

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, March 29, 2026

As we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you, as I do each week, to get comfortable in your pews there and close your eyes. Take whatever prayer posture you need, and take a couple deep breaths with me. Okay? So, let's take a deep breath in and breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in and breathe it out slowly. Breathe in God's mercies

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

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And we pray that you would be at work within us in this moment, around us and within us, quieting any voice within us but your own that we might hear your word for us and, indeed, your word for your church 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.

If you're joining us for the first time in this Lenten season, you're here right at the end of a sermon series that has taken us throughout this time of wilderness these last six weeks. We have joined together studying a series that we've entitled Marks of a Disciple. We invite you to go back and view those sermons on the YouTube page. There are also transcripts there if you're more of a reader than a watcher. Each week we have wrestled with a different way in which we believe those who follow in the way of Christ are marked. We spoke first of boldness, then gratitude, then humility, then perseverance, then just last week the practice of peace. This morning our mark of discipleship is compassion. Compassion. Philippians, Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, has grounded our study throughout this season of Lent. It does so again this morning. We're in the fourth chapter. We're going to read verses 10 through 20 together. So, let us listen together for God's word to each of us and indeed to the church.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content in whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that

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accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full. I have more than enough. I am fully satisfied now that I have received the gifts you sent. A fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Thanks be to God.

So, I set in motion this series several months ago. Each of these marks thoughtfully planned. I was reading through the text this week though, and I thought that there's a good chance I might have missed the mark on this one. As I read Paul's letter to the Philippians and these particular verses, it seemed to me that the mark of discipleship in this text might be empathy—the way in which the Philippians can empathize with the perils that Paul is navigating.

But then I pulled out this handy dandy dictionary that my friend gave me a few years ago, a dictionary of theological terms that helps me often in times to frame a word that is known in particular ways out in the world in a particularly theological way.

If we're defining compassion, we might say that it is a “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.” That last part paired with a desire to alleviate the distress—that is what makes compassion so unique and so important for us as followers of Christ. Compassion means that we recognize the suffering of others, that we deeply care for that suffering and for them in the midst of it, and then we take action to help. Compassion is a tangible expression of love for those who are suffering, for those who are in need. Frederick Buechner, which some of you might be familiar with, describes it this way. He says, “Compassion is the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside someone else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.”

Our scripture lesson this morning reveals the Philippians' compassion for Paul. In verse 10, Paul says, “I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. You were sympathetic to me, but you had no way to work to alleviate it.” The Philippians had sympathy for Paul's suffering. They knew he had been imprisoned. They knew that he had little supply as he went through the countryside proclaiming the good news of Christ. But they had no ability to act to alleviate it. Not in this particular instance. Not until we read here in chapter 4. They did however have a history of showing compassion to Paul. In verse 15, “You Philippians indeed know that in the

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early days of the gospel when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone.” There's a history here between the Philippians and Paul. “For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once.” Can you imagine those in the church in Thessalonica? Can you imagine them reading this critique of them some years later? In this passage, Paul expresses his deep appreciation for the church's compassion toward him with an offering. That's what they do. They send money to help him. In verse 18, he says that he has received their gift, their offering, and he is deeply grateful. But beyond that, he wants them to understand that as they model compassion toward him, they are in fact reflecting that character of their savior Jesus the Christ. They are living out their discipleship of Jesus. In verse 19, Paul says, “And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus,” giving thanks and then grounding them once again in the compassionate savior that they follow. Jesus is, of course, for the Philippians as he is for us, the model for what it means to embody compassion in the world. He looks upon the suffering of the world. The triune God does and does not only sympathize but indeed takes on flesh to dwell amongst the suffering of the world. Christ enters the world's suffering not simply to experience it but to alleviate it, to bring suffering to an end. As the prophet says, “to loose the chains of injustice, to liberate the captive, to set the oppressed free.” This is key for the Philippians. It's also key for us here and now. We worship a savior who does not simply see our pain and the pain of the world, see our distress and the distress of the world, but in compassion enters into the pain, into the suffering and lifts us from it. In this season of Lent, we often draw parallels to being in wilderness. And it would be understandable for us to believe that we navigate the wildernesses of our lives alone. But it would not be true. What we offer in this season is the belief, the trust that the wilderness in which we enter, the wilderness that we navigate is one that our savior has already walked through and, indeed, right now is walking with us through ours.

And we also say that to be a disciple of Jesus means to do the same as Jesus. And so if Jesus is the embodiment of compassion, then we are called to embody compassion as well. And I'll tell you, we have opportunities every day to live out this mark of compassion more often than we might think. We can do so in big ways and in small ways seemingly. I was at a luncheon a couple weeks ago at Second Baptist Church just east of here. It was a gathering of clergy, leaders of local churches. We gathered there at the request of the senior pastor at Second Baptist. He wanted to share with us the ways in which their church was walking alongside a community that had been birthed within their walls. There's an Afghan church that grew from that place, and those there have had a deep relationship with those people. He wanted us to know about the ways in which that community was being impacted, that church community was being impacted by the task force presence here in Memphis. He wanted us to hear stories, and we did for more than an hour. He told us one story of a man who was a refugee in Afghanistan, brought here by the

