

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, July 26, 2026

Friends, if you had a chance to read Sunday morning email or even This Week at Idlewild, then you are aware that we are beginning a new sermon series this morning. It will take us over the next four weeks together. We have called it I Pledge Allegiance, and we are going to spend the next four weeks examining what it means to be faithful Christians as we live as faithful citizens of the United States of America for those who call this place home here in 2026. I won't be able to cover all the things that need to be covered in the four weeks. And I have to be honest with you, I was trying my darndest to keep this one to like 15 minutes since we have Communion. And that...I blew that out of the water. I figured that one out on Wednesday. Here's the thing. There are so many more resources to, for you in your personal lives, in your personal devotional lives to wrestle with what that looks like for you. This series really grows from an effort leading up to July 4th of this year called Faith at 250. You can simply Google that and there are a ton of resources, some really interesting studies that were created that were not only scriptural studies but took some really important founding documents of our country...not just founding but foundational documents that have been created over time, and they do some comparisons, and there's a lot of opportunity to learn. So I commend that to you. Faith at 250. What I will tell you though is, if you showed up for the first time at Idlewild this morning, you picked a great Sunday to do it. We're going to be wrestling with some really, really sensitive and really, really difficult things over the next couple weeks, but things that we believe are really important to how Christians show up in public life and especially for us here at Idlewild, how we show up in Memphis and across our state and across our world. What you will not hear is a subscription to the prescribed binary of American partisanship. That's not going to happen. That isn't to say that everybody's not going to get some over the next couple weeks. Okay? If you identify strongly with one party or another or even with one end of the the spectrum or another politically, you will probably feel a pinch at some point, and I'm probably not doing my job if we don't all walk out of here with, as Jacob had, a little bit of a limp, right? But also a blessing. Okay, so we will...we'll sit with that. But as one of my favorite professors taught us in seminary, he said, "Jesus is always political. He is never partisan." Okay? And so we will wrestle with some really important things over the next few weeks.

And we begin this morning with a sermon entitled, *I Pledge Allegiance—No Other Lord*. No other Lord. Philippians chapter 2 is going to ground our study. But since we're about to talk about politics from the pulpit, let's take a couple deep breaths together. How about that? Okay, get comfy in your pews.

And 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.

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Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. In your power, you bind us together, each to the other and to you. And we are grateful. And we pray that by that same power, you might quiet us in these moments, that we might hear the word that you have to speak to us and indeed to your church this day.

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. Philippians chapter 2, we're going to read verses 5- 11 together.

In your relationships with one another have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who being in the very nature of God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness. And being found in human appearance, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place, and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God.

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

So, as Whitney reminded some of us, if you have...if you're an empty nester now, you might not know that school starts for some students tomorrow and for others a week from now. I had one sitting up here with me who said, "We start tomorrow?" And I said, "Maybe not. You might start a week from now." The school is upon us and the school year is upon us. And so as we were celebrating with our Adopt a School teachers, Idlewild Elementary teachers, that made their way over to be with us and to share in time around table earlier this week, it had me reminiscing a bit about the beginning of school. And I think all of us, it's not too hard to be in touch with the excitement that would come as the school year approached. Well, dread, but also excitement, right? You were meeting a new teacher, and if you had been away from your friends for the summer, you were coming back to them, right? You had probably been to some really cool places. I was reminiscing particularly this week about my primary years of education, those years that I spent at Brushy Creek Elementary School in Taylors, South Carolina. One memory that has taken first place is the specific way that we at Brushy Creek Elementary School began each school day. The beginning happened in two parts. First, there was the ringing of the school bell three times. Too often, I found myself more than a few steps away from the classroom as the third chime of that bell rang. And I knew I was about to get a tardy. It happened more than I wanted it to. The bell would ring three times and everyone would find their seat. And then our

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principal would come over the intercom, Principal Martin, and she would welcome us to Brushy Creek, and she would tell us that she hoped that we had a wonderful day and then would commence announcements. I was texting with a few teachers this morning. So announcements are, like, still a thing, right, in some schools.

