

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, September 7, 2025

Friends, as we prepare our hearts and our minds to hear the word read and proclaimed, I invite you to close your eyes, get comfortable in the pews, and take a deep breath in with me,

Breathe it out slowly.

Take another deep breath in.

Breathe it out slowly.

Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

And join me in prayer.

Holy Spirit, you're as close to us as our very next breath. May we sense your nearness in this time. May you quiet within us any voice but your own this day that we might hear your word for us, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. 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.

Our scripture lesson this day comes from the book of Acts. We are in the sixth chapter. We're going to read together verses 1- 7.

Acts 6: 1-7. Let's listen together for God's word.

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 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 in some ways this is really forward. An issue arises in this young community trying to figure out what it looks like to follow in the ways of Jesus. Someone sees the issue. They bring the

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issue to the attention of the community, and in response the community sees to the need, to the issue. In this case the issue is one of justice. There's inequity in the distribution of the physical care of the community of food being given to widows, Hellenist widows. Some are being neglected. Not all are being treated fairly in the community. And I'm not saying that the 12 disciples were Presbyterians. We didn't quite exist. But I would say that their first response was to create a committee to deal with the issue that was brought to their attention. In verse three, "Select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the spirit and of wisdom whom we may appoint to this task."

They are telling the community, "You know your people. Pick out seven of y'all. And don't just pick the ones that say yes to everything. Okay? Pick pick the ones that are full of the spirit. Okay? You all know those people when you meet those people, right? Not that they are just spirited, but they are filled with the Holy Spirit of God. And the spirit has many different fruits, right? So that can look differently, but you know your people. So pick seven of them. We need...we need people who are patient and kind. We need people who are faithful and generous. We need people who love others really, really well. Pick them. But don't just pick them for those characteristics. Pick them because they're wise. You know the people who are wise in your midst. You know the people who talk a lot. And then you know the people who when they speak, they communicate a wisdom that's beyond them. Okay, pick those folks. We need only seven. Bring them before us. We're going to pray over them. Lay hands on them. They will fulfill the task." "We've been given a task of our own," the disciples say, right? "We aren't supposed to do this particular kind of work. Each of us has a different sort of calling. We have been called to proclaim the gospel, to preach, and we've got a lot of preaching that we need to do." And the result, once the seven are selected and brought forward and prayed over, and they have hands laid upon them, the result is that the widows are cared for. They receive adequate sustenance for their bodies. And that is the point after all of the community of faith. that a care is named, a need brought to the attention of the community, and the care is provided for, the need satisfied.

But what I love is that that's not the only thing that God gives in the story in this text. Notice further in verse four, while the community was selecting these deacons—by the way, this is the calling of the first class of deacons. While the community was selecting these folks, the other ministries didn't stop. We, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word. They continued in their work as well, the disciples did. And another result, we're made aware of another result in verse 7. "And the word of God continued to spread, and the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem." Here's what I imagine. I imagine those early disciples were pretty good preachers, right? They had had an experience of the living and incarnate God in their midst. When you hear somebody who's had an experience of Christ, it moves you. That's how

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our hearts are constructed, right? And I imagine that a great number of these disciples that increased in number greatly in Jerusalem came from good preaching. But I imagine there were others. I imagine there were others who really aren't 'preaching sort of people.' They've heard enough preaching. And so they're much more interested in seeing how a community acts than they are in hearing what the preacher preaches. And so what I imagine is that as the widows were cared for, as the food was distributed in a way that all could be satisfied, there were others who paid attention not to the preaching, but to the way the community cared for those within it, who saw that there were hungry among them, and they gave them food. I imagine this is only one small slice of what it meant to be this early community of followers in the book of Acts. I imagine they saw others gathering to serve in their community, not just within the faithful community. And I imagine that a great number of those disciples who came to know Christ in Jerusalem, they appreciated the preaching. But what transformed their lives, saved them, was the community and the way the community lived out its calling.

