

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, October 24, 2021

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## Acts 16:11-15

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

So, I told you I was a little nervous people wouldn't show up. I was also a little nervous on how to pronounce Samothrace. A couple big words in there, and they're really cities for us. Important cities, actually strategic cities, it turns out on the journey of the early Christian church. There would be helpful for us as we unpack what it is to understand that the offering plate is a forever piece for us.

It's an odd forever piece because for the last 18 months we have not been passing the offering plate. We've had it present. It's been in the narthex and here in the main hallway. Some of you all have noticed it. Some of y'all have not noticed it, but we try to still collect. Again, no judgment. We try to still collect the offering every week, even though we have to do it differently. This piece, though, gets reintroduced to us this day. We'll be passing the plates later on in worship. I'm grateful for that. The offering plate for me is actually served as a pretty important thing in my life. A couple important moments for me on my journey of faith early on in elementary Sunday school. We would collect the offering every Sunday school. You'd show up and you would give your dollar and Guy Clore would put your name down on the offering envelope for Sunday school. David Powers one dollar. David Powers a quarter. Whatever it is. We didn't preach the prosperity gospel, that is, what you sow you will reap back bountifully. But we did only receive Krispy Kreme donuts after we had made our offering. Yes.

That was one of my earliest moments about what it meant for us to be intentional about giving. That was an early moment for me. Another one happened more recently. I was invited to preach in a church of a different tradition than our own here at Idlewild, and it was a beautiful service. There was a lot of energy in that sanctuary. When we got done though we did something. The preacher of the church and then this guest preacher got to go, and we stood on either side of the communion table where the offering plates were laid, and then the offering was invited. Every family slowly got up and made their way to the front and then rotated to the back. It was a really beautiful thing. You know we passed the plates here, but it was really nice to see everyone get up and make an offering. All sorts of different offerings, but then something amazing happened. The pastor looked down at the plate and said we do it again. Everyone slowly processed forward again. He was satisfied with that second offering. It's a peculiar thing these forever pieces. These offering plates.

Because in our lives in the world money is extracted from us. If you go to a restaurant, if you go to a football game, if you go to a car dealership, you are not asked to make an offering for

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food or for the entertainment of a game or even for a vehicle. Money is extracted from you sometimes in large lump sums. Other times slowly over time. But as people of faith, we claim that the offering plate symbolizes something completely different. Money is not to be extracted from the people of faith. Instead, an offering plate for us is an invitation. Money is not extracted from us. Instead, we are invited to join in the ongoing work of God. This is an important distinction for us. This invitation to participate in the work of an all-powerful God. Rightly understood, it's a humble one, a humble limitation that we are given an invitation to recognize the one who has richly blessed each of us. It's an invitation to participate. It's also an invitation to joy. There's little that can produce more joy within the heart than that of giving to another, giving in various ways.

We hear in the book of Acts about a gift made by Lydia, but you should know the context of this is that we have a bunch of disciples making their way by boat and by land spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and the good news that God has taken on flesh. This God although he was killed, God has been raised from the dead, and indeed the power of that God dwells within each and every one of us. So, Paul and Silas arrive in the Greek city of Philippi, and they venture out one day they've stayed there many days. Then they venture out one day to a place where they imagine, Scripture tells us, there will be prayer happening. It's the day of sabbath not unlike this one. They're in the city by a river not unlike ours, and they venture out for a quiet place of prayer.

There they meet some women who are praying together and, we imagine, having a deep and rich conversation. We don't actually know the intricacies of it, but what we do know is that they begin to have a conversation with these women and whatever the content of that conversation was it led to the conversion of Lydia. Whatever was discussed in that time, the very spirit of God was at work in such a powerful way that Lydia saw her life completely changed. Scripture says that “the Lord opened her heart” and then at the end of that text there is this invitation when she and her whole household were baptized. “She urged us saying if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord come and stay at my home.” So, they venture out for prayer in a city by a river, and then there's a baptism, and then there's an invitation from this person they've just met a few moments ago. If you judge me to be faithful, come and stay in my home.

Lydia makes an offering that day, an offering of hospitality, an offering of a place. If we weren't to spend much time thinking about her offering, we might not understand that her offering is not simply that of hospitality. And home is an offering that ends up changing everything about the trajectory of the Christian tradition by opening her door. By opening her door in Philippi, she opens the door for the sharing of the good news of the gospel throughout all of Europe.