The principal or some leader comes over the intercom, and they share the news of the day, and then something would happen. Then someone with a voice the tone of mine, a young child my age would come over the intercom, and that child would have the privilege of leading the entire school in the Pledge of Allegiance. And so they would invite us to rise and to put our hand over our heart and to find the flag in the room, and then they would lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance. And if I tell you that these teachers and administrators knew how to leverage that moment...! You only got to lead the Pledge of Allegiance if you didn't have tardies like I did, right? If you were a stellar student, right? If you served on the Student Council, the default person when they couldn't find anybody else was the President of the Student Council. And I remember in elementary school that person was the coolest person in the entire school.

And so we would all rise, and we would put our hand over our heart, and we would recite the Pledge of Allegiance. It was a mark of my childhood. It was foundational to becoming a thoughtful citizen of these United States. We began every day with love and allegiance to our country.

There was also a tension in the air for me because I went to church every Sunday, and like we do here at Idlewild, there are flags present, but they aren't here in the sanctuary. They are outside the doors. Right? Because when we move into this place, what we are claiming is that there is an allegiance which takes priority over all other allegiances in our lives. And so even as a child, I remember wrestling with this idea of relationship—between love and allegiance to country and love and allegiance to Christ.

The text this morning invites the faithful Christian to wrestle with that same tension. Our text this morning is one that you can find in the lectionary on Palm Sunday because this text speaks to both the possibilities of the lordship of Jesus and the dangers of the enmeshment between allegiance to country and to God or more specifically to religion and to government. When Jesus enters the holy city, which we remember every year on Palm Sunday, he does so on the back of a donkey. He does so with crowds shouting Hosanna and laying leaves and branches at his feet as he makes his way there. When he enters the holy city on the back of a donkey, some of you are probably aware that there was another parade that day coming in from the other side. It was a royal parade. And so Jesus sets up this situation as a significant moment for those who were to

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follow in his way to recognize the difference in governmental power and the power of God. He rides in on a donkey as a parody of sorts, exposing the myth of the powerful, exposing the lie so deeply rooted in that culture that Caesar was God.

Even the people, though, who joined in their loud hosannas, they were equal parts celebrating Jesus and mocking Caesar.

That's when this text is often read in our liturgical year. So I felt like it was an important one for us to begin with as we start this series. Paul was very well acquainted with the dangers of religious nationalism, of the way in which faith and country can be joined together, the dangers that would be manifest in a leader acting as if they possess the wisdom and indeed the power of God and of citizens falling prey to that belief. And Paul did not want Christians early in their journey with Christ to fall into the trap of mixing their new religion with their national identity.

However, he did certainly hope that their faith in Christ would inform how they engaged in the civic square. how they engaged in public life. So Paul's message is actually pretty balanced here. He says...he gives a personal instruction in verse 5. "And in your relationships with one another," "in your relationships with one another," that's where he starts. Before you get to the public square, Paul says that it is your relationships within the community, with your neighbors—that is actually the place where you need to focus your energy. In your relationships with others, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus or have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

What was that mindset? Well, he goes on to say, he goes on to choose two specific character traits of Jesus, humility and obedience to God. In verse 8, "and being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself." Jesus did. "He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross." He could have named anything in that moment characteristics of Jesus. What he names is humility and obedience. Not obedience to country, but to God.

Paul knew that their world would try its darndest to center their lives on other values.

But he wants the Christians in Philippi to be centered on Christ alone. for them to know with all of their hearts that there is no other Lord but Christ.

"Therefore, God exalted Christ to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. So that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father."

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Paul recommends a response to the Christians in Philippi who are wanting to follow in the ways of Jesus—to manifest humility and obedience to God in their lives together. Because he knew that if they did that in their worshiping communities, if they centered Christ and Christ's values, then their broader communities would be impacted in ways that would ultimately glorify God. There would be a group of humble people obedient to the message of grace and peace and welcome that would move through their communities. And by the ways that they serve the least of these, they would glorify God. There would be a group of people who wouldn't fall prey to the same lie that turned the parade watchers from those who yelled hosanna to those who yelled crucify him.

So with Paul's lesson, we shift our focus to our nation, our faith, and our warning. We live in a time when many people who claim the name of Christ have at best fallen into the trap and at worst purposefully co-opted and manipulated the gospel of Jesus so as to enmesh their identity as Christians with their identity as Americans. To be very clear, in so doing, they have perverted the gospel of Jesus Christ. The phrase we use to identify those people now is that of Christian nationalism or Christian nationalists. And to be very clear, this way of moving through the world, of engaging in public life is a perversion of the gospel for many reasons. Not the least of which because it takes the subversive humility and obedience of Jesus and mortgages it to the arrogant egoist of American politics. It hollows out the gospel for the vulnerable and for the poor, for the hungry and for the foreigner, for the sinner and the disinherited. It hollows it out, and it replaces it with something akin to the religious nationalism of the Roman Empire. Of course, the irony then is still the irony now, and it's tragic, because these so-called Christians, these so-called Christians have allowed their religion to be co-opted by the same nationalism that ultimately killed Jesus, who died not at the hands of the church, but at the hands of his government.

