

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 13, 2023

If you are joining us for the first time in a while, I know some folks take vacation this summer, some it's hard to get here at 10 o'clock, it's easier at 11. So we're grateful for your presence, but that might mean that you're unaware that we spent the whole summer in the Book of Psalms. We were learning together from the Psalms and all the different ways that they speak to the human experience. We drew that sermon series to a close last Sunday. We begin a short series this morning. It's going to carry us until the beginning of the Narrative Lectionary, which will be in the beginning of September, so we are going to talk over the next four weeks about what it looks like and what it means to begin again. We're going to imagine together that the God that we know in Jesus Christ is at work within us birthing something brand new. And so we're going to wrestle with how the spirit calls us to begin again, first in our faith, then amongst our family, then with our friends, and then even with our foes. So we hope that you'll spend the next couple of weeks with us imagining how it is the spirit authors something brand new within us. This morning we'll begin with faith, and we'll start in the book of Romans, chapter 12, verses 1 through 8. I'll invite you to turn to it in just a moment, but before that let us go to God in prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious Spirit, as you moved across the waters of creation, we pray that you might move once again here. Move amongst us and within us. Quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

So maybe you brought your own Bible, or maybe you just want to grab one of the Pew Bibles. Turn to Romans, chapter 12. We'll begin in the first verse and go through the eighth verse together.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

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So I hope you got away for at least a little time this summer. Maybe if you did you got close to home, if home is not here in Memphis, maybe it's somewhere else. I got to travel back to South Carolina a little bit. I've told you some about those travels. My last trip, though, I was making the drive from the Low Country back up to the upstate, which is where my dad still lives; and I passed through this little town named Malden. Malden's actually where my dad's business is, and so we spent a lot of time in Malden, but it just happened to coincide with imagining of this particular lesson in this sermon. And...and so I was struck when I crossed over this bridge and down to the right, I saw this big red brick factory building and this rush of memories came back to me.

It's still, actually some 30-40 years later, a...a store, it's a second hand store, it's like a factory store where you're able to go and exchange clothing items particularly for children. And so one of the traditions that my mom and I had was that the week before school started we would hop in the car, and we would make our way down to Malden, the wonderful place to go visit. And we would stop at this Factory Store, and she would let me go in and pick out anything I wanted, and so it was Bugle Boy pants and Chaps by Polo shirts, and I was looking as stylish as possible. She would also pick out a few outfits for me. Particularly, she'd pick out the outfit that I was going to wear for class pictures, and I remember one of those outfits happened to be this green turtleneck that was, like, almost choking me, right? and then this purple—imagine, like, Mr Rogers sweater vest. Just the sort of thing a third grader wants, right? To have that outfit memorialized for all history. I still have that picture, but it reminded me, though, about that trip and how there was a lot that went into that trip. There was a lot of expectation. It really, for me, encapsulated, okay, 'the year is about to begin again.' Something brand new is about to happen. I might be starting a new grade, might have new teachers, might be going to a brand new school. I'd pick out all those clothes, and I'd also get to pick out a backpack; and that signified, that was a ritual of sorts, that we were beginning something brand new. And so while it was really just a shopping trip, it was a lot more than that, because there was something happening within my spirit at that time; and I think probably within my mom's too. If you're sending your kids off to school in a couple days, then you might be feeling some feelings this morning, even as we do backpack tags.

There's this new thing that Paul was talking to the church in Rome about too. If you brought your Bible, or if you used your Pew Bible, you might have seen that the heading for this section of Romans, chapter 12, is A New Life in Christ, New Life In Christ. And so this teaching for Paul is to let the Romans know that in Christ there is this new way of moving through the world that is different from the way that they have previously moved through the world. But he talks about it in a familiar yet odd way. "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy to present your bodies as a Living Sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship." Now the people who would have been hearing this, they would have understood the idea of sacrifice. They may have even read some of the texts that we call Holy, that speak of sacrifice. They would have understood the way the transactional nature of God and the way in which we bring something before God and sacrifice it, and it either brings God joy, or it...it somehow takes God's anger away. They would have known what sacrifice looked like and

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what it meant. It meant something really significant in the Roman Empire as well. They would have understood that but not in the way that Paul described it.

