

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 11, 2024

So, friends, as we celebrate Kickoff Sunday this morning, we are going to hear two scripture readings—first from the Hebrew scripture from Psalm 23, which you're probably very familiar with, and then from our New Testament text from Acts 6: 1-7. I just want to say it's really good to be back with y'all in this wonderful holy space. Hopefully, you joined us over the last five weeks or so when we were over in the gym. That was a different experience, purposeful for us actually, and you are seated, you may not know, on some brand new steam cleaned cushions, okay. It took upwards of like 4 days, I think, or many hours, I would say, and lots of energy to clean just one side of those pew cushions, okay. Don't look on the other side. We're going to do those later on. We spent something like 28 bottles of wood treatment on the pews, and we've rubbed them down to make sure you're not going to take any with you on your clothes. But I just want to say a word of gratitude to all of the volunteers that made that happen. Many of you are here in this place this morning. It was one of the things that we got to do while we were worshiping in our gym throughout the month of July.

So we'll read scripture together. Before we do, let us ask God's blessing upon our time.

Gracious and loving Spirit, bring your peace upon us this day. Not only your peace, but your creative power. Move forth in us and around us to draw forth new life from us, that we might be your people more faithfully now. 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, first the familiar Hebrew scripture-Psalm 23.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, [d]

I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Here ends the reading And then the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 6. We're going to read verses 1-7 together.

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and

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Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

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

So we have here painted in the Acts of the Apostles the calling of the seven, the first deacons of the church. If you read the text closely, it seems as if they come about being these seven men of good standing who are prayed over and then given the task of doing the work of the church, they... it seems like they come about because the leadership of the church doesn't really want to spend time waiting on tables. It seems as if the work of waiting on tables, caring for the widows, ensuring that they are not neglected in the distribution of food is beneath them. That's how I first read the text early in the week, and that didn't really settle with me too well. Hopefully, it unsettles you a bit too. On our bulletin it says that every member of Idlewild is a minister. It's said that for a long time, and that is because each of us has a unique and important calling. I wonder what we can learn from the calling that these seven were given. Interesting how the faithful people could not see the areas that were being neglected, more specifically the people who are being neglected in their midst. It was the Hellenites who had to draw to their attention that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food, but even though they couldn't see what they were neglecting, they were responsive when it was brought to their attention. There was a need that the Church needed to fill, and so they were called then, these seven, to end the negligent work of the Church and to ensure the daily distribution of food to be given to everyone. There is a necessity in this calling for the Church to continue to be the Church. If it was going to be faithful to the Word, it could not neglect the widow. That is the calling of the Church, of course. Those that others forget must not be forgotten in this community. And so Stephen, one that is described as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, he's kind of, you might imagine, the leader of these early deacons. What's interesting to me about this is that Stephen wasn't just sitting around waiting on the church to call him up to do this work. Stephen had other things going on in his life. So did the other six that made up that first group of deacons. They had other things. It wasn't tabula rasa here. They had other things going on in their lives, but they answered the call without question. In fact, when the church leadership told them that they needed to create a nominating committee just like we have here at Idlewild Presbyterian Church, they were happy about it. It seems as if when the leadership of the church said, "I can't do that. I have some other responsibilities. Y'all need to be about this work." The church, instead of being angry at the responsibilities given to them, instead they were overjoyed. When the leadership finally loosed their hands of doing all the ministry and said, "There are people among you, you know who they are, you should call them into service of Jesus Christ." What I know about Steven and about these first group of deacons who were called because, Scripture tells us, they were all faithful. They were all following as best they could in the ways of Christ, which means that they understood the connection that maybe you haven't quite made yet.

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Why do we read Psalm 23 and Acts on the same day now. Neither is a lectionary text for the day, just so you're aware. We read them because it is the same God who speaks in Psalms that speaks and is spoken about in the book of Acts. The God who called Steven and the six was the same God of the Psalms. Stephen and the others would have understood this. I'm not going to try to go through their names again. I was nervous enough trying to read them the first time, but y'all know who they are. These seven altogether—they knew the connection between these two, these two seasons of God speaking, and they knew that they could not do the work that they were being called to in what we now know as Acts of the Apostles without doing what the psalmist had already talked about. This is the same God who speaks in Psalms and the same God that is speaking to them in their calling. This God that is calling them into action to ensure the equitable distribution of food is also the God that leads them beside still waters, that makes them lie down in green pastures, that restores their soul. They know that the calling that they have had placed upon them by God and by the community is not going to take away their energy. because the God that has called them to that work is also going to call them to lie down in green grass and rest.

