

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, September 29, 2024

Friends, as we continue in our worship of the Lord this day, and as we prepare to hear the reading and proclamation of God's word, let us join our hearts and minds in prayer together. Let us pray.

For a few days now, oh Spirit, we have watched as the rain has fallen upon this good creation and nourished it. We have watched, and we have come this morning hopeful, that your spirit might fall fresh upon us this morning and do the same sort of work within us. So fall fresh and bring a sense of peace. Fall fresh and bring a sense of comfort. Fall fresh and bring a sense of challenge as we hear your word. And as we hear it, may we be called to 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.

If you're joining us for the first time in a little while, we are in the midst of a brief sermon series, a four-week sermon series we've entitled Behind the Bulletin. Some of y'all are cradle Presbyterians, cradle Idlewilders even, and so you know all the movements of worship, but it's seldom that we spend intentional time moving through them and learning why we do what we do. And so that's what we've done the last couple of weeks. We began with Gathering in God's Name. That's the first movement there. Gathering in God's Name is the first main heading in your bulletin there. The second one, we tackled last week, which is Proclaiming God's Word. We proclaim God's word together. This morning we focus on the third movement of worship, and that is Respond to God's Word. What does it mean for us to be a people who respond to the word of God? I've reminded you each Sunday that this movement of worship is called liturgy, and that if we were to translate that word from the Greek, liturgy means the work of the people. So every movement of worship is actually us engaging in the work of discipleship, okay. This one—for some of y'all who have been waiting for something to do with your hands—this one really is where the work will significantly begin for you. After we have heard the word proclaimed, how is it we respond? The scripture that will center us this morning is from the Gospel according to John. We're going to read from the 15th chapter, verses 1- 11. These are the words of Jesus to each of us, to you, and indeed to all creation. Let us hear them this morning.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

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

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Draw your attention first to the third verse of this Gospel. “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you,” Jesus tells the gathered group, the disciples. Important for us as we begin our reflection on what it means to respond, because what Jesus is saying is you have heard the word proclaimed to you. Now I’m about to tell you what comes next. Verse three is the acknowledgment of the importance of how this scripture plays into response. Just like we last week talked about what it meant to receive the proclamation of God’s word, so too the disciples have received that proclamation as well. And Jesus is insinuating to them, yea teaching them, that the word is not simply to be reflected upon, but it is to be acted upon. Our movements are rather simple. We have really four main movements that take place week after week after week under the title of Respond to God’s Word. One of them actually precedes it by just a little bit. It’s right after the proclamation of the word when we sit in silent reflection. Sometimes that reflection is 15 seconds, and sometimes it’s more like a minute, right, but that’s actually the beginning of the cultivation of our response. We believe that the Spirit kind of settles within us in those few moments, helping those words to become deeply rooted, the words that we have just heard proclaimed to us. Then, as one we rise together, and we speak words of truth— that which we can affirm, maybe not individually every single week, but always corporately. Then we pray together, not just for each other and not just for our church, but for the world, and then we practice gratitude together. We offer something of the very fruit of our labor. We do it in simple ways, these few simple movements, because we believe what Oswald Chambers shared, which is that “the greatest hindrance to our spiritual lives is that we often only look for big things to do.” And so we practice simple things here—sitting in quiet, joining our voices together in speaking truth, praying, and then offering gratitude. They’re not grandiose. They are simple practices for us that prepare us to move out into the world. As Jesus was preaching to the disciples too, he was also preparing them. He was letting them know that something was happening within them as they heard the reading and the proclamation of God’s word. That’s something that we believe too, that something is actually happening amongst us when we gather together to worship God. He told them, paraphrasing Jesus here, “You are growing as you hear this word. You might not sense it now, but God is doing work in you that is helping you to grow as a disciple. Let me give you an image that might be helpful for you. I am the vine; you are the branches. The God that I will call Abba, father, that God is the vine grower. The growth might not even be recognizable to you, as it often is unrecognizable when it’s a branch and a vine, but it is happening within you all the time. That is actually the work of the spirit of God moving through you.” So Jesus tells the disciples this, and he says, “Not only are you growing, but you are being pruned as you grow. In fact, how about I start with myself,” Jesus says. “The father cuts away, prunes all within me that is not good and fruitful and bearing fruit in the world, and it’s the same with you. Everything that is bearing good fruit is tended, and everything that is not is cut off.”

Often, some traditions in Christendom want to equate this or make a parallel here, draw a conclusion that Jesus is talking about a group of people who bear good fruit and a group of people who do not bear good fruit, and a group of people therefore get sent off to burn forever, and a group of people go to heaven forever. But what Jesus, using himself is an example, first

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says is that we are all of this...we're both of these things. We are branches that bear good fruit. We are branches that do not bear fruit.

