Gracious God, as we gather in this hour, we give thanks that You are a God of goodness and mercy. A God who seeks to push the darkness back in order that we might walk in the light and be people of the light. And so Lord, in this hour may we be refreshed by Your word through worship in order that we might go out and be expressions and examples of goodness and mercy as You have called us to be in this hour and in all our days. In Jesus’ name. Amen

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen

How many of you like puzzles? (Picture on the screen.) This is one that is my speed. It’s got about 12 pieces and you can just look at each piece and you look at the aquarium and the fish, they all fit in perfectly. Well, you know for those of us that are elementary in puzzle making, it’s a good deal. However, as we grow older and more experienced in the art of puzzle making, we might rather than having 12 pieces, you might want 500. Now that is a puzzling puzzle. And it takes a lot of time to put it together, does it not?

You know, I see when I go around to different places in Sun City, I see card tables and they have a puzzle on them. Somebody spent a lot of time generally, trying to find the pieces that go around the outside, right? Because that’s the easiest! But then a lot of people get frustrated and they leave the puzzle. The center is not completed, but then, aha, someone else comes along and with a different eye, a different look at how all of these pieces are shaped and formed, then there is a greater possibility of it all coming together.

But on the other hand, there are always those puzzles, they just sit on the table and they never get put together. And why is that? Why aren’t the puzzling puzzles put together? Because, very simply, we run out of time, we run out of energy, or will power to attain the accomplished picture.

Puzzles…. I thought about puzzles. But think about also how puzzling life can be. Particularly after this last week or so. Puzzling, after all the violence, the hatred, the deaths, the rhetoric over this past week following the events of Charlottesville, Barcelona and Finland, and now Florida. Are you puzzled? Do you see the picture? Do you see all of the images? But you
can’t put it all together. Is there a sense of futility in trying to put the pieces together? To grasp what it is saying about America, about our world community. To grasp what we are saying about how we view and value and treat others.

As a pastor, yes, I read the articles too. I have heard the rhetoric of racism and bigotry and belittling. And I have read notes from pastors, some of whom are being bashed by their parishioners for denouncing hate, violence, killing, and hate groups. And be mindful there are 19 registered hate groups in Arizona.

And so collectively, does all of this, what you see and what you hear, does it make you mad? Does it make you sad? Does your soul lament? Or do you simply want to put the puzzling picture of racism and injustice and apathy in a box, and then place it on the shelf of indifference and apathy so you need not face the journey that we are on? Or more importantly, you need not face – oh, we can’t get away from it though, face our accountability and responsibility as those who say, “We follow Jesus.” Oh, I know, some go so far as to say, “Justice, that doesn’t fit in the realm of teaching and preaching. Justice, it’s not about religion, it’s not about religious values, or living with spiritual integrity.” I say, “Wrong!”

Scripture says it very clearly in Micah, as well as in Isaiah. “He has shown you oh people, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? But to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.” And so I say, as is the title of the message “Let us find a way and not an excuse.” In other words, we know our cultural reality is confusing and complex and puzzling. So are we simply going to give opinions and make judgments? Or do we want to make a difference? Seeking to put pieces of the puzzle together that allow communities to fit together, to flourish rather than to become divided or alienated, are separated one group from another. If we choose alienation, such is not following Jesus.

Consider the question, again in my puzzle analogy. Might we need, in the midst of all of this – do we need some different pieces in our complex cultural puzzle. Pieces which could create a different picture? Or do we need to look at the pieces that are already there in a different way, from a different perspective, through a different lens? Because, after all, if we keep doing things the way that we have been doing them, guess what – we get the same results continually.

I like the direction and perspective of theologian Karl Barth. And you have heard me say this before. But Barth writes, “Take your Bible and take your newspaper and read them both, but interpret them from your Bible.”

