

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, September 15, 2024

Friends, this day we have come to worship God together, to hear God's word read and proclaimed together, so let us join in the spirit of prayer.

Gracious and loving Spirit, fall fresh upon us in these moments. Let your spirit quiet us, oh God, that we might hear the word you have for us this day, and that in hearing your word we might be called to response. I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts might be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

So, Friends, this day we begin a four-part sermon series entitled Behind the Bulletin. If you are a lifelong Idlewilder or if you've been in Presbyterian churches all your life, then this might be a sermon series that you are familiar with lots of the parts of. We are going to be moving through the major movements of our bulletin, okay, so if you're new, if you haven't been a Presbyterian forever, we'd love for you to learn something brand new about what it is and why it is we worship in the ways that we do. A few weeks ago I referenced a little line in the bulletin—it's on the back page, it's right above our staffing—where it speaks to the ministers of the church, and it says Ministers: All the members of Idlewild Presbyterian Church. And I'm not going to say who, but a few of y'all came out in the receiving line and said, "I've never seen that before. I think you put that in there this week just for us." And I said, "No, it's always been there. It preceded me, okay. Lots of churches have this." What that made clear to me, though, is we can see things week after week after week after week and actually not truly see them, right? And so our hope is, whether you're a lifelong Presbyterian or brand new to the faith, these next four weeks as we study what it means to Gather, to Proclaim, to Respond, and to Be Sent in the Spirit of God, we might learn together a brand new thing. We begin this day by Gathering. We Gather in the Name of God. We Gather in God's Name. That's the heading in our bulletin, the first one.

Hebrews, chapter 10 is going to help center our time as we wrestle with what it means to be God's gathered people here. Hebrews 10: 19 through 25. Let us listen together for God's Word to each of us and to God's Church.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

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

So, over the next four weeks we are going to study the movements of Reformed Liturgy. Reformed Liturgy. You might be familiar with that phrase. Liturgy is the structure of public worship. It is what you see in your Bulletin. Now while many of the parts don't change each

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week, you need to know that a good bit of work has gone into the Liturgy for this particular morning. Parts have either been composed or discovered; music has been selected thoughtfully, often weeks and weeks before this service or before any service. I've gone away, and other preachers have spent time preparing to understand how it is we are to proclaim God's word in this place. Lots of work has gone in, and that's appropriate when we talk about liturgy, because liturgy comes from an ancient Greek word, leitourgia, and that word means—woodenly translated—means the work of the people. Liturgy means the work of the people, one word to five, right? What we are doing here is, actually, we're beginning to work together. We don't just come to simply absorb. We come to take action and be a part of what it is that is happening in this place. The first bit of our work we know has taken place before we have gotten here. While we see Gather in God's Name as the first main heading, what all of us, all of us who have prepared for you to join us this day know is that there has been a good bit of work that's been done on your part before you walked into the doors today, especially on a rainy Sunday morning when bed is super cozy, right, when there's all sorts of reasons why you could just stay at home. There has been work that has been done for you to be here. Perhaps some of you had to make sure you picked up the dry cleaning yesterday before the dry cleaner closed, so you could have something spiffy to wear this morning, right? Some of you woke up this morning to the smell of coffee made by your beloved, right? Others of you stayed out a little bit too long on the Grove. I would say you were staying and watching Tennessee play late night, but they win 71 to nothing. now, so that doesn't have to happen, right? Things happen in our lives. Some of you are raising children and they had a bad night last night. Some of you, your work this past week was stressful, and it would be just as easy for you to stay home this morning, but you got up and you prepared yourself and you made your way here. I was talking to a friend of mine. She remembered a time when she had a two and a four-year-old, and they had had a terrible week. They were having a terrible season, actually. Sleep was not coming as easily to them as they would have hoped. She remembers one particular Sunday morning when she and her husband were struggling to get the kids to get ready and go to Church, and she looked at him, and she said, "I am too tired to go. Let's just stay home." And he poured a little more coffee in her cup, and he said, "I think they let us sit down when we get there, and they have Nursery Services as well." "The devil works hard on Sunday morning," a preacher once said, right? So many of you have done a lot of work just to get here, and then we invite you into even more work—the work of the people. If you were here before the hour, then you heard our beautiful Prelude on the organ this morning. The Prelude is not simply the first musical movement in our worship; it is a time for you to transition in body and in spirit from all that has happened outside of these walls before you arrived this morning, to transition so that you might be fully present here right now. and then following our Prelude, we call ourselves to worship. This is a particular movement that we are purposeful with every single week. We believe that we are called to worship by our creator and indeed by Jesus Christ. And so when we call ourselves to worship each week in corporate voice responsively, we are echoing the call of Christ to come, to be together in community, and to worship together. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says it this way. "Therefore my brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the New and Living Way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is through his flesh) and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full

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assurance of faith.” That great high priest, the one who has called us here, is indeed Christ Jesus our Lord. And so we echo that call every week. It centers us. It sets apart this time differently from all the other times throughout the week. And then as you're standing, you are invited into song, and what is that supposed to do? It is supposed to help you connect with a part of your brain and a part of your soul that only music can connect with. And sometimes it's a familiar hymn that you've heard many times, and sometimes it's brand new to you. And it doesn't matter if you know all the words or if you're learning them for the first time. What matters is that you hear the voices of the people around you lifting praise to our Savior together.

