

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 25, 2024

Friends, this morning our lesson, our scripture lesson, is from one of Paul's Epistles, but it is not as the bulletin notes from Ephesians 4:1-6 and then 11-16. It's also not what our Thursday email noted which was 1 Corinthians 12:12 and 14. I've been hopping around a good bit this week. It'll make a little more sense to you, I believe, as we dive deeper into this Word. I'm hopping around because Paul weaves the image that is central for us this morning, he weaves it through almost all of his Epistles. And so I was, at different parts of the week, kind of enthralled with one of the different Epistles, and so where I landed was 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, and then moving ahead to 24b through 27. So let us listen for God's word to each of us and to his church this day.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

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

Let us pray.

Spirit of love as you moved across the waters of creation, we pray you might move amongst us this morning. We pray you might quiet us and all voices within us but you. We pray that you might incline our ears, you might open our hearts to hear the word you have for us this day. We pray that you might give us courage and wisdom for the ways in which your word calls us forth. For we ask in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

So, I hopped around a good bit in scripture, particularly in the Epistles, because this image of the body of Christ is really Paul's main teaching mechanism in his writing. He uses the same image in almost all of his letters. He tells the Romans first and then the church in Corinth and then the Galatians and the Ephesians, each of them in different ways. He tells them that they are the body of Christ, and we're so used to this image that we might, if we're not careful, miss how radical this claim that Paul makes is. What he is claiming is Oneness in Christ, equality across all that make up the body. This idea, collectively and personally, would have been and was revolutionary. It was revolutionary to the people in Corinth who would have read this message or heard it read to them. It was revolutionary because it spoke, it taught, over and against the pervading culture, social structure in which the people lived and were trying to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ. It did so communally because there were certainly hierarchies within the

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societies, within the cultures to whom Paul wrote. It did so personally because some of the forebears had taught a separation of quite literally one's own body–mind, and heart and soul and spirit. They were different. So then for Paul to speak of many being one, he was speaking communally, which was radical; and he was speaking about the people themselves. You have been taught that your heart and your mind are of different origins. They will speak differently to you. You've been taught that you are not one, but you are. You are bound up in the beautiful, creative power of God, and not just you personally but you communally. In so doing Paul also is implicating anything in culture, in society, that would articulate a different vision of God and God's people. Anything that would speak to separateness is indicted when Paul speaks to Oneness. And he is not simply speaking it. What he is claiming is that this Oneness that the people experience is actually...is actually the Oneness of God Almighty. Paul claims that what binds the people together is not simply an energy or good will of any kind. It is indeed Jesus the Christ, who through his life and death and resurrection makes all one in the body. What's interesting for the audience that would have heard these Epistles is that they would have known that Paul was a good teacher. He had a great object lesson for them, right, but they would have understood that this lesson was not simply an image for them to hold up. It was an assignment for them to live into. There was not teaching in that day without response. There was not teaching without response. They would have known that if he was describing the Oneness of community, then that Oneness had some sort of purpose in the world, and they were called to live into that purpose. It was image, but it was truly assignment. They would have known that both personally and communally this body was to be the vessel of something they had heard Jesus had spoken about a whole lot, and that is the kingdom of God. They would have known that the body was indeed to be the vessel that carried the in-breaking Kingdom amongst them and in their world. Paul wanted the Corinthians, he wanted the Ephesians, the Galatians, everyone to whom he wrote, he wanted them to be witnesses to this truth in the world. He wanted them to amplify what they had heard or read in the Epistle. They were to carry it with them, and they were to multiply the voice and the truth of this out in the world. I love the way that Pastor David Swanson says it. "It's one thing to be committed to the truth. It is another thing altogether to be purposeful about how to speak it and how to live it truthfully," because what the Corinthians would have known and what we might be able to learn from today is that being the body requires something of us.

And that's where this morning an anti-racist vision for Idlewild meets us. That's where the long work of a special subcommittee and then a Session and now a standing committee greets us this day. Paul was telling the people that something was being asked of them by this image of the body. Here's what Paul was asking of the people and what I believe God is asking of us today. What is asked of us first is that we acknowledge what hinders us from truly being the body. We take note of it, we create a list even, and we say. "These are the narratives, these are the actions, this is the history that keeps us from being the body of Christ now." Now, as good Presbyterians we know what it is that divides us and keeps us from being the body, so we'll say it together all on three. 1 2 3. Thank you Courtney—oh, Mary—Mary and Courtney. Yeah credit where credits due... sin I got to tell you the 8:30 knew what it was, unprompted, okay? Sin is what keeps us from truly being the body together. And what Paul is telling the church in Corinth is you have to

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name that first, and so that's actually where our vision—this anti-racist vision for the Church—that's where it begins. It begins by naming that which keeps us from being the body. Idlewild Presbyterian Church, this is the vision statement now.