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American government because he was a professing Christian in that place, which would be a certain death sentence. So he was brought by our government to these United States, planted here in Memphis. In early December he was stopped by task force members. He was taken to our local facility here. Ultimately, he was released, but he was released without some of his most important documents. He's been here legally and for a long time. He has a driver's license and a work permit, but for some reason, he was not released with those documents. And no matter how much he implored those to give him back his documents, they wouldn't. We heard the story there a couple weeks ago of a woman named Darla. Darla heard news of this and wouldn't abide it. She was not content to sympathize, but to show compassion, which we know means action. So, she made her way to the facility, locally here, and found those at the front desk and asked for his driver's license and his work permit. She was refused. She lobbied. She was refused. She went home. The next morning, she got up. She went back. She was refused. She went home. The next morning she got up. She went back. And that morning there to greet her was one that shared in the compassion that she embodied as well. Hearing the story, that guard decided to go back and explored the evidence locker and went through files and found the man's driver's license and his work permit, returned them to Darla. Darla drove back across town and returned them to this man. Some would have thought that his captivity ended after a very short period of time, but in this environment he was afraid to move about our city without his driver's license and his work permit. Understandably so. I was struck by Darla's living into this mark of being a disciple of Jesus Christ in this time. Not content simply to look upon the ill, the distress of her neighbor. Not content to simply sympathize, but to have within her this dimension, this spirit that would call her to something deeper, that would call her to live out her compassion for her neighbor here and now.

Now, that's an example that many of us will never have the opportunity to engage in. And yet, there are many opportunities within the walls of this place and ministries in which we here at Idlewild are engaged that give us plenty of opportunities to carry out the mark of being a disciple of Jesus to show compassion to our neighbor. In a couple weeks we're going to celebrate our volunteers from A Room in the Inn at a luncheon. We're doing it on Low Sunday. A lot less of you will be here the Sunday after Easter. It's gotten a reputation. It's called Low Sunday. We can turn that reputation around if y'all want to show up on April 12th. But that morning or right after worship, we're going to celebrate those who volunteer at Room in the Inn. If you don't know what that is, every Thursday evening, with the exception of April and October, which are months off for the local organization, there are a group, a small group of people, Idlewilders, who gather in the second floor of the Jones building in a room that over the last year has been transformed into a really hospitable place. They greet as the sun goes down women and their children who are either unhoused or in unsafe housing situations. They are housing insecure. Our church has

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decided that our ministry is to women and their children. Other churches have other ministries under the umbrella of Room in the Inn. But we have those, a small group in our midst who have looked upon the plight of these women and their children and said that they are not content to merely sympathize. They believe that their calling as disciples of Jesus takes them beyond that to a deeper compassion. And that compassion means that they need to show up and be here. You can be one of those people, too. If you're willing to give an hour or two to help set up or an hour or two the next morning to help clean up, or maybe you're willing to give up one good night's sleep a month to be present with those women throughout the night. We could use you. Amanda Ray is sitting at the very top left of the balcony up, I mean about as far as you can get from me actually. As far as she is from me, she is equally and oppositely as close to our Room in the Inn ministry, and she would love for you to come and find her after worship. If staying overnight isn't something that you can do, which many can't, you can come a couple hours earlier and you can serve people a hot meal and if you're not good at serving, you can talk to them. We've been serving meals at Room in the Inn for 26 years. Never miss a Thursday. You can come and let your sympathy for those who are unhoused and housing insecure in our community move from mere sympathy into compassion. You will not be able in that hour or two to alleviate that which they carry with them throughout their days. But you can give them a measure of love and care and grace that few others are willing to extend.

If neither of those work for you, if Thursday's just busy, Dana Brandon's here, too. She—Dana, raise your hand. There we go. Everybody sits really far away. Dana's almost in the back row there of the nave. She helps lead our relationship with Idlewild Elementary that we've had for decades now. We need readers. They need readers. The students there. We need mentors. They need mentors. If you care about the plight of children in our community, and you can give an hour, you can allow your sympathy for them to be transformed into this mark of discipleship that we know to be compassion. If you want to be like Darla, because I know we got some Darlas in this congregation, then you can reach out to and be in touch with Melissa Peeler, who leads our No Longer Strangers ministry. This is a ministry focused on immigrants and refugees.

And beyond modeling compassion within the walls of this place, you can...you can also do it in your civic life, in your work life, or your vocational life, even your home life. I was thinking about how I might be able to embody compassion more so just in the way that I pastor. And I was listening to a leadership podcast this past week, and there were these two former C Suite folks who were talking about the qualities that make for a good leader. One quoted a study from 2018 that said that compassion was the most important leadership skill, and it was determinant of a leader's success. In 2024, another study came out that said that 72% of leaders would not lead

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with compassion because they were afraid it would make them look weak. Thanks be to God, Jesus wasn't part of that 72%.

