

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, August 1, 2021

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## **Galatians 1:13-14**

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

So admittedly self-control is not the sort of thing that is often going to fill a sanctuary. It is not the most inspiring of the fruit, although it is what Paul chooses to end this portion of Galatians with.

If you're like me, then you probably had enough of moralistic religiosity telling you what you can and can't do. We've had to wrestle with self-control we've had enough of shallow Lenten practices that give up special indulgences -- like chocolate or cheese dip or beer and call that self-control. But I have to tell you the more time I spend with this fruit over the last week or so the more I began to see the importance of this fruit of the spirit of God.

Last week I headed out just after worship packed my truck and began a trip across Tennessee I camped in falls river falls and then our falls creek falls and then over in great Smoky Mountain National Park for a couple nights it was an amazing time away. It was rainy every night. I go camping ever so often to help me to clear my mind a little bit. I got to do that this past week but when I was leaving the great Smoky Mountain National Park and made my way all the way across the park, if anybody's ever made that drive you basically are going over the Appalachian Mountains right and you're having to do that, you come out the other side and you can wind your way to Asheville or Greenville or any place you'd like to go.

Well when I came out on the southeastern side of the park, I saw a little turn off that invited me to merge onto the Blue Ridge Parkway. Has anybody ever driven on the Blue Ridge Parkway? Yes? Many of you have, it's beautiful. It reminded me that on many Sunday afternoons following worship, at John Knox Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina where I grew up, my family would head to the IHOP on Wade Hampton Boulevard. We were classy and

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so we enjoyed a big old stack of pancakes and some coffee. Then, we would hop in the Honda, one of those boxy like 1988 Honda Accords, and we would go take a ride on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

This is one of my mother's favorite pastimes and it was one I'd loathed but we did it probably two Sundays a month. We would head off after IHOP and we'd just go up there onto the parkway and we'd just drive and I didn't understand the point of it. Of course this past week when I was making that drive I understood the point of it. But what I remembered as I was making the drive this past week was that when we would go for those Sunday drives, my mother would ask my father to pull off at some of the antique shops that are along the route. We'd get off the parkway and down and we go see a great antique store somewhere in western North Carolina. That was important because we would pull off to an antique store, although I had no desire to understand or know what antiques were, and finally get to stretch our legs.

We would get to walk around a little bit. But what I was reminded of this past week is that when I got out of the car my mom said where do your hands go? And then I would put my hands up and I'd put them in my pocket. My mother had a hands in pockets rule when David was in the antique store, okay? So imagine an eight-year-old David getting out of the car putting his hands in his pocket and waddling his way into the antique store. I guess because I had active hands when it came to seeing objects I'd want to grab something and touch it. My mother knew that the rule was if you break it you bought it and she desired not to buy any antiques. She desired to look at antiques. So I kept my hands in my pockets.

She was rigid about this. If I took my hands out of my pockets I was going back to the car. As I was thinking about that rule, I thought about what other rules did my mother have for me when I was younger. We would go to my grandparent's house on Lake Hartwell just outside of Clemson, South Carolina for lunches on Saturday afternoons. They didn't have a kids table there so my sister and I we got to sit at the adult table. There was only one rule for us when we sat at the adult table. We were not allowed to talk until there had been exactly ten seconds of silence amongst the adults. So nine-year-old David ten-year-old David would sit there waiting one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten inevitably before I could get a word in

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edgewise my grandmother or my grandfather would pipe in. Everyone else was in on the rule, I didn't know that until later.

My parents though, they were teaching me a couple different things. They were teaching me in one way to keep my hands to myself. They were teaching me in another way to be quiet and listen. Now if you think those rules are a little too rigid so does my therapist but it is what it is.

They taught me a number of things. I think one of the things that the spirit of what they were trying to teach me was a bit about what it means to have and practice self-control. This fruit of the spirit that we are indeed capable of embodying takes practice, it takes intention, it takes effort. I think my mom knew that probably more so than I even do at this point. You know this fruit of the spirit also is exemplified in the person of Jesus Christ. I hadn't thought about that much until this week in Christ the God of all the universe the God of all the universe do you hear me.

We claim that the God we worship is the God of all the universes. In Christ this God took on flesh. The author of Philippians captures the beautiful awe-inspiring mystery of it all when the author says Christ Jesus though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross.

If you look up the Greek of this translation of self-control what you see is that it can mean something like self-limiting. Something that would be the opposite of it would be self-indulgence which is exactly what the author of Galatians cautions us against. In our text this day you've been given the gift of life the author tells us. You'd be given the gift of life but don't use this gift of life, this freedom, to be self-indulgent. No, instead use this gift to care for one another, to love each other. In fact, every bit of the law and world that we live in it rests on this that you should love your neighbor as yourself.

