

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend David Powers  
Sunday, August 16, 2026

---

Friends, we continue this day in worship with the reading and proclamation of the word. And if you're joining us for the first time in a couple weeks, we are now 3 weeks deep into our I Pledge Allegiance sermon series where we are wrestling with, as Paul talks about, citizenship in the kingdom of heaven and citizenship in these United States of America. And so we are trying to figure out, answer the question each week in a different way of what it means to faithfully follow Jesus Christ in these days, especially as Americans. You can go back and you can find the first two sermons from the series on YouTube or on the podcast. We encourage you to listen to them. You'll know that we can't encapsulate everything of what it means to pledge allegiance first to Christ and serve faithfully as Americans in simply one sermon. So, I'll spend some time on those. This morning we're going to read from Galatians, chapter 3. But before we do, I invite you to get comfy in your pews, and let's take a couple of deep breaths together, okay? So, let's take a deep breath in.

And breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in.

And breathe it out slowly.

And 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 so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments, that you would quiet any voice within us but your own that we might hear the word you have 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.

All right, Galatians, chapter 3. We're going to read verses 23 through 29 together.

*Now, before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a*

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend David Powers  
Sunday, August 16, 2026

---

*disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

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

So, as we've done each week, we need to frame the text that we just read. We have to answer the question, why did Paul write this letter to the Galatians? Paul had founded, as we know, many churches. He had founded this particular church among largely Gentile converts. This is important for us. It frames everything that we are going to talk about. Gentiles were converted to Christianity; and after he left, other Christian teachers arrived. We might think that Paul was the only one traveling around and sharing a version of the gospel, but he wasn't. Christian teachers arrived, and they argued that Paul's gospel was incomplete. And if Gentiles were going to become full members of the people of Israel's God, they should take on the traditional covenant makers of Jewish life. Especially, they argued for circumcision, and apparently, according to the rest of this letter, to dietary observations as well.

Paul sees this as no small thing. This is not simply a minor disagreement for Paul. It's not about religious practice for him. He sees this instead as a fundamental challenge to the gospel that he preached. That explains why Galatians is so unusually heated. If you go home this afternoon and spend some time inside reading Galatians, it's short, you should do it. Also, it's going to be like 108° this afternoon. If you spend time with it, you'll see he doesn't really beat around the bush. He skips the customary thanksgiving at the beginning of the letter, and almost immediately says, essentially paraphrasing him, "I cannot believe you are doing this."

His concern is not simply people in the church aren't getting along, which is his concern in some other letters. It's not that here. There's an argument underneath this passage that is of so much more consequence.

And it is rooted in the question 'on what basis does someone belong?'

Before Christ, Paul says identity was marked and bound by law. These, some of them, circumcision and dietary restrictions, there are many others that shaped Jewish law. But in Christ, he says, the decisive marker of belonging becomes baptism and participation in Christ himself. What's important for us to recognize is that when Paul talks about that "there is neither Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female," he is not

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend David Powers  
Sunday, August 16, 2026

---

saying that distinctions cease to exist. Jews and Greeks still exist, male and female still exist, social realities remain. But those distinctions are...they no longer determine who has standing, who belongs, who possesses greater worth within the people of God. A community, even a nation, necessarily uses laws to define citizenship. Laws determine who is a citizen, who may enter, who may remain, who may vote, what rights and responsibilities are attached to that citizenship. That is part of what governments and communities do, but Paul is saying that the church of Christ is governed by another defining reality.

The law, whether it be religious or political, may tell us who belongs, who a citizen is, but Christ tells us who our brother is, our sister, our neighbor, and our fellow member of the household of God.

Interestingly, Paul is not asking the Galatian Christians to become less engaged in the place where they live. He is simply reminding them that their deepest, most abiding citizenship determines the character of every other citizenship they hold. Their defining characteristic of being found in Christ Jesus, that shapes every other relationship to place and citizenry.

As Americans, our citizenship is defined also by law.