What is their calling though? Are they called to just distribute food in a slightly different manner? I don't think so. Food is kind of our entry point into the calling of God. Their calling is a calling to compassion to look upon the people and to say where is it, who is it that needs the compassion of our community? They are called to compassion just like you and just like me, just like us. One of the things I worry about when we have the Ministry Fair—well, I don't...now I worry about multiple things actually. There's no competition between the tables and the Ministries in the Ministry Fair, okay? Except you might see that one table did try to outdo all the other tables, okay? If you walk through there—and I'm not looking at Joe Lackie or anybody on the Music Ministry right now, okay—there's no competition there. That's one of my worries that we're going to compete. The other worry is that you walk in there and you are overwhelmed by what is being asked of you. You say this is one more thing that I'm having to add into my schedule. This is one more thing that is going to take all of my energy for a night a week or maybe multiple times a month, one more thing. That's my worry when we have our Ministry fair, and I worry that that might become an impediment to your calling. I was thinking about it this week. There are a number of things that kind of stop us from making the commitment to serve Christ in this place. Some of them we might live into. Others we don't. One of the things I think about is sometimes we are just lazy, right? We have a tiny bit of time, and we...we don't want to...we don't want to give it to the church—service of Christ through Idlewild. But that's not, that's not y'all. I don't think that's the reason. If we tap down into it. you're not lazy. You're here. You look nice. You got up early. You're not the 8:30ers. They're really on top of it, right, but you're here at 11, so you're not lazy. I think another reason, another thing that might be an impediment to our responding to the call of God to compassion is our unwillingness to sacrifice. Jesus invites his followers to take up the cross, which means that there will be a sacrifice on your part if you are to be following in the way of Jesus Christ. But crosses aren't what we like to deal with. Nobody's left besides the women at the foot of the cross, right? None of the disciples, even these who will be talking later, only the faithful women at the foot of the cross, because no one likes a cross. And so we don't

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want to sacrifice. That might be you, but I think there's something else. I think there's something else that we might even get a hint of this morning on Kickoff Sunday with all this beautiful energy and goodness.

I think that perhaps our most significant impediment to responding to the call of God to compassion is our busyness or its cousin—hurry. I find myself guilty of this on almost every Sunday morning. There are too many things to do in too short of a period of time, and for that then for me Sunday morning just becomes kind of a microcosm of the rest of my life and my existence. I think hurry, hurry which results from our busyness, hurry is the...it is the great enemy of our calling. Let me tell you a little bit more about why I think that. I think that we—it's no surprise to y'all that we as a culture are overscheduled. We're filled up, and it might be with some good stuff. It might be vacation after vacation after vacation. Maybe that's what your summer was full of. I was guilty of that a couple times. I landed one afternoon. I did a couple of loads of laundry, and I took back off the next morning. I was going to do that towards the end of the summer, and I landed on a Sunday night, and I didn't feel good, and I said on Monday morning instead of getting on a plane, "I'm going to take a covid test." And I popped for covid for the first time. And I have to tell you I didn't feel good, right, for a couple days. But the weight that was oddly taken off of my shoulders knowing that I would be in my house for the next four days—it spoke to me. It said something about the pace that I was trying to keep up with. It shouldn't surprise us that hurry is a great enemy of our calling. I heard a preacher recently observe, "If we plant busy, if we plant busyness in our field, then we have given up the options of the fruit that will be produced. If we plant busyness, we are going to reap busyness." That's it. Do not be deceived. Scripture says, "God is not mocked. Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap." If you sow busyness, you're going to reap busyness. And then you say in moments of exhaustion, "I don't want this anymore, I want something better," you have to go backwards and ask, "What do I have to plant in order to get something better?" It turns out that we are actually in charge of our calendars and the commitments that we make. We choose the seed that we plant in our field. Therefore, we are responsible for what comes forth from it. But what this text is trying to teach us today is that the God who calls you is the same God of the Psalms. The God of the Acts of the Apostles is the same God of the Psalms. We cannot do what the authors of Acts talk about without doing what the Psalmist talked about. And if you don't believe me that hurry is the great enemy of our calling, I want to draw your attention to Arthur Boers' work, *Living into Focus*. He cites a study by J. M. Darley and C. D. Batson. The study was conducted with students from Princeton Theological Seminary, so a good 75% of them are solid Presbyterians. The students were sent from one building to another through an alleyway or an aisle. They were to move from one place to another to receive a talk, and they were told either that the talk that they were about to hear was either a talk on the Good Samaritan or about the jobs that were about to be available to them as new Seminary graduates. Now along the way as they made their way from one building to the other, as they went down the alley, there was a person, an actor, positioned right there in the alleyway who was obviously in need of care, in need of medical aid, slumped over in a doorway coughing. Here's the interesting part. a third of the students were told that they had to rush to get from one building to another, you got to get over there as quickly as possible, the speech is about to start and you don't want to miss it.