In scripture, previous to the events of Charlottesville, I had looked at the gospel lesson and thought about a question that many people pose regarding the text that was read. And the question is this, and I am sure you have thought of it. “Does God ever have a change of mind?” Does God choose to change outcomes, or is everything scripted?
To gain that perspective, we enter into that gospel text, and we heard it clearly, and we have heard it before. The disciples are trying to keep the boundaries tight around Jesus. This woman, this Canaanite woman, this outsider, one who normally would not be included in the group, she has pushed her way in, she has prodded her way in, she seeks to see Jesus, and as the disciples are viewing what is happening, it is raising their emotions and raising shackles. “What is she doing? Don’t let her in. She doesn’t belong in this group.” Is this the scenario, be it a picture of the wrong person in the wrong place? Again, not a follower of Jesus. Initially, Jesus alienates her, even as she laments and proclaims “Lord, have mercy on me.” But then, she strikes a chord with our Lord in her persistence, when she hears the words of Jesus, but then she cries out, “Even the dogs get crumbs off the table.” As if to say, “I may not be in your little comfortable group, I may not deserve the main course, I may not look like the others, I may not measure up like the others. But don’t I measure up to the level worthy of crumbs?” It is a powerful scene of determined desperation. Again, “Jesus, please, can you look at myself and my daughter differently? Don’t see us as outsiders. Don’t see simply my history or my gender or my beliefs or the color of my skin or the language that I speak. Jesus, just see me as a mother in desperate need to have her daughter healed.”

And again, grace and healing, rather than judgment and intimidation. Jesus does not check her credentials, rather her hopefulness and her persistence turn the tide. As Jesus said, “Because of your faith, be it your persistence and your hopefulness, your daughter is healed.”

The outcome changed, the scene evolved, it wasn’t simply a healing, it was a transformation. Yet, over and over again, with a mother’s persistence, Jesus chose to reshape the picture. Different boundaries, boundaries often disregarded, grace prevails, healing occurs.

At times, in your and my puzzling picture of life, our faith may waiver for any number of reasons. However, remember, change does not occur without persistence. The puzzle does not come together, the pieces do not simply fall into place. Persistent prayer changes us and changes things. And changes the picture.

And so today, our cultural reality is very clear. We have all again heard the litany and the rhetoric from all sides. We have seen the hate rallies and the peace rallies and the reality is at the end of the day the question – are the pieces of this puzzle called life in community coming together? Can there be a picture of hope amidst anger, fear, judgment and apathy. Do we remain distant or judgmental? Are there some crumbs of hope and possibility to cling to?

I think of the sermon title I preached years ago, which I titled, “Without hope you cannot cope.” Isn’t that true today? In our pain, or the pain of others. Does the darkness prevail? Or is there a word or a way of persistence that offers another way of viewing this puzzling scenario of life and faith and community?
I share the words of Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. Powerful. He writes, “I refuse to accept the view that humankind has so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daylight of peace and community can never become a reality. I believe that truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

And as I read that, I am sorry I drew on an instant thought of Coach Vince Lombardi who said, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” In the midst of what we read and see then, we have some choices. Do we simply fold up our tent and go our own way? Or do we seek to build a more certain foundation of commitment to Jesus and His ways of putting the puzzle of community together.

You know, we are not kids here. In all of our years we have seen pain, we have felt hurt, and violence and hatred and abuse and bullying and war all those behaviors that separate one from another. Yet we best not simply out of apathy or ignorance, say “Oh well, God will take care of us.”

Be reminded, each one of us in Jesus’ name are accountable and responsible to be those instruments of God’s peace. It is yours and mine, it is our voice, our attitude, our behavior, our witness, our prayerful persistence that can put the puzzle together. That can bring healing and hope together and restore community amidst chaos and crisis.

What may be the first step in this difficult journey? Could it be simply an expression of humility? And therefore, as we see and feel the hurt, the pain, the puzzling rhetoric, may we, like the mother who probably on her knees before Jesus, said, “Lord, have mercy on me.”

Can we do that for our community and our people? And then with persistence pray and pray without apprehension, without making excuses, “Lord, heal us, lead us, guide us, empower us in Your way and in Your truth. For Lord, it is only Your love that heals. It is only Your love that persists. It is hope in You that endures and it is only Your grace that prevails.” It is the grace of God that prevails.

And that is not a puzzling thought, that is the truth we live in. Amen