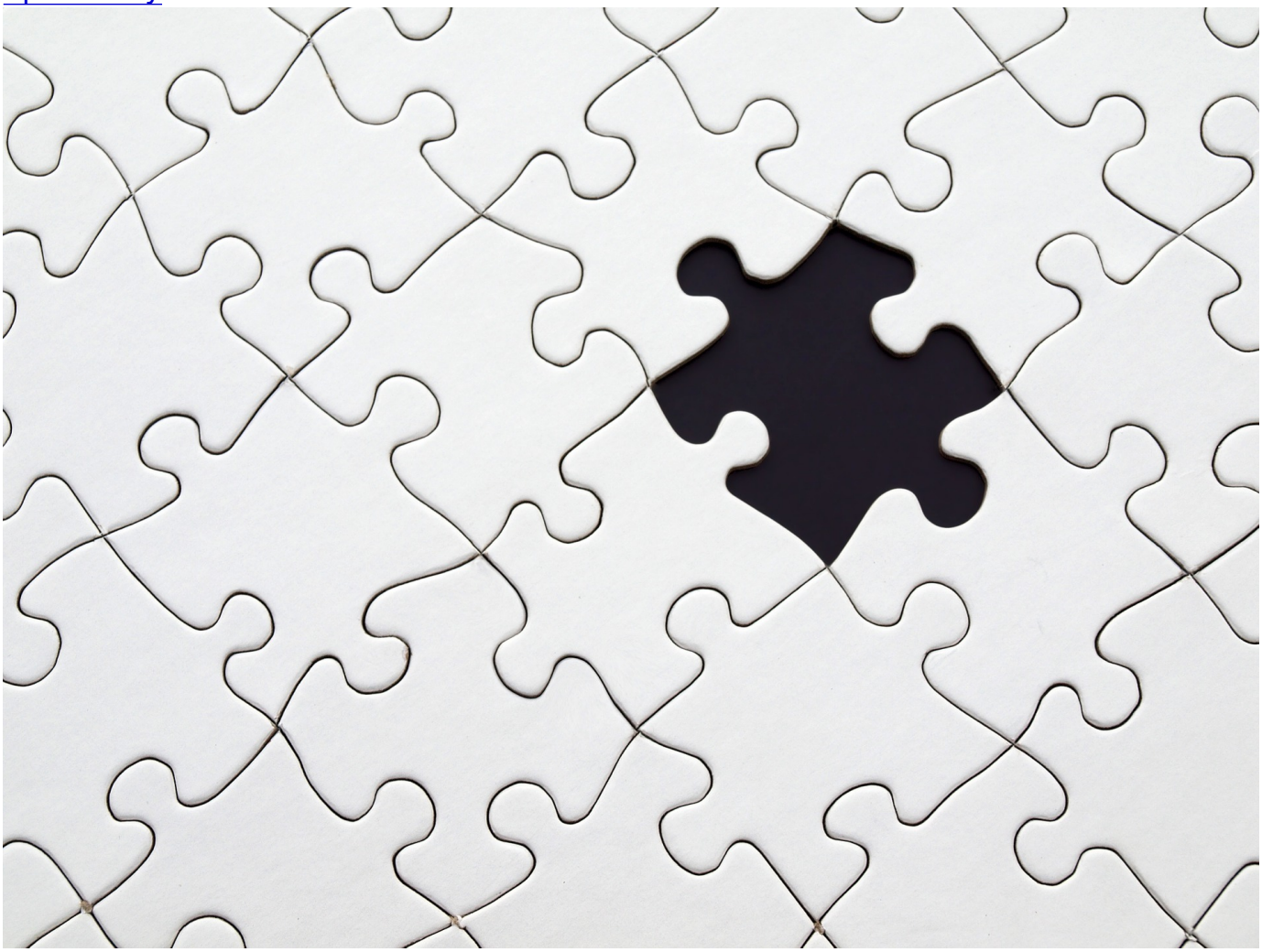
Opinion
Spirituality



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by Sr. Colleen Gibson

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"*Not only we ourselves desire life in abundance; God desires it for us as well. Not only must our eyes and ears be attentive; God's 'eyes' and 'ears' are always attentive to us. ... God does not wait for us to puzzle out the way of life; God rushes in before the soul finished its prayer to show us the way. And the way is to rejoice in this constant, loving Presence.*"
—Norveen Vest, Desiring Life

A few weeks ago, I found myself in front of nearly 150 students in grades five through eight at a local school where one of my congregation's associates-in-mission is principal. I had been invited to come speak on vocations and my own story.