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Another third of the students were told, “Listen, whenever you get there is fine. Whenever you get there, that's when the talk's going to begin, okay,” And then the final chunk, the final third was told kind of a moderate instruction. “Listen don't dilly dally but whenever you get there, that's when it's going to start. okay. Speaker's waiting on you.” Here's what's interesting about those who made their way through the alleyway between the two buildings. Those who were told that they were in no real hurry, that whenever they got there, the talk would begin—63% of those people helped the person who was in need of medical care in the alleyway. Those who were told, “Listen, don't dilly dally but make your way as purposefully as you can. Whenever you get there, it'll start—about 45% of those folks stopped to give aid. But those who were told to hurry. Those who were told you have to get there or you're going to miss the talk—only one in 10—10% of those who walked that alleyway stopped to give aid to the one who was in need. And Boers explains this is not surprising, or it ought not be. After all, empathy and compassion both need a calm, attentive mind. There is no such thing as hurried compassion. There is no such thing as hurried compassion. I want to tell you, beloved, I think hurry is a child not only of our busyness but also of fear, and you can go look at some of the studies that speak to this as well. When you find yourself moving, walking more quickly, you're also...you're often doing that from a place of fear. As Asher Gray observes, “The faster you're moving, the more you're in fear, and the more you're in fear the more you're thinking about yourself, and the more you're thinking about yourself, the less compassion and kindness you can have for others. There is no love in hurried and stressed. The more you are hurrying, the more that you're stressing, the more you're missing the magic.”

But if hurry is the child of fear, what are we afraid of?

Well, I think maybe we're afraid that we are what we do. I think maybe we have convinced ourselves that we are not beloved because God said so but because of something that we do. It could be noble, what we're doing by the way, very noble. Or, perhaps, fear for us is more of a result of the worry over missing out. Fomo is something that I struggle with a whole lot. I don't want to miss out on the fun thing that's happening here or there or with people that I may or may not even deeply care about. I just want to be there to experience it. We might have fear for ourselves, or we might have fear for those that we care for, for those who we parent. On this morning when we celebrate those who are teaching our children, I wonder what fears we hold for our children and how that impacts how we parent and move through the world—that they won't make a team if we don't sign up for that league as well, that they won't get the scholarship if they don't take this level of classes, that they won't have friends if they don't get to go to that party that we're a little worried about. We're fearful in all sorts of ways. And while I worry some about what this Sunday represents for us, I also think Kickoff Sunday gives us a tremendous opportunity to recenter ourselves in our calling of Christ. As John Mark Comer reflects and as I shared with y'all a couple weeks ago, “Jesus is not asking us to do more. He is asking us to do less with more intention,” which means that spiritual addition necessitates worldly subtraction. Let me say that again. Spiritual addition will necessitate for you and for us worldly subtraction. We are not asking you to add more things without also asking you to take some things away. And we aren't just asking you as a leadership of the church. We think Jesus is calling us not

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simply to add to busy schedules but to unravel ourselves from them so that we might be able to serve Christ more faithfully here and everywhere. I joked with the 8:30 service. Some people show up early for worship because they've already stacked the rest of their Sunday full of other things to do. Others of y'all came to the early Ministry Fair so you're not going to have to hang out after worship, and you can beeline to whatever reservation you made just a little bit earlier than you should have, right, or because you have something you need to get to, right? You are in charge of those decisions. You know that, right? No one is in charge of those decisions and making them for you. I would complain to my counselor back in Georgia about how busy I am, and she would say to me after listening thoughtfully, "And how's that working for you? You know you're in charge of your own calendar, David, right?" I said "No, I'm not in charge. There's 300 people. They all want to meet with me. I have no idea why they want to meet with me, right? I need all this time to prepare for this thing that I'm doing, and then we're doing the thing over here too." And she said, "You're doing all those things by your choice, David."

Beloved I don't want you to worry at all, but if you're going to worry, if you're going to worry, then don't worry about whether your child's going to make the team or get that scholarship. If you're going to worry about something, I would prefer that you worry that doing that extra thing is teaching perhaps your child or your spouse or your friends or your loved ones, it is teaching them that having a completely full schedule with no wiggle room is normal, that hurrying is normal, that being exhausted after a summer of what should have been vacation is normal. It is not. It is what we have fallen into, but it is not normal, because the God who calls you is the same God of the Psalms. We cannot do what the author of Acts asks of us without doing what the Psalmist talked about too. We cannot serve with compassion if we are hurried.

So here's my invitation to you. Perhaps you already know the place in your life that is not getting the compassion it needs because you are too busy. A relationship might have flashed before you when we started talking about that. A task might have flashed. I want to encourage you. Whatever it was that was drawn into your attention this morning, that's a place for you to lean in. It's a place for you to lean in and figure out what needs to be subtracted so that compassion might be added to that place. So spiritual flourishing, spiritual addition is going to necessitate worldly subtraction. I don't want you to walk through that Ministry Fair and say "one more thing." I want you to walk through that Ministry Fair and say, "All right. I'm subtracting this and this and this and this, and I'm going to add this." I could give you a laundry list of things that need the service of the people here, but it's not about that today. Today it is about you discerning the way God is calling you to be about service in and through the Church. The same God that is calling you today to be about the work of the Church will invite you to lie down in a green pasture from time to time beside some still waters to restore your soul. And not just your soul but the soul of the Church and the soul of the world.

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