

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, October 26, 2025

All right, friends. As we continue in our worship this day, as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to get comfy in your pews there. Close your eyes if that's how you feel moved and take a deep breath in with me. Breathe it out slowly. Another deep breath in. Breathe it out slowly. And breathe in God's mercies. Breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. We pray that you would be at work within us and around us this morning as we hear the word read and proclaimed. May you quiet us that we might hear it afresh. May you empower us that we might be changed by it and move through the world in a more faithful way as we leave this place today. May you bless the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts. May they be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, as Whitney shared with our kids, this morning is Commitment Sunday. For those who are visiting with us, this is the day when the people—the great cloud of witnesses that is Idlewild Presbyterian Church—we make our financial commitments to support the life and ministries of the church in the year ahead. So there are commitment cards there in your pews. There's a QR code there. But just to help you all understand kind of what that looks like if you're not a part of our tradition, this helps our leadership imagine the ways that God is calling us forth in the next calendar year, and the generosity that grows within this community helps shape the ministries that we do here. And so we celebrate that this day. We celebrate it as the conclusion of three weeks that we've had teaching on gratitude and generosity, specifically. So we believe that generosity is a fruit of the spirit of God. It is planted within us by the living one and is nurtured so that it can grow. And this morning our lesson is going to talk about what it means to be a steward of the gifts of God. And we're going to turn to 1 Corinthians, chapter 4:verses 1-5 together. We're really focused on verses 1 and two. Okay? But we're going to include all of them for you. Here we go.

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me {this is Paul talking} but with me, it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you and by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I'm not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

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

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So it's important for us to understand just a bit of context with this text. So we enter into this letter to the church in Corinth in chapter 4. You should know in chapter 3 Paul is addressing great division that is going on in the church, competition between those who are trying to follow in the ways of Jesus. He's trying to instruct them on what it looks like to live and be in community. Community is always beautiful and it's always difficult. So he's encouraging them in that way. When he gets to chapter 4, he wants them to understand their purpose, their role, their call. And he uses particular language. If you go, if you're looking in your Bible right now, or if you go home and you reflect on the text this afternoon, you'll see a title, a bold title above chapter 4, and it will say 'the purpose of the apostles. the purpose of the apostles.' He wants them to understand that they have a role, a calling, in this thing called church and in the world. So in verse one when he says to them, "Think of us," he's talking about himself and those who have come to teach with him. When he says, "Think of us in this way as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mystery," he's not just speaking about himself and about those who have journeyed with him to care for the church in Corinth and are writing on its behalf now He's trying to let them know what their purpose is as a community of faith. So, he says, "Think of us in this way as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." But he wants them to hear it as "think of us and think of yourselves. Think of yourselves as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." That is the purpose of the apostles—to be stewards. And to be a steward means that we are caretakers of and we are responsible for, in this case, the mysteries of our God. For those who come here on a first Sunday, we have a more lengthy prayer of thanksgiving during our time of communion. When we celebrate the sacrament of communion, we have interludes where we sing together. Y'all know this. We alternate in singing. The second interlude is prompted by an important phrase, "Great is the mystery of faith." And then Gary starts to play the organ and we all join in singing what? Do y'all remember? "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Thank you, choir. I hear a couple up there. Is that the alto section? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I believe it. Yeah. Yeah. So we say "great is the mystery of faith." and then we respond in song that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again." We claim that to be the mystery of the faith, okay, that, indeed, when it was appropriate for the Lord's timing, love became incarnate. It took on flesh and it dwelt among us. We put that love to death and yet that love triumphed over the death, and indeed that love will come again, that love that we know as Christ Jesus. Okay, this is a great mystery that has the power to transform our lives but also transform the world. It can change the way that we move through the world when we trust and we believe that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again." And what Paul wants the people to know in Corinth is that they are stewards of that great mystery. They are to be caretakers of it. They are to be communicators of it. They, in every way, in the way that they teach and in the way that they live, are to carry that mystery with them in the world. Because Paul knew because he had experienced it in his own life. He knew that the mystery of God had

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the power to change the heart of humanity. The power to even change the world. What's interesting, I think, for me there's lots of interesting pieces about this text, but one of the interesting things is that Paul has stewarded the mystery of God to the people in Corinth, to the church, and he's calling them to steward that mystery to the next people and then, not to be sacrilegious here, but yada yada yada yada, we're here. Right. We actually are here because faithful people over two millennia have stewarded the mystery of God over time to us here.

Next week we'll celebrate the great cloud of witnesses. But this morning we recognize that we have been stewarded this idea, this belief, this faith that Christ has died, Christ has risen and Christ will come again. It still has the power to transform us. It still has the power to call us to the font. It still has the power to call us out into the world to serve. And that means we have been the beneficiaries of the stewardship of countless people all the way back to that church in Corinth. What's beautiful about that to me is they could never have imagined what their faithful stewardship in that time and place, what it might produce by God's grace over millennia. How many lives, how the world would be changed and remade, right? How many people would be heartened by their trust that that which is dead indeed will live again? That indeed death doesn't have the final word. Darkness does not have the final word. They had no idea what their stewardship would mean in that time. And yet here we are, and people across this city and this nation and the world gather in places not so dissimilar from this one as those who have benefited from the stewardship of the mystery of God. Paul knew that this message could be transformational, and so he wanted the people in Corinth to understand that. And I think he wants us to understand it afresh this morning too, because what we don't know from this point moving forward is the ways in which how we steward today, this mystery today, how that will change people's lives and, indeed, our city and the world. But we still trust and we believe that it does. I was reading an article that was sent to me earlier this week, a New York Times article, written by a woman that I often read, Melissa Kursk. Maybe y'all read it as well. It was an article on gratitude, which I thought was important for us because we're talking, we've been talking about gratitude and generosity. Our theme for the last three weeks has been growing in gratitude. She begins the article talking about gratitude practices. Specifically, she talks about how she keeps a gratitude journal. Are y'all familiar? Raise your hand if you're familiar with the gratitude journal. Has anybody kept one? Yeah. Does anybody keep one now? Oh, nice. Mary faithfully. Yes. Very good. So the idea, if you don't, the idea is pretty simple, right? That you wake up in the morning or whenever your quiet time is, and you spend time reflecting on that which has made you grateful that day, right? I keep a note in my phone, and I pause and I'll write things throughout the day, but for some people it's literally a journal practice. She talks about how that's kind of become passe in the last...or corny even...in the last couple years, right? Gratitude, this attitude of gratitude. You see it like on driftwood with white paint like over people, you know, in