So the warning of Paul rings dangerously true in our time as well.

Thank you preacher. You have brought us as low as we can go.

What now?

The important piece that we must hold in these times is that faithful Christians are still called and empowered to respond. They are called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses in our time right now. And the way that they are to do that, Paul says, is to center Christ Jesus as Lord.

Interestingly, it's only a few clicks away, right, from that which endangers our nation so. There is a centering that has to happen. There's a centering of Christ, but it is the manifestation of Christ

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and the characteristics that Paul points out, that is to be the center, and that is humility and obedience to God. And so when God says to care for the poor and the hungry to defend the vulnerable and to welcome the stranger and the foreigner, that is obedience and that is what takes center. When God says that there is a transformative power which can cleanse us and make us brand new, and it only can work through us when we are humble before our creator, that is the humility that needs to be centered. The Christian now is called to center their life in humility before and obedience to the God of Paul and the God of Christ. To recommit oneself to humility and to obedience. In many instances, centering Christ will necessitate for us a reordering of our lives and maybe even of our identities because people all across the spectrum politically, I would say, have come to a place of identifying still on that spectrum, holding that identity perhaps as primary...first.

And yet if we listen to and we witness to the ministry of Jesus, he's taking shots at everybody. Yeah. The neglect for the vulnerable. The religious folks who don't think that a woman has a place, right? The religious folks who don't believe that foreigners should reside, even though God instructs them very clearly, right? "As you have welcomed, as you have cared for the least of these, so you have welcomed and cared for me" he says. And so the faithful Christian now is to use Jesus's life, to use Jesus's ministry as the lens through which we view the faithfulness of every thing we see in public life, every policy decision locally, nationally, and across the globe. It is to put on the lens of Christ Jesus and to compare everything we see in the world with the savior that we see in Christ. The tension for me as I've prepared this sermon is the 'so what' because there's an opportunity for us to stay in our heads with this. And y'all know that I try each week to leave a nugget or two. I know Mary does as well. Incarnate practices which could enable you to live as clearer and clearer reflections of Jesus. But where I've landed this morning is to trust the Holy Spirit of God to use this message and the next couple in the exact ways that the Holy Spirit intends for you personally to be changed. Every single one of us needs it. And I'm not smart enough to know exactly how it is that your heart and your mind and your lives need to be reshaped to center Christ Jesus. You all probably know some ways. For some of you...for some of you, your response might look like a different sort of reading of the Daily Memphian or the Commercial Appeal. You might start seeing the news differently if you put on the lens of Christ. For others of you, it might be how you consume content in your social media feeds, filtering them through the lens of Christ. For still others, your response might manifest when you step into the voting booth later on this week. Some of you have the power of the pen in this community. Some of you have the power of the boardroom. Some of you have the power of the classroom. Some of you have your circle of friends and people. For still others, this series might simply have the purpose of reorienting your heart and your mind and your spirit toward Christ. "To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good," Paul says later.

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So my hope for us this day is that as we go from this place reflecting on the words of Paul to the Philippians, we might be challenged anew. Perhaps it might be helpful for us to begin each of our mornings over this month of August by recentering ourselves, by pledging our allegiance to the one that took on flesh, to the one that challenged the powers and principalities of this world, to the one that ultimately because of his grace and his humility and his obedience, took on death, even death on a cross. The bell's not going to ring three times to get you in your seat each morning. That's up to you. But don't think this isn't our work to do as those who call on the name of Jesus. Don't think that there is not a Christian witness that needs to be heard and seen in the world, in our city, in our state, across our country. A witness of grace and welcome and humility and obedience that leads to caring for the most vulnerable amongst us, that changes the way that we spend our money and our time. It changes every bit of our lives. Perhaps it is in this time that we might recenter our allegiance on Christ, for there is no other Lord. And perhaps as we do that, we might echo the words of Paul. "So that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God. Amen.