Idlewild Presbyterian Church affirms that the Church is called to seek the Kingdom of God. To that end, we confess that racism, as a sin both personal and systemic, keeps us from achieving God's purposes for our congregation and our community. We believe the Gospel calls us to repent of racism and white supremacy and their effects in our church, our institutions, our communities, and our hearts.

Our conviction is rooted in Scripture, which affirms that "there is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God..." (Ephesians 4:4-5), that "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another" (Romans 12:5), that "he who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy" (Proverbs: 28:13), and that we must be "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22).

That would have been assumed for the Corinthians. We must articulate now in our lives and in our community; and not only do we need to name those things, those things which separate us, which keep us from being the body, we also need to confess our roles, understood or not, in them. What we realize is that all of us are participatory in some way, ways that we are perhaps conscious of and not conscious of. If the kingdom has not come upon us and our gathering is not the fullest foretaste of the Kingdom, that means there is still work to be done. Then we have to confess the ways in which we have done that as a church.

So continuing in the third paragraph—

We also confess that as a worshiping community and as individuals we have both participated in and benefitted from racist systems that engender inequality and oppression. About this we cannot be silent. Thus, we now commit that we will confront and confess our church's role in these racist systems, holding each other accountable as we do the hard work of disentangling ourselves from the false doctrine of white supremacy.

Here's what the people in Corinth would have had to do. When they heard that they were one body in Christ Jesus, they would have thought about in an instant all of the things, all of the narratives and the ways in which they have been living that they would then have to disentangle themselves from. And that was going to be difficult work because the belief in division, the belief in hierarchy, it was so entrenched in their society. They would have thought to themselves we have to redo everything. We have to redo everything in order to do this, which might be hard for us as a church. If you were a part of the Forum last week, over 100 people attended in Montgomery Hall. I think 125 or so have watched the live stream of a brief history of race and Idlewild that happened last week, you might have noticed something very conspicuous but something we didn't speak to, okay. Our church has done some significant work. It has done

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some significant work, and it was participatory in some really significant ways; but what you might have noticed is that 1968 was the most impactful year of that work. And even that, even in that year, we weren't all pulling in the same direction. There was even division then. What you probably don't know, because you haven't mined the archives or the minutes of the Session, is that the last substantive discussion of race happens in our minutes around 1980. We are some 44 years away now. So when Jeanene took the pall and placed it over the rope, you might have said to yourself, "How did we cover it up? What do you mean?" Well, I would say that since we know this is not the reflection of the diversity of the kingdom of God that we will experience, then what we have done is simply not speak to or do substantive work in a very long time. That doesn't mean that we weren't about that work in many different particular ministries of our church. But what it does mean is that in ways that were detailed in our Session and across our leadership, we were not speaking to issues of race. For some reason 1980 is a line of demarcation for us... until 2022 when the Session begins to do some work. We'll get to that in just a second.

Another thing that Paul is calling us to, after we confess, is to commit to change. This one should be much more in our wheelhouse. If you watched any of the sermons or if you were present for any of the sermons this summer, whether here or in the gym, where we talked about reformation. We ended with a conversation about what it means to be reformed, and what we realized was our deep connection to and belief in, belief in the idea that God is forming and reforming us all the time to be clearer and clearer reflections of Christ. We are people in the Reformed tradition, so we believe, we claim, that God is not done with us, which means that we can...we can be reformed even now.

This is the fourth paragraph—

In our historic commitment to being the church reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God (Book of Order, F. 2.02), we will trust the Spirit of God to shape our worship, liturgy, and formation in ways that allow us to better resemble the Beloved Community. We commit individually and collectively to an ongoing process of learning how racism and white privilege operate in our world. Finally, we commit to engage with and support other communities in Memphis in working toward this shared vision.

We will not simply believe that we Idlewild Presbyterian Church are the body of Christ by ourselves, but we will commit to being in relationship in ways that we have not been, or we have not been for a long time, because we will as the church in Corinth would have, we will...we will remember what it is that binds us as the body.