So this issue arises and the community responds. And if, then, we are to learn anything from the book of Acts and this story, then ought we not pay attention to what the issues are in our community of faith and in the greater Memphis community and across the world? And it'd be easy if there was one issue. There are widows who are not being given the right amount of food. But we know because we move through the world that there are many, that the issues of our community, the 1165 people who call this place home, and the issues of our greater Midtown community and the greater Memphis area—they are many and they are varied. There are physical needs. There are hungry people, people without shelter. There are spiritual needs. There are people who have not been told that they carry the very light of their creator within them. There are emotional needs, struggle, anxiety, people with depression, with loneliness, who feel unloved.

The issues within our community and in our neighborhood are many and they are varied. And so what happens when there are so many issues in the church and in the world? How do we respond to the needs that are presented, brought to our attention? When we ask that question, what we're really asking is a question of call. It's a word that hopefully a lot of y'all are familiar with. If you're not, call is our understanding of the spirit of God placing something on our minds, on our hearts, on our souls that draws us into service of God in the world. Call. What are we called to do in response to the many and varied issues in our church, in the world? How are we called to be in this time? Often, I would say this is where the issue becomes difficult. How do I know when there are so many different needs? How do I know what I am called to do? There is so much to do, what is mine to do?

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I was blessed on Tuesday evening of this week to attend the Mystic in the Green Room of Crosstown Concourse. Show of hands for those who are familiar with the Mystic. Okay, very good. If you're not, if you're not, the most recent Mystic is available on Apple Podcast. It's on Spotify, too. Spotify, all your streaming platforms. The Mystic is a gathering of...a gathering of faith people across faiths to discuss the most important issues of the day. And our very own pastor Joshua has been a member of the panel of the Mystic for several years now. I attended on Tuesday because it was Joshua's last time of facilitating the conversation within the Mystic, and I wanted to be there, and a lot of people wanted to be there, right? Joshua is sharing with that community as we did together a couple of weeks ago about his new call to this new place that he will be going to in a couple of weeks, right? And so the conversation on Tuesday evening was about call. What does it look like, and what does it mean? And there was great conversation. Go and listen to the whole podcast or the whole recording of the Mystic. But there was one particular part that caught my attention. And the panel on Tuesday was Scott Morris, who is the founder and CEO of...retired CEO of Church Health, although he says he's not retired, right in the midst of Mystic. Lillian—Reverend Lillian Lamers who is down at First Presbyterian, Pastor Joshua who is here, and the final panelist was Kirk Whalum. Y'all might be familiar. He's a world famous saxophonist and songwriter. And there was something in the conversation about call that really caught my attention that Kirk said. He said he was 33 years old. So about 20 years after, in his words, he had fallen in love with Jesus Christ at a church camp in his adolescence. He was 33 years old when he heard a sermon where Jesus is changing water into wine. And the instruction given by his mother Mary to the attendants at the wedding is 'do whatever he tells you to do.' Pointing at Jesus. When Kirk heard that sermon, what he heard it as was a call. Do whatever it is Jesus is telling you to do. Well, it's a nice instruction when the wine runs out. It's less good when you're 33 and already have your vocation picked out, right? It's an inconvenient thing to do what Jesus is telling you to do when life is pretty much ordered as you'd like it to be. So Kirk was contemplating this call. It was the last thing he wanted to do...was be a preacher. Everyone in his family was a preacher. They didn't need another one, right? But he called up his grandfather who was a pastor and a preacher for some sage advice. We might describe his grandfather as one full of the spirit and wisdom. He called him up, and he was explaining this whole idea to him, and his grandfather said, "What did God say to Moses?" Are y'all familiar? Exodus 4 verses...Moses answered, "Look, they may not believe me or listen to me, but say, the Lord did not appear to you." The Lord said to him, said to Moses, "What is that in your hand?" And Moses said, "A staff." And God said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw the staff on the ground and it became a snake, and Moses drew back from it. And then the Lord said to Moses, "Reach out your hand and seize it by the tail." So he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand. And God said, "This has been done so that they, the people of God, may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob,

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has appeared to you, has called you." And so his grandfather asked him, "Kirk, what is in your hand?"