Lent 2018

For more Lent reflections, go to our sister publication, Celebration.

After speaking to a similar number of students from the lower grades, I dove into the lesson prepared by our vocation directors for middle school students. We began by looking at our own unique being and how the God who has uniquely made us calls us to be who we truly are by living out our call to love and to embody God's love in the world.

Of course, no matter your age, exploring such topics isn't simple. And so, after reading a poem and a prayer, I pulled out a bag full of 24-piece puzzles featuring cute animals and cartoon characters. Unbeknownst to students, each puzzle intentionally had missing pieces.

Grouping the students by grade level, I spread them out in 15 groups around the gym we were in and put the stack of puzzles in the center of the room. "Your task," I told them over the flurry of chatter in the space, "is to create a whole picture. The

first group to complete this task wins!"

With that challenge, the energy and noise levels in the room went up a notch. On the count of three, each group would send a member running to get their puzzle and to race back so that they could hopefully win.

"One ... two ... three!" I shouted into the microphone as students rose to their feet in pursuit of the prize.

Soon the groups began to realize something wasn't quite right. First, the oldest students flagged me down. "Do you know where our pieces are?"

I shook my head and shrugged. Almost instantly they began to theorize about what this all meant. Before I could listen too intently to their discussion, a younger student ran up to me out of breath and with a look of panic on his face. "We don't have all our pieces. ... Where are they?"

Again, I shrugged. He quickly left my side and began searching under chairs and in the corners of the gym for the missing pieces. Meanwhile, his fifth-grade classmates began to ask me what the true meaning of this exercise was.

"What do you think?" I asked them.

Their responses surprised me: No one is perfect. God is the missing piece. We can't always put the whole picture together. You need other people to give pieces and help complete the puzzle.

All of those lessons are true.

As I called the group back together and the disappointment of not winning subsided, lessons began to sink in, and the students began to recognize that the puzzles had more to teach us about how God calls and how we put that call together, even when we don't have all the pieces.

Then I ended by sharing pieces of my story and inviting the students to strive to work with God to assemble the puzzle of their own call, now and in the future.

That's the call for each of us. Leaving the school, I thought of the eagerness with which the students responded and the conclusions they drew. I patted myself on the back and then promptly got back into the grind of everyday life, all but forgetting about the experience. That is, until I began preparing for Lent.

Reflecting on what I might give up (fasting), give back (almsgiving), and give to prayer (prayer) in order to draw closer to God this Lenten season, the image of the empty space in the puzzle returned to me.

We all have those spaces in our lives that are in need of greater clarity, the pieces of our lives that require time, patience and prayer to discover, recover and uncover. The empty spaces remind us of the lessons many of us spend our lives learning — no one is perfect; you don't need to be perfect to be loved; there's grace in empty spaces; God fills us when nothing else can or will.

Dwelling on the gaps in my own self-awareness and spiritual life, I remembered the fifth grader who ran up to me panicked, out of breath, and desperately looking for the pieces. How many times in life have we or do we busy ourselves in frantically searching for the missing pieces? Running to the point of exhaustion, only to realize that it might benefit us more to sit with the empty space?

When we take a loving look at our lives, what might benefit us more: filling the hole in our life or being in the hole with God?

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The latter is a simple and yet profound gesture. In the empty space, we surrender; we don't know or need to know; we can be and be perfectly well in and with Christ.

In her new book (and accompanying podcast), *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved),* Kate Bowler underscores "what it feels like to live a non-shiny life in a world that prefers glittery people." That word — "shiny" — resonates within me as I consider the life I live and the life each of us is called to. Life can be

messy, and we often find that pieces are missing or that they don't fit the puzzle the way we think they will. God's invitation is to get dirty, to rend our hearts as the Prophet Joel declares in the Ash Wednesday Scripture.

Lent is not a shiny season; it is a season of grit and dependence. It requires us to lean into God while examining (and hopefully letting go of) what prevents us from growing in relationship with God and one another. This requires determination. Not determination to get it "right," but determination to hang in there, to persevere, to occupy the empty spaces, and to embrace the missing pieces and perhaps, in the process, regain our missing peace.

As we enter into these 40 days of reflection, there is the invitation to be in it all with God. In an intentional way, we have the opportunity to engage deeply with the God who journeys through life with us, to be in the seemingly empty spaces of our lives and to share that space with God. May we be faithful to that call and to the One who meets us there, attentive to God's presence and finding fullness in the mysterious spaces where God abides.

[Colleen Gibson is a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia. Author of the blog Wandering in Wonder, she currently serves as coordinator of services at the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey.]

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