

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, January 18, 2026

Friends, as we continue in worship this day, and as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to get comfy in your pews, to close your eyes if that's your posture of prayer and take a deep breath in with me.

Breathe it out slowly. Another deep breath in.

Breathe it out slowly. Breathe in God's mercies.

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

And breathe out God's mercies to others.

Join me in prayer.

Gracious spirit, you're as close to us as our very next breath. So we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That you might by your power quiet any voice within us but your own that we might hear your word for us this day 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.

So this morning we have part two of a sermon series that will lead us throughout the season of Epiphany. It's entitled, Who Do You Say I Am? This is a question that Jesus asks of his disciples. It's a question that for us over this time is going to shape our Christology. We hope together as a community to develop a clearer understanding of who we know and who we claim Christ to be. We began last week. When we asked that question, we said that we as those who follow in the way of Jesus believe that Christ is the word made flesh. So we talked about the way in which the Gospel of John speaks to that, how this Christ mystery that has existed from all eternity even before time at a particular time took on flesh in the person of Jesus, so that we as humankind might look upon that one who comes and fall in love and follow faithfully. This morning our question prompts us with a different sort of answer. Who do you say I am? We respond with Christ as the image of God. The Imago Dei. Christ as the image of God. The centering text for us this day comes from Colossians, the first chapter. We're going to read verses 15 through 20, which if you were paying attention last week to your affirmation of faith—which I know all of y'all do—it was our affirmation of faith last week. So this is the text that helped to affirm what it is we believe guides us in our study this day of Christ as the image of God. So let's read together from the word of God. Colossians, chapter 1, beginning in the 15th verse.

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Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible. Whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers, all things have been created through him and for him. Jesus himself is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

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

So the text this day reveals to the Colossians an incredible gift from their God, the gift of what we refer to as the Imago Dei, the image of God. It's a clarification for the Colossians that this one that they know as Jesus the Christ is indeed the incarnation of God. And as I think Whitney so appropriately taught our children, this image of the living God that is made known in Jesus is not simply the human reflection but also the content of the character of the one that we call the Christ. Paul tells the Colossians in verse 15 that Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. And we're going to come back to that in a second. But last week we talked about the language that we are given with the Christ mystery, that we believe that there is a dimension of God that is formless. We call that dimension of God, that person of God, God the Father. There is a dimension of God that has form. We call that one Jesus the Christ. And then there is a dimension of God, the person of God that is really energy moving between the father and the son and indeed all creation. Paul tries to articulate this very clearly. There's this dimension that is beyond our sight. The dimension of our creator that has no form. But there is, there is form in the person of Jesus. "You have looked upon him. You have seen him. You are following in his ways," Paul tells the Colossians. And then in verse 19, Paul says, "For in Jesus, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Jesus is the archetype, incarnate to reveal the truth of the Imago Dei in the world. The idea being that there is divinity that wraps itself in flesh and dwells among us.

But the gift is not simply to look upon Christ. It is to reveal something deeper and more meaningful. It's interesting that this gift is not first revealed in Colossians but in the very first chapter of the text that we call our holy scripture. In the first chapter of Genesis, we hear the first of two creation stories. And those in the reformed tradition, we understand Genesis 1 as the first creation story, Genesis 3 as another way in which we can imagine the creative power of our God. In Genesis 1, God creates the world in how many days? Louder, John. For the people in the back, six. Yes. And then rests. Do y'all remember what God created on the sixth day? Humankind, God

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looks upon the world that has been created, right? And...and there is this creative energy that God looks upon and says, "Let us create human beings in our image." It's almost if we get to...we step in and we get to listen to this conversation between the triune God, between Father, Son, and Spirit. "Let us create humankind in our image." The Imago Dei takes on form in the very first chapter of our holy text in verse 26 of chapter 1 of Genesis. And the people of Israel would have known this truth, that they indeed were reflections of the divine. And, yet, it is really easy for us to forget. We'll get to that in a second as well. And so these people that we know as the Colossians, they are living and trying to be faithful to their God. And they have forgotten that the image of God dwells in the world in the flesh. And so he points them, Paul does, back to the Christ. This image which was present at the beginning of time took particular shape in the person of Jesus. He is the archetype, but he is not the end of the story. The extent to which you can recognize God's indwelling within Christ is the extent to which we hope, we pray, you will understand that the image of God also dwells within you. That mirror that Whitney had. Y'all didn't see it. But the whole idea is that when we hold the mirror up to ourselves, we don't simply see the flesh and bone that is David or John or countless others. But indeed, we see the image of God being reflected back to us. Not simply in the tone of our skin or our hair, but in the character, the witness of the divine. Some theologians have called this the divine spark. Others, the ground of our being. The idea is that we bear an image of our God, the Imago Dei, our very selves. And yet we struggle also. Our great sin, perhaps, is failing to see the image of God in ourselves and in our neighbors. I don't know about you, but often whether it's looking in a mirror physically or just holding up a mirror to myself of the ways in which I move through the world, I don't feel like I reflect the Imago Dei; and I look upon myself or upon decisions I've made, I think to myself, why in the world did you do that? What's going on? Right?

