

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Lucy Cummings
Sunday, October 11, 2026

As we turn toward the word of God, I invite you to take a couple of deep breaths together. Breathe in deeply. Let your shoulders drop and exhale.

And breathe in the grace of God. And breathe out the grace of God to others.

God of power and might, may the boldness of your spirit transform us. May the gentleness of your spirit lead us. May the wildness of your spirit surprise us. May the gifts of your spirit be our goal and our strength. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This morning we begin a four-week series in which we will explore four Greek words that we believe every Christian should know. Greek, of course, is the vernacular of the New Testament. And when David asked me to take this Sunday, he neglected to tell me that we were going to be talking in Greek. I was not and am not a Greek scholar, but we will muddle through somehow. Our scripture comes from the Gospel of John 14:verses 15- 21. It's part of Jesus's farewell discourse in which he told the disciples what to expect upon his death. Listen now for the word of God.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will ask the father and he will give you another advocate, Parakletos, to be with you forever. This is the spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him or knows him. You know him because he abides with you and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you. In a little while, the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day, you will know that I am in my father and you in me and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me. And those who love me will be loved by my father and I will love them and reveal myself to them.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I wish you could have known him. Maybe some of you did know him. The Reverend Dr. Paul Curry was a minister in our presbytery for a long time, a graduate of Southwestern at Memphis, now Rhodes College. I think his roommate was Dr. Bill Coley, who some of you may remember as a member here. Paul stood a little below average height. He had blue eyes that crinkled at the corner when he smiled. He always smiled. He had a massive sense of humor, and he was the kindest man I have ever known. Now his wife Dot was normally with him, and I often saw them as two parts of one whole. When I worked for the Presbytery of the Midsouth, I traveled to Carruthersville, Missouri, quite often, and I stopped to see Paul and Dot. They lived in the former manse that the First Presbyterian Church of Carruthersville gifted them with after his 39 years of service to that church. 39 years with the same people in the same church. He deserved a house. The whole city loved Paul and Dot. The city of Carruthersville honored them with a Dr.

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Paul Curry Day, and they named a part of 7th Avenue Dr. Paul Curry Avenue. A friend told him, "Paul, don't get cocky about this. There are only two things on that road, the church and the jail."

I think I remember every single time I ever visited in their home. I'd always call first to make sure that the visit was convenient for them, and they always acted like they would like nothing more than for me to visit. When they both crowded in the doorway and opened the aluminum door off the garage, they exclaimed and fussed over me and ushered me through the autumn gold and avocado green kitchen through the dining room with the silver service on the sideboard. And they settled me into a lovely floral brocade chair. We all sat together facing one another. There was no TV. There was no magazine out. There was no crossword puzzle. It was just the three of us together. We talked of this and that. Their daughters, granddaughters, had both worked at Pinecrest. Their son had worked at Pinecrest as well. We talked about what was going on in their church and the friends that we had in common. And we talked about the Presbytery of the Midsouth. Just talked. But steadily they built me up. They believed in what I was doing. They asked my opinion and valued it. They listened to me and passed on wisdom of their very own. And when I tried to turn the conversation and direct it to them, they very cunningly directed it back to me. Every single time, I left there feeling as if I had been sitting with God and Mrs. God. I was the beloved child who never needed to doubt or fret. They were delighted to see me, and I was delighted to be seen by them.

You know that feeling you get when you are on holy ground that there's something bigger happening out there. There's something more sacred, even holy spirit infused. Every time with Paul and Dot felt as if they would go to the ends of the earth for me. You couldn't tell me nothing. I was so full of myself.

Honestly, I was just full and at peace in my mind, in my body, in my soul. I was at peace.

Parakletos.

Paraclete in English.