Paul didn't say go to the market and get some animals that are suitable to be sacrificed and take them to the altar of God and then sacrifice them there. Paul said, "Present your bodies as a Living Sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship." That's where you get this first hint that Paul was a Presbyterian because worship has to be reasonable, okay?

But Paul is telling them though, I don't want you to go find something else to take to the altar. I want you to take yourself to that place. I want you to make a living sacrifice of who you are. What he's essentially telling them is—if you want this new life, then you have to bring that old life with you to the altar.

This sort of sacrifice would have been counter-cultural, which is to say, the world teaches that you become who you are and then stay that way. In fact, if one continues to change over time—maybe die and rise again—they're seen as flighty or immature or unsure of their identity. That's why Paul says, "Do not be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." imagine a different kind of sacrifice than you've ever heard of before. Imagine it is you that is supposed to present yourself not because you're bad. In fact, you're holy and acceptable before God. It is not your sin necessarily that needs to be sacrificed there. It's just this imagination, imagining that you have...that you're going to continue to move through life without change. Paul knows that the evolving person is the faithful person. One could say Paul understood more than most that motto, "Reformed and always being reformed according to the word of God."

One of my favorite teachers taught about this idea but with a slightly different vocabulary. Richard Rohr teaches on the true self and the false self. If you've read Immortal Diamond, then maybe you're familiar with this language. Rohr says this. "I learned the terms true self and false self from Thomas Merton, words he used to clarify what Jesus surely meant when Jesus said that we must die to ourselves, or later when he says we must lose ourselves to find ourselves. Merton rightly recognized that it was not the body itself that had to 'die', which much of Christian history seems to believe," but it was indeed the false self. "The false self is all the things that we pretend to be and think we are. It is the pride, arrogance, title, costume, role and degree that we take as ourselves."

It is in essence what passes in this world, what is going to die. It is what we cannot take with us, and it is in fact "not who we are," but "our attachment to our small, separate, false self." It has to die in order "to allow our true self—our basic and unchangeable identity in God—to live more fully and freely" in the world; and this "change of identity from the false self to the true self [you have to understand—it] is major." It's "almost seismic." It's a "shift in motivation and consciousness itself." It's a shift that "mature religion rightly calls conversion. It is the very heart of all religious transformation"—this idea that one might die to the false and rise to the true.

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But if we are to speak honestly about what beginning again with our faith might look like, we have to also speak about our willingness to make our way to that altar. Y'all know we actually don't have altars in Presbyterianism. We did away with those a while ago. We centered the table instead, and in that way we are still centering a sacrifice of sorts, but it's a different sort of sacrifice. It's a sacrifice with a promise from our savior.

But there's still, there still is this question of our desire to make our way to that place, our willingness to trust in the God that Paul trusted in, that...that he hoped the Romans would too. The prerequisite for beginning again is a willingness to let the old life die.

That's the beautiful and sometimes gut-wrenching part about the gospel. Unless something dies, it can't live again. So if we want to experience new life or even a new understanding of our faith, we must present that old way of living for it to be sacrificed. Even in its holiness before God, its acceptability in the sight of God, we must present it as an acceptable sacrifice. So when we talk about beginning again with our faith, we must be willing to offer our old systems of belief, our old faith traditions before the God of all creation. I know that in our midst we have a lot of recovering Baptists and a lot of recovering Catholics and a lot of recovering... even Presbyterians. In some way perhaps your presence here is a marker of your willingness to bring the old way before God and allow God to make something brand new.

For Paul this sacrifice was critical if one was going to actually understand and experience new life In Christ. The old life had to go away so a new life could begin.

Because Paul knew that God was authoring something brand new, something more vibrant and vital, more authentic, more transformational for not just the individual but for the community.