But our citizenship in the kingdom of God is defined only by Christ. And the faithful Christian must never allow the first to cancel the obligations of the second. This is precisely where Christian nationalists get it dangerously wrong. They have decided that citizenship as Americans is the defining characteristic of who is welcome and who is not. Whose dignity should be defended and whose can be trampled upon. This belief is dangerous not only to non-citizens. It is dangerous to a true proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, as faithful Christians and proud Americans, the scripture asks us this day, who are our fellow citizens?

Americans, certainly, by law,  
but under the law of Christ, who are our fellow citizens?

Christ is clear in the Gospels. It is the refugee, it is the undocumented neighbor, it is the person of another race, it is the person whose politics we might despise. It is the Christian living on another continent; it is the person whom my nation may legally classify as an outsider, but whom my Lord refuses to let me regard as disposable.

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend David Powers  
Sunday, August 16, 2026

---

Paul is outlining to the Galatians that the law of Israel draws boundaries. Every society needs those category structures, Israel did, too.

But Christ in his ministry, over and over again, crosses those boundaries. If you've got extra time this afternoon, read Mark. Read Matthew, read Luke, read John, whatever you want, whichever of the Gospels you want to read, and skip specifically to the teachings and the way in which Jesus moves through the world. He sees these boundaries that are set up, these laws that are set up as simply mere suggestions.

These religious laws of the time, he says, we move through those because the way in which we understand belonging is defined by our God.

Christians live in two realities.

Especially Christians in America in this day.

We respect the legitimate role of civil law while refusing to let legal status determine human dignity or Christian responsibility or neighborly love.

Legal distinctions may be necessary for the functioning of a nation, but they are never sufficient for determining the moral obligation of a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

And so, then, how do we relate to people if we are to call ourselves faithful Christians? If we are to call on the name of Jesus in the same way that others do?

We must ask 'how do we relate to people? How do we treat people? How do we honor the dignity of people?' The question is no longer 'do you look like me? Do you live like me? Do you come from the place where I have come from and bear the markers that I bear?' The question is simply 'who is it that belongs in Christ?'

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, no longer male and female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

The question on the air this morning is where do we confess with our mouths that Christ has made us one, while our tables, our neighborhoods, our friendships, our politics, even our churches allow our fears to quietly reconstruct the divisions that Christ has already overcome.

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend David Powers  
Sunday, August 16, 2026

---

The question of belonging might be defined in some ways by legal distinction, but as it is defined by Christ, it encompasses all.

And I have to tell you this morning that that is the deepest of the good news of Jesus Christ. Because each of us, each of us in our different ways need to be covered by that sort of welcome. By that sort of inclusion. Each of us could easily find ourselves on the outside of welcome and belonging, but in Christ Jesus, we never will.

But for the faithful Christian in these days, it is not simply a question of how we understand belonging to ourselves. It is how we live it out in the world.

How is it that we judge the policies and the laws of our communities, of our state, of our nation? How is it that we hold to account those who represent us, who put pen to paper and make those laws? How is it that we advocate for those whose dignity remains steadfast in Christ regardless of the letter of the law. How is it that we stand in the gap? This time and in every time.

There are opportunities for that. In another of his letters, Paul is telling a church that they are no longer strangers to each other in Christ. Several years ago, this church created a ministry. We call it No Longer Strangers. Melissa Peeler is here this morning, and there are others amongst us who have done faithful and good work. It has been a testament to how the church is to respond. But as I said last week, there are a faithful many who are doing that work, but not enough.

There is more work to be done, especially now in our community. The stories are countless across Memphis and across our state and across the world. And I wonder, I wonder, my fellow citizens, what it might look like for a group of people at 1750 Union to actually deconstruct the divisions that Christ has already overcome right now. So that our tables, our neighborhoods, our friendships, our politics, even our churches might not be ruled by quiet fears. It might be ruled by the citizenship that we know in Christ. The clothing of grace and of welcome and of love and of belonging.

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to the promise.

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