

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 22, 2021

John 15: 1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

You know, over the last couple weeks, we've been doing some visioning together. I'm not quite sure if you have known that as we've been moving along through these different texts since the end of our summer series, even that really was visioning for us. That's the season that we're in right now. We are imagining together what this new season is supposed to look like. We do that in the continued midst of a pandemic. We do that in the midst of many different transitions in the leadership and in the life of this place, but we do it faithfully together. It's right and good that we would take some time to do that, and that that transitioning and imagining might be centered for us on scripture. It might be centered for us on God's word for each of us and to the church.

It's an interesting story that we read of here in Jeremiah. This prophetic word to the people who are in exile. Some have returned and others remain in Babylon, and the word of God comes to them through that prophet.

You who I've sent to Babylon and you who are exiled from this place that you imagine to be your home. build houses where you are. Build houses there and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Build relationships and families. Prosper there and grow as a community. Pray for this place where you have been sent because it turns out that in its welfare you will find your own. It's an interesting thing because the people who are exiled have as their sole purpose and sole hope that they would return to the place from once they have com, and that

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they would go back to that place, and it would be the same home that they imagined that it would be for all time.

Yet God speaks through the Prophet and says you are in a new place now that is foreign to you and different, but I want you to do something. I want you to think about and pray over and reflect that that I sent you there, and that you are there by no other means besides my providence. You are in this particular season in your life as a community because I have a purpose for you there. So do this. Make yourself at home in that new place. I know you want to be back in that place, Jerusalem, that you have identified with for a long time. But make yourself at home where you are as there's something for you there. Build a house and set a foundation.

Go to sleep with the knowledge that I am with you and present there. Till some soil and get your hands dirty. There are some things that need to come up from the ground that only you can help to produce. There's a reason why you are where you are. Build relationships. Connect with people. Connect with each other because there is something that is necessary and good in this place, even when it is not the place that you desire to be. It seemed appropriate that this text would come and speak to us this day in the continued time of pandemic and in the midst of the world as it wobbles to and from with tumult. It seems appropriate that we might hear a word that there is actually something that might be accomplished here by the divine, and that there actually might be something that God is indeed intended to communicate to the people. Here is the reality of these people's posture towards the world. They are foreigners in this place, and they don't want to make home here. They think that that their future is just that. It is theirs and theirs alone. They actually cannot comprehend that their future will be dependent not upon the people that they find around them in their community, but upon the people just outside their walls and just outside the circle of compassion that they have drawn around themselves as Israelites. The true nature of God is accomplishing something beyond them.

God seems to be saying through the prophet Jeremiah you are not an island unto yourself, and that your health, your vitality, your growth, your sustenance, is all dependent on the community in which you have been planted.

It's an interesting thing to hear this idea that we would seek the welfare of the city and for it to be perhaps a vision for us as a church this day because it has not always been the vision of the church. The Israelites didn't want to set down roots there and really care for the people around them and neither has the church over time. This verse was popularized about 20 years ago but, of course it's a lot older than that. It gained a lot of popularity and energy 20 years ago when churches began to make their way back into urban areas where they would plant churches there and seek the welfare of the city. They would do so without repenting of the fact that, of course, we as the church have not always sought the welfare of the city, or the community around us, or the people that are our neighbors. Instead, we've moved away. We moved away maybe physically, but certainly spiritually. We moved away sometimes literally from the people around us, from the people that are our neighbors, from those just a few blocks South, and a few blocks West, and a few blocks North. we can call it donut side or riverside that positions us here in the sanctuary, but does it position us in our community? Do we, like the Israelites, hear the lesson

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that the prophet is trying to explain to them? You cannot divorce yourself from the health of the community around you. You cannot be healthy and whole until you have helped to create around you a community that is healthy and whole.

Father Gregory Boyle started Homeboy Industries many years ago now. Perhaps you're familiar with that that group, or perhaps with Father Gregory's work. It is the largest organization in our country doing work in the midst of gangs and gang violence. Homeboy Industries is an organization that helps to create space for people who want to leave that life and enter into something new to, and to have something brand new birthed within them and around them. What's really interesting about this is that for homeboy industries, kinship has become the most important and vital value.

Boyle says that it turns out that what we must and need to create is a community built on kinship. We are to cultivate a community such that God might recognize it as God's own. Boyle says this I suspect that Mother Teresa diagnosed the world's ills correctly when she suggested that the problem in the world is that we have forgotten that we belong to each other.

So, we asked the question how do we stand as a community against that forgiving? How do we imagine and create a circle of compassion that is ever expanding? As we imagine that circle of compassion, what we seem to recognize over time is that there is no one standing outside that circle. What we as a community, he says at Homeboy Industries, what we realized is that we could not stay insular. We had to begin to move to the margins, so that we could stand with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless, so we could stand with those whose dignity had been denied them and whose burdens were more that they than they could carry. Occasionally, he says, you get very fortunate to be able to stand with the easily despised and the readily left out, and with the demonized and the disposable.