Unafraid of what he might be perceived as, he comes humble and riding on a donkey. And we're not reading that text this morning. I commend it to you this afternoon. But what we do know is that he is our model for compassion. We can show it. We can model it. We can embody it. We've been marked by it in our vocations, in our friendships, in our marriages, at home, and out in the world. This whole study for the last six weeks, this whole study of Philippians, it's about sharing in other people's struggles. The Philippians share in Paul's trouble, in his difficulty, and he shares in theirs. It's a beautiful story, but it doesn't have to be only a story. It can be the way in which we move through and shape the world around us. I'm struck by how much has happened since we began this sermon series—six weeks ago. A lot has happened in our world, since we began this Lenten journey together. Our country is now at war, embroiled in conflict halfway across the world. There's tension here at home. If you read the Daily Memphian this morning, you saw that on the front page. There's this low boil that always seems to be present right now. It's the...it's the air we breathe in some way. And yet it's not the only reality. That's to say nothing of your life in the last six weeks. What you have navigated, the joys and the concerns that have greeted you in this Lenten season, they are many and complex and difficult and perhaps beautiful as well.

The emotion that I have greeted most often in congregants and friends over these last six weeks is a sense of overwhelm, a deep sense of being overwhelmed by the world and by life. It's a real feeling. More often as I listen to stories, I hear people asking “and what can I do?”

I would say that too often in our spiritual journeys, we only look for big things to do. But that's not what we have studied throughout this season of Lent. We have spent this season wrestling with what the marks of Christian discipleship look like in the world. Scripture attests and we believe that true and faithful disciples of Jesus are marked by boldness. but boldness bent towards justice.

We believe that true and faithful disciples of Jesus are marked by gratitude in the midst of a world that is in need of a gracious stance. We believe that true and faithful disciples of Jesus are marked by humility, humble and riding on a donkey.

We believe that true and faithful disciples of Jesus are marked by perseverance. When things feel overwhelming, we continue to bear and trust that God is present.

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We believe that faithful and true disciples of Jesus practice peace. They nurture it within their own spirits, and they carry it out with them into the world.

We believe that true and faithful disciples of Jesus are marked also this morning by compassion.

But if you find yourself this morning asking, "I hear you, preacher, but what can I do?" Jesus, I hate to tell you, doesn't only offer you big things. He offers you disciplines. We've been talking about what it means to be marked as a disciple. Well, that's somebody who's committed to disciplining their life to be shaped and reshaped more and more into the person of Jesus Christ. And so it's the simple daily, complex daily practice of these disciplines that have the possibility of transforming us and transforming our community and indeed the world. I found myself being drawn back to the wisdom of Laura Vanderkam this week.

She says, "Believing that your actions matter is how the human mind learns hope. A habit or, for us, a discipline has the force of the water drop that hollows the stone. A small task done daily, if truly daily, will outdo the labors of a spasmodic Hercules."

What we have wrestled with are disciplines. Boldness, gratitude, humility, perseverance, peace, and compassion. What we are invited to is discipline. To boldness, gratitude, humility, perseverance, peace, and compassion. And if you don't think that's enough, I invite you to imagine that these are the water drops that hollow the stone. They are the small daily tasks of discipleship that will outdo...that will outdo the labors of spasmodic Hercules.

It should be clear to us by now that as we commit ourselves in our community to these disciplines, we will begin to see the world differently. We will begin to notice things in our world differently. We will pay attention when one claims to be a disciple of Jesus, even invokes the words of our savior and yet does not embody these marks. When we see our neighbors in the world also in places of power and in leadership and in civic squares, those who invoke the names of Jesus, who claim to be representatives of the Christian faith and yet who do not model these marks, we are not seeing faithful discipleship.

We might be seeing some allegiance to some power, some proclamation of some principality, but we are not seeing the disciplined path of Jesus.

These can be marked by something, but it is not the good news of Christ. And that is what we are called to. Our lives of faith are meant to stand in contrast to those powers and principalities, but they only do so to the extent that we bear the marks of discipleship in our lives. And so I invite

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you to not simply proclaim Christian rhetoric, but to live lives marked by the one who the world crucified for his boldness and his humility, his compassion and his peace. For the way that he persevered and was grateful to his God even in his suffering. This week we will witness that they drove nails through his flesh but not his ministry. They crucified his body but not his witness. They believed that they had marked him forever. And yet, and yet, and yet, God was not done. God was still breaking forth into the world the good news of the gospel. So, may you feel the invitation to discipline. May you live it out in your daily lives. And may you trust and may you believe that the same God who continued to be at work in that holy week when things felt dark and lost was bringing forth something beautiful and good and unimaginable. Something that would transform the world and reshape it into the ways of grace and hope. May you see your act of discipline as a participation in that work. May you be marked by the one who is marked this week—and yet.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving one, you call us to lives of discipline

and yet we only look for big things.

You call us to simple daily practices

and yet we find other ways to use our time. As you encourage the Philippians through your Apostle Paul, we pray that you would encourage us this morning as well. Whatever our gift is that we are called to share, we pray that we might do it with compassion. That we might not simply look upon the world and sympathize with those who are experiencing distress, but we would be moved to action by your grace and by your hope and by your justice. We want to be your disciples. That's why we're here. So by your spirit, shape us and reshape us that we might be clearer and clearer reflections of you in our lives. For we ask it in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.