It's an interesting and beautiful thing to think that the God of all creation out of love would come and take on flesh. That the one that is boundless would be bound by a human body that is not the living breathing example of what it means to have self-control.

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I'm not sure what is by bearing the fruit of self-control though collectively we give each other the space that we need. This is an interesting thing what I've learned over my life is that the more I'm able to practice the idea of self-control in my life, the more space I give to other people.

You know when I was seated around that dining room table in Clemson for an afternoon lunch or for dinner, I learned a lot of things by listening. I heard stories about my mom and my dad and my grandparents that I never would have heard if I decided that I needed to talk all the time. You know if I wouldn't have counted to 10 Mississippis under my breath waiting expectantly to get in a word edgewise, I probably would have never heard countless stories of the ways in which my family history has moved. I wouldn't have learned about what my grandfather loved so dearly being on the golf course. I wouldn't have learned about my grandmother's love of cooking and how she learned that from her mother and how her mother learned it from her mother. I wouldn't have heard stories about my Uncle Paul, my mom's brother who I never got to meet. I wouldn't have heard stories about how my mom and my dad got together. I probably wouldn't have heard a lot of stories.

What I've realized over time is that when we can practice self-control, I can actually do something for myself and for other people. We are creating space for other people to share their experiences and their stories and their voice this is something of what Jesus is modeling for us in this self-limiting nature of the incarnation. Repeatedly, Jesus gives space for his disciples to question and to disagree and to wrestle with these teachings. The way that he is going about ministry there is so much space that Jesus gives he doesn't come down just to fill their ears with words he teaches but then he lays back.

Jesus also makes space for marginalized people. For people whose voices or experiences have not been valued in his society. In the hot of the afternoon sun he sits by a well in the midst of a crowd he reaches back to find the woman who's touched his cloak. When the children aren't given space to come to him he makes sure that they have the space to do so.

If you have sat around a dining room table, a boardroom table, a church meeting, or a family gathering then you know the importance of creating space for other people. That's the essence of self-control.

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A few years ago I was only three years into ministry and we were having a very heated session meeting. There were 20 of us in the room. Everyone wanted their voice to be heard but there was one person whose voice seemed to rise above everyone else's. This person had the floor, not because it was given to them but because they took. Then I watched the moderator of this meeting, a pastor that I admire a pastor that I love, calmly said to this person "there are 20 people in this room we appreciate your voice but you've used more than one twentieth of the time and the people need to be heard they need to have space to share their stories and their experiences."

That has stuck with me for a decade of ministry and beyond because the calling of God in the midst of this study of the fruit of the spirit, the calling of God is for us indeed to make space, and that will necessarily mean that we must draw back of ourselves so that others might have space themselves. It's a tricky thing it's a tricky thing because there are people even in our midst perhaps you are one of them whose voice has been silenced.

Whose perspective and whose story has not been valued in the way that it should be and so it seems to me then if we are to be the people of God then we as the church of Jesus Christ, as Idlewild Presbyterian Church, ought to get about the work of self-control and bearing that fruit even more so.

Here's what I realized when I got done making that drive across the Blue Ridge Parkway thinking about my mom's rigidity. She was preparing me, in a way, to take up the space that God had called me to take up but then to also invite other people to take up the space that God has invited them to use their voice to share their story to let others know how God is at work in their lives.

Beloved, bearing the fruit of self-control it can dramatically change the world that we live in. My message to you this day is that if we can bear the fruit of self-control, if you can do that, you will be changed by the beauty and the power of the space that is created around you. You will be changed by the stories that you hear. You will change the way you live in response to the stories that you hear. You will be freed also from the myth that this life is all about you. As a community, if we can practice and bear this fruit when we practice self-control we will hear the voices of those who have long been pushed to the periphery.

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But whom God intends for us to hear their stories when we bear the fruit of self-control we realize it is actually a divine gift meant not to persecute us, but to allow us to experience the fullness of all humanity and creation. When we bear this fruit we can change families and businesses and relationships and communities.

Beloved, as we embody the fruit of self-control, we are indeed reflecting the very nature of Jesus the Christ the one who has drawn us to this place today in worship and in song.

You know the more I think about it, it's probably time for me to reclaim some of the things that my mom and my dad taught me. Maybe the 10-second rule wasn't such a bad idea. Maybe you'll feel invited to do the same in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.