

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 12, 2024

So, I mentioned that in a couple of weeks we will move to one worship service. We'll do that throughout the summer. The Narrative Lectionary, which we have been following throughout this programmatic year, takes the summer off. It gives spaces to churches to imagine something different in the summer. So we have a sermon series that we'll launch the last week of this month— Theology 101. We're going to kind of move back to the basics of our faith and try to understand some of those big words that have significant implications for us, those theological terms that ground us in our worship and our service of the Lord. That means though that this Sunday is really the last time that we'll spend in the Narrative Lectionary until we kick off the programmatic year in August. And the Narrative Lectionary brings us this morning to the 15th chapter of First Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. You should know that the assigned text for this morning was about 45 verses, and I figured we wanted to get out of here sometime before 12:30, so we're only going to study about eight of those verses this morning. What you need to know is the context. In the beginning of this 15th chapter Paul is being really direct about the significance of Jesus's resurrection, and the truth of it. What has happened in the church in Corinth is that there have been some who have begun to believe that this was simply a myth or a story that was told—that Jesus rose from the dead, and, indeed, that that death is not the end of the story. Paul is trying to be very concrete with them that Resurrection and the power of Resurrection is true and real and the power of God at work in the world. And then he ends this 15th chapter with the verses that we'll read this morning. So I'll invite you to follow along 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, beginning in the 51st verse.

Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 12, 2024

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

Let us pray together.

Gracious and loving Spirit, greet us this morning with your peace. Fall fresh upon us and quiet us, that we might hear your word, and that in hearing we might respond. So 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, Paul is not only trying to reiterate to the church in Corinth the significance of the Resurrection, he is also trying to help them be prepared for the difficulties that they will face as a community of faith, okay—the difficulties that they'll face as a community, but also individually, personally, that they will have to worry over and be anxious over in their own lives. He is trying to assure them that whatever difficulty they face—even death, even death, victory has been secured over that difficulty. Victory has been secured over even death.

Paul says that when the perishable body takes on imperishability, and when the mortal body takes on immortality, the saying will be shown to be true—"Death has been swallowed up in Victory" So what do you have to worry about? Why would you worry yourself with the difficulties of the day? Why would you be anxious? Except these Corinthians, like us, are human, and so they, like us, they forget the promise of the resurrecting God. They at times are tempted to believe that this story of this Resurrection is a lie, or at best a myth, told to encourage them but not actually based in reality. Then when they face difficulty, all they have to rely on is a story they've been told and not the truth of what Paul calls the Gospel. The question then is how are they to approach the difficulties which they will experience and see in the world? What will they as a people do in the face of communal crisis and personal crisis? Will they approach those with worry and anxiety and fear when something happens in their life or in their communal life together? How will they approach pain? How will they approach hurt? How will they approach division? How will they approach even death? Paul is trying to have them approach those most difficult realities of the world from a different path, from a different way. It's almost as if he is asking how would you approach the challenges that you see in the world differently if you were confident that the victory had already been won over them. How would you see pain differently if you knew that healing would come? How would you experience hurt differently if you knew that reconciliation was possible? Division—how would you see it differently if you knew that ultimately all would be drawn into Oneness with God and one another? How would you approach death if you knew that death indeed did not have the final word? Paul is offering an...an ultimate reassurance for the lives of the Corinthians. He's also inviting them into a mystery. Say what you want about Paul but he was a...a mystic in the most vital sense of the word. He invited the Corinthians in this text, and he invites us even this morning into the mystery of it all. When he says to them, "Look, I'm going to tell you a mystery," he's basically saying, "Look I don't actually know how all of this works. I can't break down for you what it's going to look like for all to be drawn back into Oneness. I can't even tell you how death gets swallowed up except that in...in Christ this is somehow done." In my life and perhaps in yours, more often than not the way that growth happens, the way that we become better, more resilient,