He's a world famous saxophonist. That's what was in his hand.

The gift that he had been given was one that was unique to him in that he could live out in a particular way that no one else could. He was thinking about all these beautiful big ways to respond to the call of God. And all God wanted Kirk to do was look at what was already placed in his hand. I think the key to calling, something for us to remember, is that we tend to overthink it. We tend to overthink what our calling is when we might simply just need to ask the question, "What is it that God has placed in our hand?" What has God gifted you with? What is the unique skill, or maybe even not so unique of a skill, it is just a skill. Is it time that God has placed in your hand? Do you have more flexibility than others do when it comes to your weekly schedule? Is it a conviction, a passion for a group or for people. To know your calling you don't have to manufacture it. You simply have to ask, "What gift has God given me? And how can it be useful for the building up of the kingdom of God?" That last term is important because as John O'Donohue says, "The gifts that are given to us are usually meant...are usually not meant for us alone, but are actually for the community and to be offered." Often faithful discipleship is not about finding the big thing to do, not about creating or manufacturing a call. Faithful discipleship is about doing the small thing well and regularly.

When we leave this place, we're going to walk down this hallway. We're going to take a right up the carpeted ramp and go into the gym. Actually, you're going to go through the server first and get your food. And then you're going to go into the gym, and you're going to find a seat maybe with some friends. Maybe you'll even invite someone that you don't recognize to sit with you, or maybe you haven't seen them for a while. And you're going to be surrounded, quite literally, by the various ministries of this place. Issues that have arisen over the history of Idlewild. Issues that the leadership saw fit to tend to, the right of worship and music, the formation of Christian disciples through classes and through fellowship. outreach to refugees, to the working poor, to children in some of the most impoverished neighborhoods in our city.

Many different communities who are in need of care.

There will be opportunities that will surround you for play and for fellowship.

And here's my challenge to you. It is not simply enough to recognize the issue and to bring it forward. It is the calling of Jesus Christ to tend to those things that have been brought into the

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consciousness of the community of faith. And so my challenge to you is to simply ask the question, what is that in your hand? What is the unique gift that you have been given? Maybe you know the Bible front to back. Maybe you can sleep really well even on a cot overnight with women and their children who are in dangerous living situations and therefore need to be a part of Room in the Inn ministry. Maybe you're able to take off early on a Thursday afternoon and serve food to those who are hungry. Maybe you have a Sunday school teacher that you still remember. When I ask you who shaped your faith the most, you can remember that person. And maybe you have a gift with children as well, or youth, to teach and to care and to nourish their walk of faith with Christ. I don't know what it is that God has placed in your hand, but I do know that the God of Acts, the God of Exodus, the God that we know in Jesus Christ places something in all of our hands. It is something that we don't have to manufacture or create or even think too hard about. But we do have to have the courage to say, "This thing which has been placed in my hand is useful for the building up of the kingdom of God. And I've been placed here at 1750 Union Avenue to be about using that gift. I found myself in this community, and the preaching might be okay, but the community and its service is what has drawn me in."

What is it that God has placed in your hand that you are being called to serve the people of God with? It's a simple question. It's all that simple and it's all that difficult.

So, let's pray together for God's wisdom and for the spirit to enable you to know what that gift is and then to use it. Let's pray.

Gracious and loving God, you call us. You call us to tend to the needs of your community, both the community of Idlewild and the greater community. And we thank you for the ways in which you've made us attentive to those needs. We also thank you in advance for the ways in which you have gifted us with exactly what we need to be able to serve you in this place. What we pray for, Lord, is that you would give us the courage to open our hand to see that gift and then to live into it. Help us to, as we make our way into food and fellowship, help us to learn something brand new, find a new opportunity where we can serve you faithfully here. Help us to do so. So that over time the number of those who are being saved, the number of those who are following as disciples of Jesus Christ in this place and in all places might continue to grow not just in number but in beauty and as clearer and clearer reflections of you in this place. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ.

And all God's people say together, Amen.