And I would posit to say that Paul knows the same about you and your life as well. Paul knew, writing a long time ago, that you would come to this place in the midst of a brand new season. For us it happens to be the school year. We kick off a brand new formation year. We do so as we coincide with the school year, and it gives us this opportunity to take inventory. And it was put on my heart this week to share that, beloved, if you want to hear the good news of the Gospel, you need to know this—that God didn't make the new season for the old you. God did not make this new season you're walking into for the old you.

God is doing something brand new in your life, and it's for the one that you are becoming.

And you might say, “That's nice, preacher, but how do I start?” A couple of years ago I started following this guy named Charlie Maxey on Instagram. He had these beautiful drawings, and he kind of gained notoriety in London because he started going into subways and drawing these beautiful pictures of what looked like a small boy and a horse, but they were kind of abstract in nature. There will always be these just one-liners that would...that would warm your heart, really, maybe encourage you for a day. A couple of years later he came out with a book. It's

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called The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse. if you're a parent of a young person you might know it. Maybe you've given it as a Christmas gift. I used to give it to some friends when their kids were starting school.

There's a lot of worthwhile things to pay attention to in that book, but it's actually the...the image on the inside of the back cover that struck me this week when I was looking back at it. The boy is looking up at the horse, the horse down at the boy. They've been on a long journey together, and you could imagine that the journey is drawing to an end, but that's not the case. Something brand new is being born. They're about to have to go on a whole new journey together, and you could tell that the boy is nervous. He's tepid when it comes to imagining this new thing that's about to happen, and so the horse looks down and says reassuringly,

“Just take this step. The horizon will look after itself.”

I thought what a beautiful lesson for us if we are to begin again with our faith.

If we focus on the horizon and where we're going to be weeks, days, weeks, months from now, then we're going to get distracted. But if we...if we focus instead on the next step, just this one, then maybe we might be willing to bring that thing before God. Let the old die so the new might live. Maybe, even, we might walk out of this door, these doors, this afternoon. We might go into TK Young, and the spirit of God just might speak to us and tell us that there is something brand new we're supposed to be doing. The spirit might say there's actually some more room up here in the choir. Yeah, come on. The spirit might be saying, “You know what? I've gifted you with the ability to teach, and why aren't you doing it? The spirit might say you've got more time on your hands than a lot of people do. You should be giving your time. Here are all the ways.

Here's the beautiful thing about our faith tradition. We don't just celebrate Easter once a year. We believe that Easter is every single Sunday. Every time we gather is Easter Sunday.

But we as God's people, we get to decide if we're going to run away from the transformation or if we're going to live into it. Beginning again, in fact, beloved, is in itself an act of faith.

I want to return to that secondhand store in Malden, South Carolina. One of the really beautiful things about that store, looking back on it now, is that there was nothing new there, not in the chronological sense. Everything had been used, maybe even a couple times, but as I made my way up and down the aisles, everything was new to me

The God that you meet as you move into your future is timeless and unchanging. There's nothing new under the sun except for the way that you can experience that God in and through the faith that you pursue. It is that sort of walk that will reveal for you new dimensions of who you are and who God is calling you to be, who we are as a community, and who God needs us to be in Midtown Memphis.

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Beloved, here's what I know. God is in love with your future. And God is loving you into that future. So I'm praying for you this week and for myself and for our community that we might have the courage to present ourselves, our bodies even, as a living sacrifice.

They're holy and beloved. They're fully acceptable before God. And, yet, in order to know and experience that new thing, Paul encouraged the church in Rome and...and even encourages us today to bring it before God, trusting that the God that we know in Jesus Christ is going to make all things new.

Let's pray together.

God of our future, we know that you are loving us into that new place, and what we pray for, Lord, this morning is for courage.

We pray for courage to walk in those ways and to bring before you the things that you know need to pass away so that something new might be born. We don't know how heavy that will be, but you do. You know the things that we need to carry even better than we do, and so what we pray for is that you would shine light and then give us courage to bring them, and then after that you would by the power of your spirit make something brand new within us.

Help us to trust and believe that we can begin again—even in our faith. Help us to know. And right now it's a great time to do that. We ask these prayers in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus the Christ. Amen.