

**Sunday, June 4, 2017**

Forest Hills United Methodist Church

**Graduation Sunday and Holy Communion**

**Sermon:** “Putting the Pieces Together”

Rev. Dr. David Werner

**Scripture:** Philippians 1:2-11

**Text:** Deuteronomy 31:8 “The LORD Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

**Gathering Song:** *Simple Pursuit* -Sanctify

**Greeting:** Pastor David  
Holy Communion

**Worship Set:** Sanctify  
*Am Free*  
*What Wondrous Love is This*  
*I Sing the Mighty Power of God*  
Worship Prayer - Andrew  
Kids invited to Kids’ Church

**Faith Sharing:** Video: Holy Land Study Tour  
Invite: Holy Land Study Tour lunch and slide show

**Recognition of the Graduates**  
Invite: Cake reception after worship

**PP#1:** *Jigsaw puzzle motif.* Putting the Pieces Together  
“The LORD Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” Deuteronomy 31:8

A message to our graduates, and for all of us! “Putting the Pieces Together.” Deuteronomy 31:8, “The LORD Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

**PP#2:** *Image of someone anxious trying to figure out his/her jigsaw puzzle.*

It’s just so exciting, isn’t it, graduates? You’re at the cusp of your future! A grand adventure lies ahead. Your whole lives have been preparing you for this time when you venture out on your own. And everyone is asking you, “So, what’s your future?” “What are you going to do?” I even asked you that this morning, because we all want to know what your future holds.

But the truth is, you really don't know your future, do you? You don't know what lies ahead. Now, you may have some thoughts about it, but my guess is that deep down, you really don't know, or you may be unsure. But you have to have an answer for this constant question. Don't you wish you could just answer it with a question back: "Did you know that you would be doing what you're doing now, when you graduated from high school?"

I mean, I told people when I graduated that I was going to be a banker. And that's what I told my girl friend. Reese, you thought I was going to be rich! Show of hands, everyone: who here got it right - when you graduated from high school, you knew what you were going to do, and then you did it? Who did, or is doing, what they told people they were going to do at graduation?

See, graduates. Very few. It's OK not to know, or be certain.

Truth is, we are all like this guy/gal with the jigsaw puzzle. We're not sure how things are going to come together. We can see maybe just the next piece or two, the next step. That's why, if you noticed earlier, I didn't ask what you wanted to do for your career *some day*. I asked you what you were going to do this fall, what you saw just for your immediate future, the next step.

**PP#3: Jeremiah 29:11**

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

So, as your pastor, and we as your church, we celebrate you, we congratulate you, but we also want to encourage you. This is also a scary time. Things are changing in your lives. It will not be the way it has been. In fact, it will probably be a way that you can't even imagine. That can make you anxious.

So, we want to come around you, and reconnect you with your faith. We want to pray for you, and point you back to Jesus.

For, we have found, that although most of us cannot forecast our future, we can say that God has brought us to where we are today. Take heart. God is with you.

Church, this is how this message is for all of us. Are you listening? This is for you, too!

We have a God who knows our future. Our God can accurately—100% of the time—predict at our graduations, what we will be doing in the future. Even though *we* cannot see the big picture very clearly, if at all!, we know that God does.

In fact, God is the keeper of our pictures, our plans. For God created us with a plan and a future. One of the best verses for graduation, and, I would argue, for all of us, especially when we struggle to see very far into the future—are you listening, church?—is Jeremiah 29:11. Jeremiah is a prophet to the people of Israel when their country has been defeated, captured, and they are in exile. Their life is nothing like it was. They can't begin to see what could possibly come next. And in this chaos, and mystery, God tells Jeremiah to tell the people, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

God has a purpose and a plan for each of us: He made us, and made us for a purpose. And He sees it all, even when we cannot. And—here's the good part—He comes to each of us, and helps us take the very next step. We may not be able to see how it all fits in, but when we trust God and follow Jesus' way of living, God guides the next steps we take so they fit in the overall plan.

**PP#4: *Person with a jig saw puzzle, squinting at the box cover to see where a piece goes.***

You may feel a bit now like a jigsaw puzzle. You dump out the pieces, and it looks like a big mess. It just doesn't seem like all the pieces fit. Some, at first, might look like they are to a different puzzle, and you wonder if they got mixed up! But you just get started in faith. The first thing to do is put all the outside pieces together. They have the flat side, and once together, they give you a framework for all the other pieces. That may be an image for you now as you graduate. You have all the basics, the framework you need for your life. Your family, your education, your faith foundations, they provide the context for the rest of your life.

But the picture of the puzzle, that remains a mystery. Now, one cheat I do is to prop up the box cover near my puzzle. I can look at the cover to see how the pieces fit together. "Oh, yes, there is a place for that certain color." Or "there is a lot of space with that same color." Sometimes you can put colors or lines together. Other times, it's just trial and error - you take all the pieces of the same color and keep trying all the possibilities, until you finally find one that fits, and then do it again.