And then we move to perhaps my favorite part of the worship service, the confessional sequence. You should know not all of these sermons are just going to go through each of the parts individually, but we're at the beginning. We're going to learn each of these parts together. This confessional sequence—the author of the epistle, I think, understood the need for this. The author says this, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” And then in verse 24 the author says this, “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and to good deeds.” The confession is a provocation. It is our opportunity to be provoked to goodness, to a higher way of moving through the world, one that is a clear reflection of Christ. Our confession, our confession is words of truth meant to provoke us to be more faithful and righteous in our living, to provoke one another to love and to good deeds. How often in your week do you have someone pull you aside and provoke you to goodness? Provoke you to love? I was a part of this workout group back in Georgia. I got invited into it. I didn't understand what we were, what I was getting into. We would work out at 6:00 a.m. one day a week together, kind of similar to our running club right now. If you want to join our running club—5:45a over at Overton Park. Similar to that but also very, very different. I'd never heard of AMRAP. Do you all know what that is? As many reps as possible. So these guys were in shape, and I was not. What we would do for an hour is as many reps of whatever torturous exercise they decided we were going to do that day. So we would do squats or burpees, all around a quarter mile track, or we would run or we would do whatever they had decided; and that was a really good workout, and we would get done, and it would be about 7:00 in the morning, and then we'd sit down together in a circle. We began to stretch together. On my first week I was so tired. And then they started talking to each other. And they began a particular type of conversation together. They began in a circle to confess that which they were struggling with in their lives that week. And I looked around and said, “I'm in the wrong workout group right now.” These men, they happen to all be men, these men in a circle as the sun rose began to share what they were most struggling with in their life right now. One of them said on that first week, “I've been really angry this week. Something happened in my family—I can't get over it and I'm just...every push-up we did this morning I was trying to push out the anger. I'm struggling with anger right now.” Another one talked about jealousy of something that their friend had accomplished that they hadn't quite yet. Over the weeks, the beginning weeks, I began to hear all these confessions. People would talk about their addictions, whether it was to alcohol or to pornography. They would mention the ways in which they were struggling, the sins that they felt like had gripped them, all around a circle when we were exhausted, tired from our

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exercise. I'd never been a part of a group that confessed to each other, or I hadn't made the connection that I was part of a group that confessed to each other. I'd certainly never experienced something as...as raw as what I did around that circle. But something started to happen in that circle of men. Something happened specifically. I think, at least two things were happening when people would confess what it was the sin that they were struggling with to that group. First of all they were entrusting it to their neighbors, their brothers in this instance, to hold for them and to pray for them as well. They were saying this is the thing that is too heavy for me to carry. I need you to carry it for me and pray for me about it. That happened, and then something else happened for the one that would confess. All of a sudden that sin seemed to have less and less and less grip upon them. That didn't always happen. It wasn't a magical circle in that way, right, but it did happen. The more and more we were open to sharing honestly what it was we were struggling with, the more and more—you could call it the Spirit of God—began to work within us and around us. And I would get texts during the week about something that I had named in that circle. They'd say, "How are you doing? It's Wednesday. Tell us how you're doing." And I would do the same to others. I thought that was the first group of people that I'd ever practiced that with, and then I realized that that's at least part of what we're trying to do together every single time we gather. Now the words of the prayer of confession, they might not resonate with you every single week, or in a given week only a line or two might resonate with you. That's not the point. The point is that every week in our liturgy in the midst of our work together, we say that we are gripped in ways that we can scarcely name by powers that would lead us away from grace and peace and love in the world, that would lead us away from Christ. We confess before God and one another the ways in which we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; and then we create this space, this silence if you will, to fill in all the small ways that we dare not name in front of our neighbors in our pew families, but that we need God to know, because God already does. And what we believe is that something begins to happen in that confession. First of all we commend that sin to our God, and even if they don't know it, we commend it to the neighbors in our pew, right? And our hope is that if we show up week after week after week after week, something will begin to loose within our spirits around that which could divert us from the path of Christ. And so when we are assured of our pardon, we are not assured that whatever that sin is has been lifted out of our lives. We are assured that pardon is coming. It is already here, and healing is on the way. And it might not happen for you this Sunday, and it might not be next or the next or the next, but we believe that God is working. God is working healing and forgiveness into our lives. There is a power that happens in our Gathering in God's Name.