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Pottery Barn or whatever. And it's kind of become a little cliché, right? I said *passe*, but more like cliché, right? And so what she says in this article I found really interesting because instead of setting aside this practice of gratitude, she decided that she would dig in a different way...dig in in a different way. Okay. So, I just want to read a bit of this, of what she wrote earlier this week. "Lately, I've been meditating on what I'm grateful for, and the process has gotten a little more ornate. I will think of something small. Say this weird deck of wisdom cards that I draw from each morning as sort of a daily fortune cookie." I love this. I was reading this article right after I got done with my devotional. Right? So, she has this like stack of cards that she pulls from. Maybe you have a devotional, maybe you read scripture, right? "I was thinking about this stack of wisdom cards I draw from each morning as sort of a daily fortune cookie. And then I think about how my friend Melanie gave me that deck of cards. And I thought about how generous and playful she is and how lucky I am to know her. But then I thought about how I wouldn't know her if I hadn't been taught creative writing. I hadn't taught creative writing with her in a summer program in the 1990s. And I wouldn't have had that job if my friend Alden hadn't recommended me for it. And I wouldn't know Alden if I hadn't gone to graduate school with her. And I wouldn't have gone to graduate school without the encouragement of my undergraduate writing professor. And I wouldn't have taken her class if not for, you get the point, this lineage." She says it's almost a game tracing the present-day gratitude back through all the causes and conditions that gave rise to it. "It's immensely satisfying, even mystifying to look at how many things had to transpire in order to bring this silly little deck of cards into my life. Simple gratitude is focused on a one-on-one relationship. These cards make me very happy," she says. "But thinking through this circuit of prerequisites amplifies, grows gratitude. It scales it." I love that phrase. "It scales gratitude. It brings me into contact with the multiple interdependent factors necessary to bring this gift into my life. As with all things related to gratitude, this is not an original practice. Buddhists have a concept of 'dependent origination.' In Judaism, there's 'recognizing the good.' Martin Luther King Jr. speaking of the Christian tradition spoke of 'an inescapable network of mutuality.' We are all connected, related, dependent upon one another. But of course, we forget this all of the time. Oh, how we forget it. We forget also that every action we take has a whole cascade of unintended consequences. We forget perhaps that we're a factor in someone else's circuit of gratitude, a link in an innumerable chain. And so often we feel separate. So often we feel lonely. We feel disconnected. One way to challenge that feeling is to start with one small thing that you're grateful for and then trace the gorgeous, improbable, but very real sequence of variables that brought you to that object of gratitude." She says, "It might seem a little corny, but it works."

When I was reflecting on that article this week, I thought about...thought about all of the people who are part of my improbable chain that have brought me to the place I am in life now. Those

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who trusted and believed that the great mystery of our faith could still transform a young man's life, could still help him see that love has taken on flesh amongst us. That even though we tried to put it to death, it would not stay dead. And that, indeed, that is the prevailing force in all of the universe. And indeed, it comes back. The kingdom is close at hand.

I wonder what it might look like for us to connect ourselves more fully this day with the early church in Corinth. To imagine what it is to be called to be a steward of the mystery of God here and now, October 26th of 2025.

I want to invite you to do something this afternoon. You're not going to be outside. It's gross. And so stay inside. And instead of turning on Netflix or doom scrolling, find yourself a quiet place in your house or your dorm room, your apartment, wherever it is. And I want you to...I want you to think about something that you are deeply grateful for. Maybe it's a silly deck of cards that are kind of like affirmations. Or maybe it's a devotional, maybe it's a Bible, I don't know. I want you to focus in on that. And I want you to intentionally go back through all of the things that led to you possessing that object that brings you joy. Think about the people who stewarded in different ways in order for you to possess that which brings you great joy now. And then I want you to contemplate more fully. How are you being invited right now to be a steward of the mystery of God in your life? In the classroom, maybe amongst sororities or fraternities or social groups, in your workplace, here through service at the church?

In one way or another, you're the beneficiary. We're the beneficiary together of the faithful work of stewards for millennia, stewarding the mystery of Christ. How is it that you are being invited to be that faithful steward right now, so that maybe in a year or two or 10 or a hundred, you will be a part of someone else's reflection. You will be one of the stewards in the long line of that which brings them joy and purpose in their lives.

Let's pray together.

Gracious and loving God, you gift us with this mystery, this trust and belief that indeed Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. We thank you for those who have faithfully stewarded that mystery from Corinth to Memphis. We pray, Lord, that you might find us trustworthy in our stewardship this very day. Give us reflective hearts that help us to be connected to the great cloud of witnesses that have stewarded that mystery for so long. And give us the courage and the wisdom to know how it is you're calling us right here and right now with whatever it is you have entrusted to our care to be a faithful steward. For we trust and we believe

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just as Paul did, just as those first apostles did, that the mystery of faith still has the power to transform hearts and minds and lives and the world.

In Christ, through Christ, bound together, we pray. Amen.