

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David Powers
Sunday, August 23, 2026

We are concluding this morning a four-week sermon series we've entitled I Pledge Allegiance, and we're going to ground ourselves in an Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah and a New Testament lesson from the Gospel according to Mark. Before we read those together, let us go to God in prayer. Let's get comfy in our pews and take a couple deep breaths together. Take a deep breath in

and breathe it out slowly. Another deep breath in.

And breathe it out slowly.

Let's breathe in God's mercies.

And breathe out God's mercies to others. Once more. 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 by your power you would quiet any voice within us by 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.

All right. As we have each week that we have preached this series, we encourage you to go back if you've missed a Sunday. You can see all the previous sermons on YouTube or you can listen to them on our podcast.

It was late April. I found myself in Stevenson, Washington, at a gathering of clergy that I had been invited to be a part of. We were discussing many different things. And one of the things that we preachers talked a good bit about during those couple days that we had together was how we were going to faithfully preach as the 250th birthday of our nation approached. So we had all sorts of conversations about what that might look like for us. And as I pointed you toward a couple times already, we centered our conversation around Faith 250. If you haven't checked out Faith250.org, please do. There continues to be a wealth of resources there for us and for you to study. But what I've realized as I've made my way through these four weeks is that the work of faithful citizenship is really important work to do. And four sermons does not a faithful citizen make. So the encouragement for you, even as we prepare to hear the proclamation of the word today, is for you to spend time over the next several weeks going deeper. Not only can you check out Faith250.org, but I encourage you to go and seek out the Reverend Sarah R. Speed's four-week series. She is the senior pastor at Second Presbyterian Church of Kansas City. She was at that gathering. I Pledge Allegiance is actually the title that she created.

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Reverend Dr. Tony Sundermeier, senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, did a five-week series earlier this summer entitled Church and State, a Practical Guide for Christians Today. I commend both Reverend Speed's and Reverend Dr. Sundermeier's series to you. Plenty more time for you to reflect. What's so interesting is the different ways in which the scriptures encourage us to think about faith and public life. And I think those are just a couple preachers who've done a great job of helping us to reflect that. So as we begin this fourth and final sermon, I hope it's not the last one where you contemplate what faithful citizenship looks like for you. Our lessons—the first from the Old Testament, Jeremiah 29:verses 4-7. Let us listen together for God's word to each of us and indeed to God's church.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf. For in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Here ends the reading. Our second lesson from the Gospel according to Mark, the 10th chapter, verses 42 to 45.

So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles, those whom they recognized as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you. Instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant. And whoever wishes to be first among you must be a servant to all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life, a ransom for many.

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

So the question that we have been wrestling with over the last several weeks is not really a new question. This question of faithfulness and faithfulness to God and faithfulness to the place in which you have been planted...this is not a new question. How is it that those who call upon the name of the living God are to faithfully live?

Jeremiah as prophet addresses the people of Israel, who God says God has sent to Babylon. How are they to live in that place? Exiles as they are, knowing its imperfections. The prophet tells them through the voice of God, "Build houses there. Plant gardens there. Grow families there. Put down roots in the soil of Babylon, a place you did not desire to go, but the place where I have planted you for this time." And in verse 7 of the 29th chapter of Jeremiah, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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you will find your own." The Israelites are told by their God through the prophet to seek the welfare of Babylon, a nation that isn't theirs, that certainly isn't righteous and is not, of course, the kingdom of God. God gives them these instructions because I believe God is striving to shape for them a more perfect union between their faith and their public life as Israelites in Babylon.

And what's interesting to me, the passage that's always struck me the most, is verse 7. What's interesting is that it seems that God has so designed creation that the welfare of God's people is inextricably woven into the welfare of the communities where God has placed them. That means that the people cannot be detached from, distanced from civic life in this place. Slaves and exiles they may be. It means that God's people are commanded to seek welfare in that place. And if God's people are commanded to seek the welfare even of Babylon, how much more should Christians take responsibility for the welfare of the countries and this day, particularly, of the United States in which we actually live and work and have our lives.