I remember driving down 441 from Athens, Georgia, to Madison, Georgia. It was early on in my time being a pastor there, and it's really a rural, 34 minute drive from Five Points and Athens to the church where I used to serve, okay? And I remember being startled one day and pulling over to the side of the road when there was a fire in a forest, a pine forest, just off the side of the road. I stopped I called the non-emergency line of 911, and I said, "There is a fire that I think y'all need to get out here and control," and they said, where are you, and I said I'm at such and such Crossroads and they said don't worry about that "That's a permitted fire." And I'd never heard that before. Maybe some of y'all grew up in somewhere other than Midtown Memphis, and so you know what a prescribed burn is, right. I didn't at the time. The idea is this—that if a forest is to be as healthy as it possibly can be, then every once in a while the one who tends that place, that wilderness, needs to be thoughtful about putting flame to it. And that flame moves low and slow across the ground, and it burns off every branch that's fallen from those trees, every bit of pine needle that has fallen from those trees. Burns off all the undergrowth that actually wasn't intended to be there, or by its being there will hinder in some way the forest being as healthy as it could be. And so this fire makes its way through and what it does is, it clears a path. It clears a path for the forest that remains to grow healthier and stronger. I was thinking about that moment when I called that emergency line, and I had a prescribed burn described to me over the phone, because I think that's something akin to what Jesus is saying about the work of the vine grower. There are things in you, things in me, things in us that are not bearing the fruit that we desire them to bear. They are not producing the fruit of the spirit of God. And those things a thoughtful vine grower prunes and collects together and burns, so that that which is healthy and good might grow healthier, might grow more fruitful over time. To me...to me that is the fire of God burning away all the dry underbrush of our spiritual lives. That's what I think the Gospel of John is describing to us. This pruning and this care needs to happen, because, Jesus tells the disciples, they have a purpose in the world. And their purpose is not simply to be an insulated little group that gets to follow along the word of God incarnate. Their purpose, Jesus is very clear with this, is to bear fruit in the world. "I have appointed you," Jesus says a little bit past the scripture that we read this morning, "I have appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." The disciples, as they are attached to this image, attached to Jesus Christ, they are to bear fruit because that is what God is accomplishing through them. Later on we get an insight into what those fruits are. We did a sermon series on this a couple of years ago. The Fruit of the Spirit of God. We've also done some other studies as well. Y'all probably know them by heart. Last week the answer was Jesus, and I gave, prompted y'all for the answer, and I got nothing. Okay? This week I'll just ask for the first fruit of the spirit of God that comes in scripture. We'll say it all together—one, two, three. Thank you, yes, and we got some out here, yeah, yeah, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, self-control. These are the fruit of the spirit of God. Jesus is not speaking about some undetermined fruit. Jesus is speaking about specific gifts that come from the very Spirit of God, that apart from Christ we absolutely cannot bear. So when we talk about the mission of the disciples, they had a purpose—to remain, to abide in Christ so that they could bear love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and

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gentleness and faithfulness and generosity and self-control in the world. They were to hear the message that he had to proclaim to them, and then they were to respond by going into the world and bearing that fruit, because Jesus knew something about fruit. He knew something about fruit that they probably knew as well. He knew that the fruit of the spirit of God was not meant just for the disciples. It was actually meant for everyone and to be shared. He knew that fruit could go rotten over time if you think that you're the only one who's supposed to enjoy it. He knew something that we would...that would be coined for us in a contemporary manner a couple thousand years later. It's one of my favorite sayings in Alcoholics Anonymous, "to keep it you have to give it away." The fruits of the spirit of God are very much like that sobriety, that new life. To keep love, to keep joy, to keep patience, to keep kindness, to keep gentleness, to keep faithfulness, and generosity, and self-control, you have to share it out in the world. You've already been cleansed by the word of God, and in that cleansing you have been prepared to bear God's fruit in the world. Here's the powerful part that Jesus knew as well, and he says it very clearly: "My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. You can glorify the vine grower simply...simply by bearing fruit in the world; and not only that, you can experience a joy that you can experience in no other way by responding to the word that I have given you." Jesus says. You can experience a type of joy that will elude many others. He says in verse 11—we just read it—"I have said these things to you. In fact why I'm telling you about this, disciples, is so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." There is a type of joy that you will experience when you bear the fruit of God in the world that cannot be experienced from any other source.

We practice here. We talked about this last week and the week before. We practice here so we can go out there. This is rehearsal for what it means to live out in the world. So if we're practicing what it means to respond, if we're rehearsing what it means to respond, we're going to do it in some simple ways. We're going to sit with the word for a while in quiet. We're going to stand and join our voices in speaking truth together. We're going to pray together for each other and for the world, and then we're going to practice gratitude for all that God has done.

Here's my hope for you—that you might as you move through this week, imagine those branches in your life that are bearing good fruit. What is it that is most reflecting love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and gentleness and faithfulness and generosity and self-control? What is it? What is it at work? What is it in your relationships? What is it in your service that is helping you to bear that fruit? And then by contrast, what branch has withered, and it would be better if it was simply collected up by a thoughtful farmer, a thoughtful vine grower, and it was moved away, burned even?

The God that we know in Jesus Christ is the source of the nourishment that allows us to bear fruit in the world. May you know that that God is working in you, helping you to grow, pruning you to be a clearer and clearer reflection of the love and joy and peace, and all the fruits that are of the spirit of God.

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