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 12, 2024

more loving, and more kind is often through difficulty and even pain. I don't know about you, but I seldom find myself becoming more Christlike in the comfort and privilege of my everyday life. It is when more difficult things befall me, and perhaps you, that growth happens. When you get fired from that job, when your marriage goes through a season of difficulty you couldn't have imagined, when you receive that diagnosis, when you get cut from that team or you get that rejection letter from that college. We have the propensity to imagine that those defeats are final, those difficulties are going to last. And, yet, what Paul seems to be telling those who will receive difficulty is "I want you to take that difficulty and enter with me into this mysterious thing that I can't really understand, but I know to be true." What I know to be true is that there is this mysterious thing that is divine in nature that can happen to you and to us as a community when we trust that God is at work in our lives and in the world. This is Paul whose life was going in a particular defined direction, and I don't think he would be able to describe to you all the intricacies of how his life changed besides to say that he had an experience of God that changed him and the trajectory of his life forever. It wasn't through the privilege of his position that his life was changed. It was through the difficulty of a holy Interruption that must have felt like a death of some kind. And so he can't tell the people in Corinth how their lives will be changed and how the world is going to be made new, but he can invite them to trust that in the mystery the Divine is at work. The hard part that he articulates here when he starts talking about the perishable and imperishable bodies, and when he talks about the mortal bodies becoming Immortal, what he says is that not all of us will die, but "all of us will be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable." He doesn't say how that's going to happen besides through the power of God. The reality of what Paul is telling the people is that it's going to look like death has come upon you. It's going to look like that difficult thing that you're facing will defeat you, but what I'm telling you is that that thing has been swallowed up in the power and the victory of God. We don't know what it will look like, but we do trust that it will happen. Paul doesn't want the people to lose hope in the resurrecting power of God. He wants them to know that every ill will be corrected, every division will be brought back together, every pain will be tended to with a healing balm, every hurt can be resolved by the divine power of God.

I don't know what the obstacles are that face our community or face you this morning, not fully. We see some in our city and in our nation and across the world. We see things that are plain as day to us. We see war, we see poverty, we see violence, we see division. We don't see a hundred other things that are happening in our world, and we don't see the difficulties that are seated right beside us in the pews here this morning. We don't know the obstacles that each other is facing, the marriages that feel like they're breaking under the weight of anger and frustration. We don't know the strained relationships between parents and children. We don't know the one who is worried that their job is not going to be there at the end of next week. We don't know the one who is struggling with the pain of feeling alone in a world where they're surrounded by people. And so, like Paul, we can't speak to those particularities, but what we can do is be invited into a mystery...mystery where we don't know everything. We don't know many things actually, but we do trust that the power that brought Jesus back from the dead is still at work in our lives

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 12, 2024

personally and communally. We do trust that the resurrection is not simply a myth meant to bring us comfort, but a power meant to transform us.

This morning we celebrate Mother's Day. There's all sorts of beauty and complexity that Jeanene will speak to in our prayer in just a moment, but I was speaking to a friend this week who talked about her journey towards motherhood. It was a long difficult journey. It's one that took many twists and turns. She said for her it was the most hopeful act she had ever attempted—this journey towards motherhood—because at turn after turn after turn, she faced difficulty. And what she knew it meant for her was that she was going to experience physical and emotional and even spiritual difficulty and pain to bear into the world something brand new. Then she was going to have to nurture that beautiful thing over time, and that child would face difficulty as well. And she said for her every time she sees a mother or she sees anyone caring for a child, she believes it to be the most hopeful act that we can take as humans, because it is to claim that even amongst the difficulty of the world that there is purpose and there is possibility in the Divine to bring about something beautiful and good. For her bearing that hard thing into the world was also an act of faith.

What we can't know about our lives are the things that lie ahead of us. We don't know the difficulties, but we can, like Paul, we can hold out the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ— that death does not have the final word, that victory has been claimed in Christ Jesus. So here's what I want you to imagine this week. I want you to ponder the question of how you might live differently if you truly believed that the victory had been won for you. How would you face that thing at work or in your faith life or at school or in your marriage or in your singleness or in your parenting if you believed fully that goodness would indeed triumph? We cannot know how we get there, but we can hear Paul's invitation into the mystery of it all, and we can trust that the very spirit of God moves with us in that mystery to bring about something brand new that is called good. May we know the truth of the Resurrection this day on this seventh Sunday in Eastertide May we know it to be true personally. May we know it to be true in our city and in our world.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.