He says you know if kinship was our goal, I imagine we would no longer be promoting justice. Indeed, we would be celebrating it, for where there is no kinship there is no justice, and where there is no kinship there is no peace, and where there is no kinship there is no wholeness.

‘Seek the welfare of the city’ the prophet Jeremiah tells the people, ‘for in the city's welfare you will find your own’. You are connected indelibly to the people around you. It turns out that oneness is not just the dream of the prophet, but it is the dream of God. You are to recognize and know that all of us together are one. Father Boyle tells a story of a young man named Bandit.

Bandit was a gang member who was working in the midst of his neighborhood selling drugs. For fifteen years Father Boyle would pull up beside him and watch him push crack and say you want a real job.

He'd say, “no, Father I'm good.” Fifteen years went by and Bandit showed up in Father Boyle's office. He said I am tired.

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I am tired of the way I've been living. I'm tired of this life. I need a different job. Can you help me?

So, he began to work, and he actually became the manager of one of the initiatives of Homeboy Industries. It was a couple years later, maybe two or three, and Boyle had lost touch with Bandit because things had gone really well in Bandit's life. Bandit called him up and he said, "Father, I need you to pray for my daughter. She needs a blessing." Father said, "Is she in the hospital? What's going on? what's wrong?" Bandit said, "No. No. No. No. Tomorrow she leaves for college. I need you to come and give her a blessing before she leaves for college. So they made an appointment, and he went over there and he blessed Bandit's daughter before she went off to school. They sat and they talked. Father Boyle said, "You know, bandit. I'm really proud of you I'm just amazed by the transformation that I've seen in your life. You have a family. You put down roots. You have a foundation. You're doing good work in our community, and you're sending your daughter off to college.

Bandit said, "I know I proved him wrong, didn't I? He said "yeah, you did."

That reminded Father Boyle, though of when Bandit first started working. He came into Homeboy Industries, and he was managing a couple different areas of that ministry, and a newcomer came along whose name was Youngster. Youngster comes in, and when you have new gang members who are about to work with those who have been in the program for a while, you kind of have to feel it out for a while to see how people mesh and if they can be in relationship with one another. As they cross paths, they looked at each other and mumbled some words and Father Boyle said, 'boys is this going to work?' They were silent. It was some years later that they had become good and dear friends working together. It was that many years later that word came the Bandit had gone and grabbed some groceries one evening, and he was making his way home when e he made the wrong turn down an alley to take a little shortcut. There he was met by members of Youngster's gang who beat him to the verge of death.

Father Boyle got the call to go and to be with Bandit at the hospital, and there when he found him, he could tell very quickly that Bandit's life would not last much longer. They have a policy at the hospital where he was that they needed 48 hours of no brain activity before they would pull the plug. So, Father Boyle prayed over Bandit, this man who had been made new, reclaimed, and driven in a new direction. He prayed over him and blessed him and as he was leaving his phone rang on the other end it was Youngster.

He said that's a terrible thing that happened to Bandit. I'm really sorry. Is there anything I can do? Can i give him my blood? Father Boyle let that request just sit there in the air, the heaviness of it and the weightiness of it. Youngster said "you know, we were enemies for one time, but, you know, we worked together, and we became friends."

Father Boyle would go on to say does that happen every time at Home Boy Industries. Absolutely.

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Does it happen with every relationship? Absolutely. It turns out that the dream of God is actually our dream too, that we might also know that we are one with each other.”

Kinship is the goal.

The goal would be that we no longer understand anyone standing outside the circle, but we know that, indeed, we are tied inextricably to our neighbors.

If we are to do that at Idlewild Presbyterian Church, then we have to go to the margins. We have to go to the poor. We have to go to the oppressed. We have to go to the powerless and the voiceless. We have to stand with those whose dignity has been denied them, and those whose burdens are too heavy for them to carry.

We have to go to the powerless so that abuse will stop.

We have to go to those who would be disposed so that there will be a day when we will realize that no one is disposable. We have to go to the demon eyes so that someday the demonizing will stop. We have to go to the readily left out so they know that they belong to the people of God.

Jeremiah reaches out to this people displaced from where they want to be, and says I have purpose for you exactly where you are. Can you dream with me? Can you dream that you need to build houses and plant gardens and grow families and care for the people around you? Can you understand and can you imagine that your welfare is inextricably tied to theirs?

Beloved, here's what I thought about this week. More than a hundred years ago, God planted Idlewild Presbyterian Church in midtown Memphis. God gave us a neighborhood and neighbors. As we move in this season that is difficult for us to navigate, I wonder what it would look like not to worry so much about what our numbers are right and worry more about what the community around us reflects and looks like? what does it look like for us to from this place to the margins and draw a circle of compassion around midtown Memphis, and realize that no one is outside that circle? What does it look like for us to make kinship with our neighbors the ultimate goal of this community?

Seek the welfare of the city. Pray for the people that I have planted you near because in their welfare you will find your own. So let us go from this place this day seeking kinship and remembering that we indeed belong to each other. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God. Mother of us all. Amen.