Many people struggle to trust and believe that the divine spark lives within them, that the image of God is reflected in their very face. This is a struggle, and it's important for us to pay attention to it because when we fail to recognize that we, like Christ, bear the image of our God within us, then it can...it can lead to all sorts of things. It can lead to, maybe at the beginning, some negative self-talk, some self-neglect. Ultimately, lots of people who experience or love someone who experiences self harm, right? It's because they are unable to recognize and love that which is truest to who they are. There are many more complicating factors as well, of course; but what it comes back to for us is the idea that the image of God within us is something that is to be recognized and cared for, tended to with love and with grace. And what we find, as with Christ as the archetype, is what is true for ourselves, that we indeed are bearers of the image of God, is also true for our neighbor. The Colossians were having a struggle with this, right? They were receiving some teaching. There was a conflict happening within their school, let's call it their Sunday school, their educational time. And these teachers were trying to draw some

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really distinct lines between who was included and who wasn't in this new thing called Christianity, right? Didn't even have that name yet, but following in the way. And the Colossians are really struggling with this. And so, one of the reasons why Paul lifts to their attention the Imago Dei, Christ as the image of God, is so that they might recognize it within themselves, but so they also might recognize it within the eyes of their neighbor. That everyone they look upon in their little town is created in the image of God, bears within them the image of God. They have in their sin forgotten that the Imago Dei dwells within their neighbor.

A couple of weeks from now, two Sundays in fact, will be February 1st. February 1st will mark for me the five-year anniversary of beginning ministry here at Idlewild. I moved to Memphis January 15th of 2021 on a day that was about as cold as this one. Actually, I was like, "What did I get into?"

The five years of ministry have been...have been a gift. Some years or months more difficult than others, but overall an incredible gift. I thought about that year and the significance of that anniversary for me as I was preparing for this sermon, because our city...our city marks something else on February 1st. February 1st of 1968 was an important day, a significant day in the life of our city. The way the story goes, February 1st of 1968 was a day filled with clouds and torrential rain. The rain was so bad that the sewers were backing up and flooding the streets. Two men went to work that day for the sanitation department of our fair city. Echol Cole and Robert Walker went to work as they did. They hopped on the back of a sanitation truck and in the midst of the torrential rain and got about their work. Sometime late in the afternoon, the rain became so bad, so dangerous in fact, that they hopped off their truck. They tried to seek shelter in a nearby building. They were refused entry. They were refused entry because of laws that segregated people based on the color of their skin. They were refused entry to a place where only whites were allowed to go.

So they made their way back to that sanitation truck, and they sought shelter in the only place they knew—under the cover of the back of that truck. And the details are a little murky, but at some point late in the afternoon, that truck malfunctioned, and those two men were killed. February 1st, 1968.

That would set off, set in motion what we would come to know as the Sanitation Workers Strike here. Set off a national reaction, a call to consciousness amongst those, especially those, who follow in the ways of love and care. It would bring that upheaval, would bring the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to this place. The conversation would end up around unionization, fair wages, time off, protections. But it only gets there because the law had supported the separation

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of people based on the color of their skin. The law codified in our community had said that some deserve shelter and others don't. That some bear the full image of their creator and somehow others do not.

The great sin of believing that the Imago Dei shows up in different measure in different people.

When I moved here five years ago, we were about seven months removed from the eyes of our nation being fixed on Minneapolis. George Floyd had been killed the spring of the previous year. For months, the collective consciousness of this nation was focused on that place. Five years later, the collective consciousness again focuses on that place. How difficult it is for us to separate ourselves from the sin of forgetting that the Imago Dei rests fully and completely in all humankind. How grievous the heart of God must our actions create. How much grief? Right?

And so we sit in the heaviness of that moment, and people of good conscience, people who call on the name of Jesus say, "Is there another way? Is anything else possible?"