This is an important thing. Lydia's home becomes a home base for these people who are sharing the good news of a crucified and risen God that dwell with grace and with love within each of their hearts. This is what Lydia's gift is. It's not just a place to lie their heads at night, it's not just a warm meal after a long day of traveling and preaching, it is a place from which the Christian tradition can grow into a brand-new continent.

Lydia knew intuitively what Henry Nouwen would write some years later that “the mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God” So, the humble offering of a home and a place to rest becomes the gateway for the sharing of the unconditional love of God.

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A few weeks ago, I showed up just a couple minutes after eight o'clock for our Wednesday food bank distribution, and Elizabeth Allritz met me with a wad of 20 bills rolled up. She said here you can have this. That doesn't often happen to preachers, by the way. She said take good care of this, and so I slipped it into my pocket assuming she'd tell me what it was for a little bit later. Later that day she sent me a message. So, it turns out that there was a woman named Janice. Janice for months was one of the first few cars in the line of our Wednesday food bank distribution. It'd been some months since she had made her way through that line, but for many her and Elizabeth had shared a moment together early in the morning on a Wednesday while the food was being prepared and set on tables and people were finding their orange reflective vest and cars were lined up around the corner and around the block. They would talk for a little bit, catch up on life. They grew a friendship in that time, and then Janice disappeared for a while. She missed several Wednesdays and then more.

This past Wednesday though, a few ago at our last distribution there was a car waiting in the parking lot. When Elizabeth arrived, she was told that car need to talk to you. Janice was in that car with a relative of hers. She had been driven that morning. It was obvious that Janice had had a difficult few weeks, maybe even months. She has suffered not only an accident that had injured her, but also, she has had the effects of a recent stroke, Even through that difficulty, she reached through the window and handed Elizabeth a roll of 20 bills. She said we want you to have this. I want you to have this.

Elizabeth would have pushed it away. But she said no, I've been given the gift of this food bank .Y'all have helped to feed people. I want you to have this and she had another roll, and she was going to give it to another person that had been so formative for her in that Wednesday morning food bank. And so, Elizabeth humbly took the offering, put it in her pocket, and when I arrived gave it to me. What's interesting is that Janice had received the gifts of the food bank, she had made her way through that line early in the morning for weeks upon weeks upon weeks and when she had the opportunity, her first trip back was to make an offering not because anything is requested of anyone that comes through that line or, indeed any of us, but because to make an offering for Janice was to participate in the work of sharing and feeding those who are hungry. So, while Janice has a number of ailments that might stop her from donning an orange vest on a

Wednesday morning, she had an offering to make. Nonetheless, she had an invitation to participate in the work of God .Really what's going to happen in just a few moments when we receive our morning offering, and we pass the place for the first time in 18 months, there is going to be in that in that passing an invitation for you to participate in God's work. It's a weekly invitation not just to devote a portion of your treasure, but to be reminded as that plate passes across you that you are invited to devote your entire life to the sharing of the good news of the unconditional love of God. The offering communicates our belief at Idlewild Presbyterian Church that this place must continue to exist, that this place must persist in its mission, that the ministry offered in this place has value here and now, but also has great value into the future.

The truth is that we are here in 2021. We are here by God's grace, and we are here because as that plate passed across the lap of people seated and fused just where you are they made offerings of the riches entrusted to their care because they believed in the mission and the purpose of this church. They believed that it was important that a message of grace and invitation of inclusion and of hope was incredibly important in midtown Memphis. They believed it so they devoted a portion of God's many blessings to them to help ensure that this place would be here.

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Now as the offering plates are passed later today, we get that opportunity as well. We get the opportunity to claim together that the work of the spreading of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed ongoing work, that Lydia in offering her home and a warm meal in that humble offering became a gateway for the unconditional love. Each of us in our very conditional love and our very conditional hope get to be gateways for the unconditional love, the unconditional hope, of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And as we make our offering, we are saying that this place needs to continue to be here. This place of prayer by a river where conversation and conversion can happen needs to be here.

So, on the sabbath day in this city by the river, I wonder if we are open to hearing the good news of Jesus Christ in such a way that we might be transformed, that God might speak to us, and invite us to join in the ongoing work of god. May our hearts be open this day to the message of the gospel.

May we give thanks that we worship a generous God who invites us to use the gifts that we've been given to do the work of ministry in this place, both now and forever. Hallelujah. Amen.