I've recently rediscovered a love that I have for podcasts. I was away for Labor Day weekend, and a buddy of mine shared about three or four of them. I used to listen to him all the time. I stopped for a while. Zach Bryan took up most of my Spotify listening, but I'm back onto some podcasts, and one of my favorite ones recently is one called Hidden Brain. Shankar Vedantam does it. Are y'all familiar with this? If not, you should listen to—well really any of the Hidden Brains you want to. Right now, though, they're doing a series called You 2.0. It's this idea of how we remake ourselves or, through the lens of faith, how we allow the Spirit of God to remake us. This recent episode detailed a professor from the University of Chicago, Nicholas Epley. Nicholas was writing a dissertation, a paper I should say, on the importance of human

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connection. The title of the episode is The Gift of Other People, and he was writing this article about how we need each other to actually be fully ourselves. We need the love of a community to fully sense deeply that we are loved. He tells a story of one morning getting on the subway in New York and heading, or, excuse me, in Chicago, and heading into work. And he's making notes preparing to publish this article about the importance of other people, but he has his hat down low and his headphones on, and he's looking down at his notes as he writes about the gift of other people. And then he looks up, and he sees that everyone else—some of them even though it's early in the morning—have their sunglasses down and on. They almost all have something in their ears, and he looks around. Everyone's reading or distracted. No one is actually enjoying the gift of other people, so he says, “Tomorrow I'm going to do an experiment. I'm coming in here and I'm going to start a conversation with somebody.” So he gets on the subway the next morning, and he finds his target, and he walks over during one of the stops, and he sits down beside this woman, and he strikes up a conversation. And it's awkward and it's weird, and the way he describes it is ‘thinking it would be a 5-minute conversation ends up being a 40-minute conversation during the entire commute that they were on.’ And she got up and she left at her stop, and he sat there. And what washed over him was the feeling of the gift of other people. He felt like he knew more from talking to her. He felt more connected to her. He felt known because he had gotten to share a little bit about who he was, and she had gotten to share about who she was. I was listening to this podcast, and it reminded me of a book that was part of our political science curriculum back at Presbyterian College, one that y'all are probably familiar with. It's a 2001 work, Robert Putnam's work, Bowling Alone. What Epley is able to name in his work is how we are surrounded by so many people, but often we are so alone. And what he finds in his research as he introduces all these other studies is that as people are invited into these studies, invited to be connected to other people, invited to have conversations with strangers on the subway or on the bus or at a restaurant, what he finds over and over again is that the people who initiate contact and the people who are contacted and have conversations both feel blessed by the interaction. Both feel more seen, less

lonely. Y'all know almost 10 years ago now our friends over in England named loneliness as a Public Health crisis. They created a Minister of Loneliness. Y'all are familiar with this, yeah. What we have in our country is not so different. We have a ton of people and a lot who feel really alone. I know I've felt that way before. Perhaps, you are honest enough to say you have as well. Mother Teresa says the greatest problem in our world is that we have forgotten that we belong to one another. That's why I think actually focusing on Gathering is important for us. I think it was important for the epistle writer as well. I think the epistle writer knew something that it took a psychologist in the 21st century to help us rediscover—that is that being together is meaningful. Gathering together actually can change us and does. So when the epistle writer says, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, and let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds and not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another,” I think the epistle writer is putting their finger on something we need to be reminded of as well—that we are bound together. We are bound together. We belong to each other. You know what strikes me when I read the epistle writer who said...when they say, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,” it reminds me of who the epistle writer was writing to. The Hebrews were a people in their community who were

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beginning to fracture. If you go back and you look at the history of the epistle, what you'll see is a community of people who are bound together for a time for an experiment of sorts, who have begun to separate. They have begun, as one commentator described it, "to move to their own corners of the world, perhaps back to the places from which they have come or perhaps simply away from where they have been." And so when the epistle writer says to them, "You have to continue to be together, to gather together," he is saying for the vitality of who you are, "do not follow in the ways of separation that are in this world." You've seen your neighbors do it, don't do it. Gather together, "provoke one another to love and to good deeds." So then I think verse 23 when we talk about "holding fast to the confession of our hope," what I think the epistle writer is saying to us is that every time we gather, we are claiming the hope of at least two things. We are claiming the hope of the truth of the Gospel that everything we're talking about is actually true. We're claiming the hope of the power of the body of Christ. Every week when we come into these walls, we Gather in God's Name together.

Here's what I want you to think about next Sunday whether it's rainy or sunny, whether you stayed on the Grove too long or watching the Tigers play, whether it's been a long week, whether the kids are in good shape or not, I want you to think about how your presence here is a confession of the hope that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is true and that we, indeed, are the body of Christ together. I'm grateful that we have this space and a great high priest who has made welcome each of us, given us a community to love us and to support us, to provoke us to love and good deeds.

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