And then Paul shows up with a letter to a little church from a long time ago, and he says there is this one who has come who fully manifests the image of God. But the point of his coming into the world taking on flesh is so that you might look into the mirror and know that you reflect the image of God too. And not just that, so that you might look upon your neighbor, every eye, every eye that you meet this week, and you might know that they are the fullest reflection of God.

And he says it's in that that something totally different can happen. At the end of the verses that we read this morning, he says that there is power in this recognition of the Imago Dei. Paul does in verse 20. He says, "Through Jesus, God was pleased to reconcile all to himself, all things to himself." Paul says there is a power in recognizing the Imago Dei, and it's a particular kind of power. It is the power to reconcile. Reconcile each of us to ourselves. Reconcile each of us to our neighbors. Reconcile each of us to our God. The Christ, the image of God, carries with it the power to reconcile.

Christ both reveals the gift of the Imago Dei but also exposes our sin of neglecting to see it in our neighbor and in ourselves. But not simply, he doesn't leave us there. He also offers the reconciliation of this image within ourselves and within our neighbor. There is good news to be found in this gospel that it is not just possible that all might be reconciled. It is the will of our God in Christ Jesus.

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It is the will of our God in Christ Jesus that when you look in the mirror, before you lay your head on your pillow tonight, you're getting freshened up, before you snuggle yourself into your bed, you will be gazing upon the very image of God.

And when you look to the one to the right and to the left of you in the pew, you are not gazing at simply a neighbor, but upon the very Imago Dei. Earlier this week, I was thinking, I was like, well, if I can begin to reconcile that I indeed reflect the Imago Dei in the world, and then maybe I can do that first, and then if I can reconcile it in my neighbor, the neighbors that I find easy to love and the neighbors that I find really difficult to love. If I can reconcile that, then maybe that will clear the way for me to be able...to be able to be reconciled to my God in Christ. And then I realized this morning as I was doing final preparation that it is actually as we reconcile the image of the divine within ourselves and our neighbor that we are reconciled to God. It is not a three-step process. It is the work of reconciliation that is the will of God.

So the events of February 1st, 1968 set in motion not only a sanitation worker strike but set in motion the visiting of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that we celebrate this weekend, his life and his ministry amongst us. They culminate on another night where torrential rain falls upon our fair city. He gives a sermon not a mile and a half as a crow flies from here, right? And then on April 4th, he is killed in this place. Right? That strikes me as important for us, because April 4th this year for those who call upon the name of Jesus will take place on Easter Saturday. It will be the day between the suffering of our savior, the Imago Dei on the cross, and the good news of the power of resurrection, the ultimate reconciliation of the entire world.

It struck me, it strikes me, that perhaps our invitation from this time to that is to do the work of looking in the mirror every day and seeing the Imago Dei, the image of our God, and not stopping there, but looking upon our neighbors, whether it be on a television screen or a tablet or as we're driving down Union and seeing the Imago Dei in them. I wonder if this invitation for us in this season to develop a Christology doesn't hinge on our ability to be about that work, because what we claim to believe is that in the recognition of the Imago Dei, there is a reconciliation that can happen. So if this morning you came to this place really struggling to see the divine dwelling within you, being reflected to you in the mirror, I pray you leave with the good news that indeed the divine spark lives within you. And if you came this day angry at your neighbor unable to see the holy and the divine that dwells within them, I pray you leave with encouragement. I pray all of us leave with the invitation to hear the encouragement of Paul to the Colossians as encouragement to us. He is the incarnation. He is the visible manifestation of the invisible God that has taken on flesh. He is the Imago Dei. He dwells in the world. He dwells within you. He dwells within his neighbor. So may we as those who call upon the name of Jesus.

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Might we without reservation when we are asked the question by our savior, “Who do you say I am?” Might we say you are the image of the living God, and so am I, and so is my neighbor.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving one, you show up that we might look upon you as the image of the invisible God. You show up in flesh, and you show up and you heal and you transform and you reconcile. And yet we still struggle to see your divine spark, your divine image within ourselves. Definitely to see it within our neighbors. And yet you promise us that as by your power, as we do that, that reconciliation takes place.

So Lord, let us respond to your invitation in this season. Let us respond to your invitation by trusting and falling into your dwelling within us. Let us respond to your invitation by working ever more faithfully to glimpse your divine image in the eyes of every neighbor that we look upon.

We trust and we believe that you are indeed present amongst us. So in the promise of your presence, may we receive the power of your reconciliation. For we ask it in the name of the one who came to dwell among us, Jesus the Christ. Amen.