

Matthew 18:1-9
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Making the Pieces Fit

There's a stark contrast between the verses AJ read and the ones I read, and yet it is the same Jesus who speaks them all. He has just uttered the second of three passion predictions, trying to teach the disciples what exactly lies ahead for him, trying to prepare them for his suffering, his death, and his resurrection. He is talking to them about big things, important things, and they want to know who gets the best seats at the table. We don't hear Jesus sigh, and yet I imagine he does. He goes on to offer these words calling them to turn their lives around and become like children, not just children but infants—utterly dependent infants. And he calls them to make room for and welcome other little ones. His rhetoric then intensifies just a bit when he speaks of the fate of those who trip up the little ones, those who do anything to lead them astray. With fierce hyperbolic protective language, Jesus paints a grim picture of the consequences of causing a little one to stumble. He wants to get our attention; he wants to make sure the disciples understand just how much is on the line, just how much is at stake.

During this season of Lent, our theme is "Parables and Other Puzzles." Jesus' words are often puzzling; Jesus himself is often puzzling. We long to make sense of all that he offers and all that he is. We want to fit the pieces together in a crisp clear finished way, and we want to know how we fit into that picture. Or maybe we simply want to know *that* we fit into his picture, because some days we are not all that certain that we do. In the past week alone, I have had numerous conversations about faith and grief and scripture and the state of the world. So many of us feel out of step, frustrated, angry, numb, or sad, and we begin to believe

that we are solitary pieces that do not fit. We worry that we're doing it wrong (whatever *it is*), that we're not as faithful or as wise or as patient as we should be. And we begin to convince ourselves that it's on us to figure out how to make ourselves fit.

Early this morning, Kate Bowler, one of my favorite contemporary writers posted a blessing for Ash Wednesday:

When we don't feel like dust,
Bless us, oh God,
in the ways we trick ourselves into believing,
that our lives are something we've made,
that all our accomplishments and successes and mastered mornings
add up to something independent of you.
But on days like today, when our heads hang low
Sunk with the grief of our neediness,
Bless us, oh God.
When our joints don't work like they should,
when we grow sick or turn gray too soon.
when our bodies betray us...
or perhaps they are doing exactly what they are supposed to do.
Tell us again
exactly how you made us:
from dust to dust.¹

We were made from dust, dear ones, and to dust we shall return. We are little ones, utterly dependent on God for our very lives. It is not our job to make ourselves fit. Instead, it is our job to shed any pretense. It is our calling to let go of the larger world's false message that we have to earn grace. It is our vocation to let go of the unfaithful narrative that we have to jockey for

¹ Kate Bowler, on Facebook, from her new book, *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*

our spot at the table. It is our job to confess that we cannot go it alone, to acknowledge that we are dependent on God for life and breath, and to recognize that no matter how hard we grit our teeth or clench our jaws we cannot save ourselves. The blessing of Lent, whether or not we give something up or take something on is this invitation to step back and realize that we cannot go it alone and to recognize that by the grace of God, we don't have to.

Each week during Lent, you will be invited to pick up a puzzle piece to take home with you. Each piece is the same shape and size. They all fit together with each other, and yet they will never combine to make a finished edge. You may write on them, paint them, or leave them blank. You may connect them in any way you feel led to. With each piece I hope you will reflect on the good news you hear in Jesus' words, the promise you hear in his words about the shape of his kingdom. We will never have a complete or finished picture of the kingdom, at least not in this life. Nor will we be finished ourselves until our baptism is complete in death. And yet even now, we children of dust have a place in God's kingdom, not because of who we are but because of who Jesus is.

Dear friends, the great good news is this: in life and in death we *belong* to God. We are little ones. We are dust. We fall short. We are forgiven. We are given a fresh start, a chance to begin again, to turn our lives around and live as little ones utterly dependent on God's mercy and grace. We are puzzling and puzzled, unfinished works in progress. We are beloved. We belong. We fit.

Thanks be to God. Amen.