**PP#5:** You can go forward *boldly* when you can't see *clearly* if you hang on to Jesus *tightly*.

Here's the encouragement I want for all of us today: you don't have to see *clearly*, to go forward *boldly*. You can go forward with confidence, and even with excitement and anticipation, when you hang on to Jesus *tightly*. Some parts may make sense at times, or we can see how they fit into the frame we can see. But other pieces seem strange or weird. Hang on to Jesus, because He guides you, step by step, piece by piece. And sometimes, you put a few pieces together, but it is only later that you can see how that completed section fits into the whole.

Graduates, I want to gift you, for a graduation gift, the passage from Philippians 1, the first eleven verses.

**PP#6:** Philippians 1:2-11 (NIV)

2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Paul is writing to the Christians in the town of Philippi, in Greece. But today I want you to hear this for you as you graduate. Philippians 1, verse 2. "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." We pray this for you, too: grace and peace to you, from God and the Lord Jesus.

Verse 3, "I thank my God every time I remember you." As you graduate, we look back and remember your life so far, and we give God thanks. You have been a gift to us! Verse 4, "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." We do pray for you, and we have joy in you, because of all the ways that we have seen God in you.

And verse six is the verse I want you to take as your graduation verse. "Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

God has begun a good work in you. He has a plan He has been unfolding in your life. Be confident! He will carry it out in your life! You step out boldly. You can trust that He will take you, step by step. He will work it out for good. And even when you put pieces together incorrectly...you

know how some pieces seem to go together, and you try it, but then, later, when working with another piece, you realize you have to separate the first two, and put two different pieces together? God does that in our lives, too. We need to not be afraid. God will work it all out. He knows the picture! And there is joy in seeing God put your puzzle together over time! “Be confident in this: that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

**PP#7:** Philippians 1:2-11 (NIV)

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Verse 9, “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”

This is the prayer we pray over you. As you boldly step out, that you would follow Jesus’ way. It’s the way of love. That your love would abound. And as you live this way, as you choose the path of love, that God would then help you see glimpses, a bit more and more, of the plan He is unfolding in your life, that you would then grow in your confidence, and you would begin to see and discern what is best for your next steps, over and over again. As you do, your life evidences Jesus to others, through the fruit you bear, and through the righteousness that you spread wherever you go. “Be confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

**PP#8:** *Image of various doors, like the puzzles*

Today, in honor of your graduation, I’m giving each of you each a jigsaw puzzle. The picture is on the cover, so you have that help already. It’s a puzzle of various doors: all colors, shapes and sizes. Sometime in the next month or so, I invite you to try to put it together. As you do, don’t look at the cover. Do it without it, and notice how it takes time, perseverance, that some times it seems like a confused mess, other times part of it comes together easily. But keep at it. Have confidence that somehow, it all fits together. It will all work out. And then think about your life, your future. Parts may be clear, parts maybe not. Other parts may never come together like you expect. And as you put your puzzle together, pause, from time to time, to pray and ask God to guide your life, one piece at a time.

As you see doors emerging in the puzzle, remember that God is placing doors in front of you. The God who knows the whole picture, is giving you one door at a time. Ask for the boldness to walk through it, to not shy away, or worry in unhealthy ways, about the problems that may come. As your puzzle emerges, let it give you confidence that God is leading you.

When I was telling my mother about this sermon idea—she turns 91 this week—she commented to me, “Goodness, my puzzle is almost completed!” I told her, “Maybe more than mine, but not finished yet!” But my mom’s comment helped me. My puzzle is also more completed than it was when I graduated from high school. I see things more clearly now than I did before. Things have worked out, rarely as I expected, but it is good. I am blessed. God has a calling on my life, and it

continues to be an adventure. And my mother says the same. Yes, there have been hard times, but God walked her through them. God has a calling on her life, and it continues to be an adventure.

**PP#9: Putting the Pieces Together**

Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Philippians 1:6 “Be confident in this: that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Deuteronomy 31:8 “The LORD Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

Graduates, and church—all of us!—God is working in your life, putting things together on purpose. He has a plan and a future. He sees the bigger picture. Hang on to Him!

I learned this past week from another pastor, who went through the Bible and looked at all the times when God called people to go do a task, or to an unknown future. Each and every time, he discovered, God also gave the promise that He would go with them. He did not send them alone. The God who knows the picture, and who created everything, goes with you into your future.

So be bold, be strong, be courageous. Deuteronomy 31:8 “The LORD Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” Therefore, “be confident in this: that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Amen.

**Communion Song:** Andrew

Children bring in the bread

**Holy Communion**

Prayer

Words of Institution

Prayer for the Holy Spirit

The Lord’s Prayer

Receiving the Elements

Offering

Song: *By Your Side*

**Closing Song:** *Those Who Trust*

**Benediction:** Pastor David