I believe the calling is not simply to build homes and plant gardens and grow families, though that might also be a calling God places on your life. The communal calling that Christians have in America in this day takes more shape in the Gospel according to Mark. Mark tells us what seeking the welfare of the nation looks like for Christians. According to Jesus, it is not domination. It is not control. It is not winning at all costs. It is not securing our own group's privilege even. Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant."

"Whoever wishes to be great must be a servant to all." Jesus grounded faithful civic engagement as service for the common good. That's what he means when he speaks in verse 45. "For the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life, a ransom for many." Jesus is setting up a contrast here. Nations measure greatness by power over others. Jesus measures greatness by service to others. Christians therefore do not serve the nation or the place where they have been planted because we believe America is the kingdom of God. We serve it precisely because it is not. We serve it because God has placed us here to seek its welfare. We serve it to endeavor to shape by God's grace a more perfect union between our faith and our public life. If Christians genuinely love this country, what do we owe it? Not unquestioned loyalty, not control, not contempt, and certainly not withdrawal. We owe it our faithful participation in its common good. To love our country faithfully is to give thanks for its goodness, to tell the truth about its failures, to protect the dignity of our neighbors, and to give ourselves in the service of its flourishing.

Each week we've reflected a bit on the particular ways that you might be called to do that here in and through the ministries of Idlewild, because we believe that for those of us whom God has

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sunday, August 23, 2026

seen fit to plant at 1750 Union Avenue in the heart of Midtown Memphis, God has a particular calling.

Memphis is not Babylon. Let me be clear. It is a city of rich history. It is a place of fertile soil in which we actually have the privilege of getting to build homes and plant gardens and grow families.

But it is the place where each of us also sees difficulty and challenge. We see division between the rich and the poor. We see division between people of different races. We see division even amongst people of faith who call upon God by different names.

So what is it? What is it that we are to seek in this time? Why is it that God has seen fit to plant a group of people at 1750 Union in the heart of this city?

My hope is that the spirit of God might give you clarity over the way in which you are particularly called to seek the welfare of the city. Jeremiah leaves it general, but Mark is very specific. It is to seek the common good of this community. And so I pray that the calling of God in Christ might not remain abstract for us. That we might seek the welfare of our nation by seeking the welfare of the place where God has planted us. And that faithful citizenship might take shape in the way that we care for the widow and the orphan, for the poor and the hungry, for the refugee and the outcast.

We owe not this place our unquestioned loyalty. We owe it not an attempt to control. We certainly don't owe it contempt or our withdrawal.

Our calling is the full participation in the common good.

I've been praying a lot over these last four weeks. This series has garnered a good amount of participation from y'all. More people showing up for worship, more people watching online. It seems to me that there's a hunger that is there for us in these days. I pray it doesn't stop for us after four sermons. I pray we go deeper. I've been praying a lot for our church to know exactly how it is God's calling us to serve in this time. My deepest prayer is that the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit might meet us as we strive to build a more perfect union between our discipleship of Christ and our devotion to our country, between our confession of faith and our participation in public life, between our love of nation and love of neighbor, between the citizenship that we carry and the discipleship we are called to practice, between the nation we call home and the kingdom to which we truly belong. My hope is that we might love America enough to celebrate with honesty its goodness,

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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that we might love America enough to tell the truth about its shortcomings.
That we might love America enough to seek the welfare of its people.
And that we might love America enough to give ourselves in service to the common good.

Through it all I pray we remember as God called the Israelites in Babylon, as Christ called the people to which he preached in Jerusalem, I pray that we might remember that America may be the nation we call home, but the kingdom of God is the place to which we belong. America claims our citizenship, and rightly so. But Jesus Christ alone claims our allegiance to the glory of God.

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