This is the final paragraph—

In this work, we will remember what the Lord requires of us, which is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). As we live into this vision, we will seek to embody the oneness of the Church, demonstrate through our love our identity as disciples of Jesus (John 13:35), and truly become a place where all who enter find a home.

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As Belle Hooks puts it in *Killing Rage and Ending Racism*. “Beloved Community, we believe, is not formed by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.”

The early Church in Corinth would have understood the calling that it was to be the body of Christ. They would have understood that it was not simply an image but an assignment. As Davis Swanson continues, “We are witnesses to the truth. Our primary task is not to argue or debate. We are to double down on the truth, and we are to pursue it strategically. We can never forget that we are before anything else witnesses to the truth (lower case t) and to the ultimate TRUTH (Capital T T).” What the people in Corinth would have known is that a vision is only a vision, a vision is only a vision, unless there are practical implications in the world and in your life.

That brings me to a group that you may have heard of. Who is familiar with the JEDI? Will you raise your hand if you're familiar with— this is in the church context—if you're familiar with the JEDI here at Idlewild Presbyterian Church, okay? All right, a handful, that's good. JEDI was a special subcommittee called together in January of 2022 by your Session. They were charged on behalf of the Session with creating a vision for what it would mean for us to be a community committed to anti-racism, not just a vision but also policies as well. The JEDI got to name themselves. JEDI stands for Jesus, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. I want to tell you who made up the JEDI: Noah Brooks, Lee Bruno, Delois Cunningham, Virginia Evans, Steve Haynes, Cliff Johnson, Jessica Joshi, Perry Magness, Julie Markham, and Mary McIntosh. I served also. To me this JEDI, actually for us, is a wonderful example of how we can be the body as Idlewild Presbyterian Church. Every Sunday after worship for on average 90 minutes, we met. For four months we met. We took Easter Sunday off. Besides that we gathered every Sunday. We began with research and with prayer. We grounded ourselves in scripture every time we gathered, and then we began to do the work of what it means to create a vision. And so we argued and we wrestled and we prayed and we wrote. You might think five paragraphs would not have taken 5 months, but it did. It took every bit of that time to develop prayerfully and faithfully the vision that you'll receive as you depart the Sanctuary today. Five paragraphs, that's all. Except it wasn't all, because when we had gotten done with the difficult work of discerning what it meant for us to truly be the body of Christ, then we handed it off to Session. I got to moderate those conversations as well. And Session took it in the late spring of 2022 and wrestled with it and shaped it, and then in October of 2022, it adopted this Vision that you will receive. It did so after doing the difficult work of being the body. Being the body is messy. Being the body is slow. I was thinking about this week how uncomfortable it was for me to sleep from age 9 to 14. That's when I was experiencing most of my growing pains, particularly in my legs. They would ache when I slept at night. Maybe some of y'all had growing pains that were similar. Every night I'd wake up in the middle of the night, and I'd have to go and see my dad. He said, “It's going to be okay; they're going to pass.” There was a time when I was 11 when I saw my uncle John—he is 6 '4, my father 5' 10— and I thought, “These growing pains will result in a 6 '4” David Powers, and

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they will be completely worth it.” I settled somewhere between my father and my uncle, right, but the point is it's painful to grow. It's slow work to grow. It's generational work to shift the focus of what it means to be the body of Christ together.

And that is what the JEDI and then the Session have done.

We have asked to grow and change here. We ought not be surprised when it challenges us and makes us uncomfortable. We ought not be surprised when the gathered people of God pull and push and argue and wrestle, because the work of growth is slow but faithful. And our work is to continue to be grounded, be rooted in the very spirit of God. Paul desired that for the early Church, for the Romans and the Corinthians and the Ephesians and the Galatians to be witnesses to the truth and to grow together day after day after day after day. Paul was challenging them with this image, assigning them the work of being the body; and I believe that is what Paul is doing this day. Being the body together is difficult, but it's also honest work. It's beautiful work, and ultimately it's life-giving work.

So today the vision is given to you. Leadership cannot bring this Vision to fruition without your engagement in being the body faithfully. You have been called here to Idlewild for a purpose. You are here on the 25th of August, 2024, to be the body. Each of you individually are one body together. So today the vision is given to you. How might we, how might we respond? How might we be open to the difficult and beautiful, the slow and faithful work of being the body, because as Paul says to that early church, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

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