

I recently saw an image of anonymous-looking people, each carrying a jigsaw puzzle piece. The people were trying to put the pieces together. Maybe you saw such an image on the front of today’s bulletin, an image that says, “**Better together.**”

What got my attention about this image is I see Church of the Resurrection in it. God has given each of us skills, abilities, and life experiences. God also has given us things:

money and the things money buys. In my thinking, these things God has given us are all puzzle pieces. And, what God wants us to do with the pieces he has given us is to use them with others to bring the vision represented by the whole puzzle into reality.

We sort through all the pieces God has given us when we prayerfully determine what to give back to God. We do not always know why God urges us at a particular time to use a particular gift in a particular way. Only God knows, often, what image is on the completed puzzle, what purpose is accomplished when the puzzle is all put together. Our individual contribution is just a piece, but each piece is vital in completing the whole.

You have heard me say, “God **always** provides **everything** needed to do what God calls us to do.” Using my metaphor of the puzzle, God provides the pieces of the puzzle, but he spreads them out over many people. So, when people begin showing up bearing puzzle pieces, so to speak, we need to figure out how God intends us to use those pieces.

Sometimes, these events happen in a different order. Sometimes we get such a clear vision of a new reality that we then feel compelled to bring that vision to life in our world. And then we sort through our pieces to determine what pieces we have we can offer to complete the vision we see so clearly that needs to be done.

This is why we are “better together.” None of us has all the puzzle pieces. We need each other and what they bring, what they return to God, to do what God has given us to do.

Sometimes the vision is relatively easy to bring to life. Our food pantry, for example, will be two years old on October 24. Looking back, creating and operating the food pantry seems relatively easy,



given how many of you contributed pieces of what God has given you to provide nutritious food to almost 8,300 hungry people.

- A hard heart would have said, “If people are hungry, let them get a job.”
- Fear would have said, “We don’t have enough money, time, interest, or whatever to do this mission.”
- Self-centered-ness would have said, “Let someone else do it.”

Instead, many of you said, “Here’s how I can help. Here are the pieces I will contribute.”

Unlike the food pantry, though, sometimes the vision is very difficult to bring to life. In our redevelopment project, God has blessed us with a most challenging vision. Together as Church of the Resurrection we are faithfully trying to provide our community with 113 units of affordable housing for working families in our City’s West End. Thankfully, many of you have dug deep to contribute your considerable gifts to this challenging mission.

What all this have to do with today’s gospel lesson? The apostle John told Jesus he and the other disciples had seen someone they didn’t know working on his own God-puzzle. **THAT PERSON** was unauthorized! **THAT PERSON** was not one of **us**! **THAT PERSON** had successfully done deeds of power **IN JESUS’ NAME** that Jesus’ disciples were struggling to consistently perform.

Loosely paraphrased, John said to Jesus, “Make him help us put **OUR** God-puzzle together!” And did you notice John’s reason? “He wasn’t following **US**.” Not, “he wasn’t following **YOU**, Jesus.” Let me paraphrase **THAT** for you. John’s reason for trying to stop this other person for successfully doing Jesus’ mission in Jesus’ name was that **THIS PERSON** wasn’t following **JOHN**. He wasn’t an authorized disciple because **JOHN** didn’t know the man.

Jesus told John, “**I** know this person. And he knows me. By name. Because he’s doing my work. That’s all he needs: my mission, my name.”

Jesus’ bottom line, after explaining how to not get in the way of others doing his work in his name, was this: “**Be at peace with one another.**” In other words, “**We are better together!**”

If we are all working on behalf of the same vision—Christ Jesus’ vision—we’re better when we collaborate. We are each stronger and more successful when we reject the competitive models the world teaches us. We are better together than apart.

You know what collaboration is, don’t you? Collaboration in the name of Jesus is sharing our puzzle pieces where needed with people who are working on other parts of the same puzzle. Collaboration in

the name of Jesus is being given rent-free worship and mission and office and fellowship space while **we** work on the mission God has given us.

As Church of the Resurrection, we have many collaboration partners. We are one of ten Episcopal mission outposts in the City of Alexandria. There are eight different Episcopal Churches, one Episcopal seminary, and one Episcopal continuing care retirement community in our City. And there are some 40 congregations of different Christian denominations and faiths in our City. We are “better together” than we are apart, as we have proven over and over again when God gives us big tasks to accomplish. Feed people? That collaboration in Alexandria is called “ALIVE!” Working with others, we accomplished that deed of power years ago.

What puzzle piece do we have today to give back to God what God has so generously given us?

What today’s gospel lesson teaches is that we must never demand that others doing God’s deeds of power follow **us** but follow Christ Jesus. What today’s gospel lesson teaches is that mission unites us. We corporately come bearing pieces of the puzzle that God wants us to put together to do something great in Christ’s name.

On an individual level, today’s lesson asks us the same thing: What do you have that God has given you to give back to God so that we can accomplish our mission in Christ’s name?