God. We all are God’s sons and daughters.

We learn much of what we know of love and caring at an early age, at our mother’s knee. If our mothers teach us to love and to cherish other people, as we are to love and cherish ourselves, we will go and do like wise. This is not just a task for mothers but for any person who has influence on us when we are young. If those who touch us reveal the love of God to us we will follow their example. If we do not learn the role love plays in

life, at a young age, we have no excuse for not learning about it later in life. If we are Christians we have the opportunity to consider the scriptures, as did that Ethiopian, and have an “aha moment.” of our own. This “love piece” is at the very heart of the puzzle and helps all the other pieces fall into place.

It’s like that vine with all of its branches—all those bits and pieces that come together as a whole to bear good fruit. All nurtured by the main artery, the main branch that keeps it all together.

My California daughter, Jennifer and her husband Geoff, have a wonderful grape arbor in their tiny courtyard. Sitting in its shade they can see the main branch of the vine as it grows from the good earth, and as it climbs up the arbor, and the way it branches out in many different directions. The branches are always loaded with Concord grapes in great abundance. Jen makes jars and jars of grape jelly from the bountiful, good fruit. When I visited last year, and saw that vine, this morning’s parable came into mind.

Jesus, in our story, is that main branch—the center vine. We are all the lesser branches. God, this story tells us, tends to the vine and removes the branches that are not producing good fruit. If we remain true to the way God wants us to live we discover continuous renewal coming into us. If we manage to take time to reflect on the way of life we are to lead and then integrate it into our lives we find that we remain connected to the very source of life.

Sometimes we are the ones who cut ourselves off from the main branch. We wander around and become lost and decide that we know what is best for our lives. Others may try to help us, but we manage to turn a deaf ear to them. Most often, if we have been grounded in the basics of our religion, we awaken to the way we have gone that is wrong and we turn our lives around. I believe that with God, all things are possible, especially second and third and fourth, or more chances, to discover what is the right way. It all is a matter of taking the bits and pieces life deals us, pondering them for a while and discovering just where they fit in the great puzzle of life, where is it they make sense, how they speak to us.

No one of us has all the pieces. That’s why we come together in communities of believers, to help one another find what we lack. That’s why Paul wrote of the diversity of spiritual gifts we have and what a blessing they are when it comes to putting together the whole, when it comes to being productive branches of the great vine. Everyone has something to contribute. Sometimes we may hold back when a task seems too large or overwhelming. But if we are bold enough to have faith in ourselves and in God and in the knowledge that others will support us in our endeavors, we will discover that all of us together can chip away at tasks that seem daunting. We can never be afraid to try to take the bits and pieces we have and work them together into a manageable whole. Every one of us, in our uniqueness, can make a difference.

I heard a song the other evening that seems a good summation for this sermon. In a way, it sings of the bits and pieces of life and the difference we can make for others when we finally see the whole picture.

If I Could Make a Difference

(From a musical about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt)

Lyrics by Gretchen Cryer ~ Music by Nancy Ford

**So many hearts are hungry, so many dreams are lost.
So many lives are empty or lived at too great a cost.
So many souls are desp'rate and needing love to live.
And I have love that's wasting and such a need to give.
If I could make a diff'rence, help someone survive,
Give someone a helping hand, keep a hope alive,
If I could give the courage to one who feels despair,
Give someone the power, the strength again to care.
But could I make a diff'rence, help someone be strong
When I have been so weak at times, uncertain for so long?
Could I make a difference, be fool enough to try,
When my resolve and my great plans have often gone awry?
It takes a seasoned trav'ler to know and lead the way
And I have walked the valleys, seen the shadows of the day.
And I can speak the native tongue of all the dispossessed,
For I have known the weariness, the fear and the unrest.
So I could make a difference, I know whereof I speak.
Yes, I could make a difference to the homeless and the weak.
Yes, I could make a difference where dreams are wearing thin.
I could make a difference and today, today I begin.
To give 'til there's nothing left of me would be a life well spent.
If I could use up all of me, I could live and die content.
Yes, I could make a diff'rence where dreams are wearing thin.
I could make a diff'rence, and today, today I begin!**

It's time to begin.

-- Amen