

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 18, 2024

So, if you were with us during the formation hour, you heard us tell you that this is the beginning of a new thing in the life of our Church, especially, as we study together a brief history of race and Idlewild and then as we receive the vision to be an anti-racist congregation next week. It's just the beginning. It's information for us to receive, Spirit-filled information, and then we begin the work, and that is critically important for us. We are not simply people who are to hear words. We are to hear them, and then we are to respond. So we'll bring that same Spirit with us to the hearing and the proclamation of God's Word this morning. We'll read together from Philippians chapter 2, verses 5 through 11, and then we will hear the thing that God is speaking to us this day. So let us read scripture together.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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

Join me in a moment of prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious Spirit, you are our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. So greet us with your helpfulness in this time and greet us with your hope. Quiet us that we might hear the word you have to speak to us this day, that that word might be communal and personal. Speak your word that we might not simply hear it but 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.

Recently I traveled from Memphis to Atlanta. As you know, as one is making the drive from Memphis to Atlanta, one passes through Birmingham, and one just after passing through Birmingham passes through Pell City, Alabama. So as I traveled from Memphis to Atlanta in my truck, I too passed through Birmingham and not long after Pell City, Alabama. And as I passed through Pell City, Alabama, I saw a sign on the side of the road. It read simply, "Jesus Christ is Lord Over Pell City, Alabama."

And I thought to myself, if Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell City, Alabama, then I should take this exit, because if Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell, City Alabama, no doubt today in Pell City, Alabama, no person will go hungry. And if Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell City, Alabama, no person will be denied access to housing; and if Jesus Christ is Lord of Pell City, Alabama, no person, no person...no person will be excluded from any space within that city because of the color of their skin or the content of their bank account. And if Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell City, Alabama, no one will be denied in that fair place of access to health care. Beyond that, if Jesus Christ is Lord of Pell City, Alabama, walls and fences will be unnecessary there, because no one will live in fear of their neighbor. And if Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell City, Alabama, no person

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will feel loneliness today. No person will feel anxious today. No person will experience despair today. If Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell City, Alabama, every dinner table will be surrounded by family and friends who have been reconciled to each other; and if Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell City, Alabama, no person will be denied the dignity of bodily autonomy. And if Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell City, Alabama, there will be no prisons there, because prisons will not be in the for-profit business. And if Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell City, Alabama, this very day people of every race and every socioeconomic station will gather not in white churches, not in Black churches, but in churches that offer a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, because if Jesus Christ is Lord over Pell City, Alabama, then Pell City, Alabama, must be a place unlike any place we have ever seen.

And as I made my way past the exit of Pell City, Alabama, onto Atlanta, I began to wonder, I began to wonder, is Jesus Christ Lord over Memphis, Tennessee? Is Jesus Christ Lord over Memphis, Tennessee? You can respond if you would like. Is Jesus Christ Lord over Memphis, Tennessee? That was a question that rolled around in my head, because if Jesus Christ is indeed Lord over Memphis, Tennessee, then tomorrow in Memphis, Tennessee, no person will go hungry. And if Jesus Christ is Lord over Memphis, Tennessee, then tomorrow no person will be excluded from any space because of the color of their skin or the content of their bank account. And if Jesus Christ is Lord over Memphis, Tennessee, then tomorrow Black children and white children will receive the same access to education. And if Jesus Christ is Lord over Memphis, Tennessee, everyone regardless of station will have access to the same care and health care. And if Jesus Christ is Lord over Memphis, Tennessee, then perhaps tomorrow its citizens will not fall victim to the malaise which has gripped so many of its populace. Instead, they will stop amplifying narratives that multiply fear and despair; and they will in the place of those narratives become purveyors of hope, not false hope, real hope, the hope that can only come from a deeply held belief in the steadfast love of God that can only be born of the claim that indeed Jesus Christ is Lord over Memphis, Tennessee.

And as I kept going—it's a long drive to Atlanta—I pondered the question a little bit more. As I wondered if Jesus Christ was Lord over Memphis, Tennessee, I began to wonder, "Is Jesus Christ Lord over Idlewild Presbyterian Church?" Because if Jesus Christ is Lord over Idlewild Presbyterian Church, then we are not so much invited into the work that God is calling us to; but, to borrow an old phrase, we are commanded to be about it. And the reality of the in-breaking Lordship of Jesus is that it upends things for the people who get to see it coming. It asks something different of their calendars and of their hearts. It asks that their hearts be broken open, that the very love of God might inhabit them in a brand new way. It asks that they not turn away from things which make them uncomfortable but lean into them. It asks that they not be in love with who they are but who God is calling them to be. And the work of being the people of God is nothing if not difficult. When Paul speaks to the Philippians about what it is that venerates the name of Jesus above every name, he says that although Christ found himself in the form of a human, he didn't regard that as something to be lorded over others, but humbled himself to the point of death—even death on a cross. Lordship is marked by the cross. Nothing about the cross is

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easy, but everything about the cross leads to new life. I love you. You are good people, and I am grateful to be here as one of your pastors; but we need to know that if we are to truly claim that Jesus Christ is Lord over Idlewild Presbyterian Church, then we are embarking upon dangerous, dangerous things. We don't have to. We can claim another way to move forward, one that includes no cross, no discomfort, and will also include no new life. But the calling of Our Lord is one that bears that cross and trusts and believes that God Almighty is bringing something brand new amongst us. Beloved, as I made that drive to Atlanta, I pondered many questions, chief amongst them, "Can we be honest as to whether Jesus Christ is Lord over Idlewild Presbyterian Church?" Because if Jesus Christ is really Lord over Idlewild Presbyterian Church, it will become a place unlike any we have ever seen.

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