It's my favorite Greek word. Maybe because it sounds like God is a parakeet, and that's just funny to me. But then maybe it's because of the three persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit just captures my imagination most fully. God the creator, Jesus the redeemer, and then there's the shy one, the Holy Spirit, who is our breath and is the fire that burns hot within us. The paraclete, the Holy One, Holy Spirit as the encourager, as the intercessor. Paul and Dot were like the dovelike Holy Spirit, the one that was there at Jesus's baptism and yours and mine, cracking open the heavens and announcing to anyone within earshot that this blessed child was and is of God. And God is well pleased. This is the dove that Noah threw out of the ark to see if there was dry land anywhere. And lo and behold, the Holy Spirit came back with an olive branch in its beak and the good news that God and God's people were reconciled.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Paul and Dot—they gave me rest and they helped me find myself. They polished me up like they had spit on their thumb a little and wiped something off my cheek. They sent me back out ready to do ministry again. This helper, the comforter part of the Godhead gets overshadowed sometimes. The creator and the redeemer did and do such splashy work. They get loads of space in the Bible and that's necessary. That's very necessary. We need to know who God is and how God works in the world. It's really easy for us to tell stories of God leading the Israelites through clouds or knitting us together in our mother's wombs. We can't wait to share how Jesus turned over those tables in the temple and brought people back to life.

But the quiet Holy Spirit—

That's a little harder, maybe less exciting.

One of the ancient Christian teachers talked about the relationship this way. They said, "God is the sun, the source of all light and life. Jesus is the beam of that same sun streaming toward earth. And the spirit, the spirit is the point of light that actually arrives and touches the earth with warmth and energy." The spirit is the point where God actually arrives. God's active presence in the world. Perhaps you have felt the spirit's presence in your own life. And sometimes that point of light is just that, one point of light shining on one thing. And sometimes it has such a piercing hot intensity. Sometimes it's like a shove. And sometimes it knocks us to our knees. In the Celtic Christian tradition, they say that the Holy Ghost—those of us who are of a certain age, remember when the Holy Spirit was always called the Holy Ghost—the Holy Ghost doesn't only make us dance and speak in tongues. Sometimes it makes us apologize and shut up and examine ourselves.

You know, it would have been easy for Idlewild Church to mind its own business, to speak in the tongue of racism in the 1950s and 60s and 70s. Our place right here in Midtown Memphis situated us in the midst of this growing city, proximate to both poverty and wealth. Reverend Paul Tudor Jones came to us in 1954, and the spirit of the living God settled around us.

Maybe not...maybe not settled. Maybe the spirit danced frenetically. Maybe burned hotter than anyone expected. As Memphians grew increasingly agitated and race relations stretched so tightly, Tudor and the people of Idlewild realized that playing together...playing together might bridge the segregation between blacks and whites. And I am certain that people pushed against it, perhaps violently. I'm certain that it was scary for the congregation as well as those folks who came through our doors trusting that we would keep them safe here. Storyboard Memphis records that on the night of April 4th, 1968, an interracial group was meeting right down in our parlor to plan a summer recreation program for black and white kids. It was then that they received word that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot. As tensions spiraled, the Holy Spirit burned hot. Idlewild stood solid and remained a place of God, of inclusion, and of welcome to all

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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different kinds of people. Not everyone agreed. Of course. We lost members. We were so scared of that. They were good people. They were good people who were convicted differently, but they felt called another way. Idlewild was vilified in the press. Our neighbors fussed at us. Not only for integrating our recreation program then, but even now for hosting our working poor and unhoused siblings at More than a Meal. For opening our doors and our hearts to the LGBTQIA+ community without judgment and with love.

For establishing CAFE for disadvantaged children and families who needed to build resilience.

I have watched the Holy Spirit soften hearts and bind us together a little more tightly. And I have seen some holy fights that turned ugly.

And I've seen apology and reconciliation. This is the Pentecost paraclete. The Celtic tradition calls this *paracletus*, a wild goose, flapping around and running straight at trouble and closed doors. This one fashions fascinators of flames to put on our heads and blows the church out into the street, acting the fool for Christ. This one is the advocate who stands beside us in court pleading our cases so that big passionate things, God things, can happen in the world. Things of justice, things of righteousness. This one, this counselor, is fierce and tells truth that annoys the heck out of us and challenges our mambipambiness with exquisite pinpoint clarity while strengthening our backbones with firehoned blue steel.

This one, this Holy Spirit, will not allow go along to get along complacency.

We can't outrun, we can't avoid, can't unhear, can't unfeel the Holy Spirit, and we never will. That's Jesus's promise.

So my dad died in 2012. He was a good and faithful servant. What more could we have asked of his 94 years? We miss him terribly, even today. But we also understood that death is a part of life.

My mom died in 2020 at 91 years old. And suddenly without parents, Carol and Buddy and I became adult orphans. Our tether to the past was gone. Some of you understand that feeling. I describe it as feeling unmoored, adrift.

And here's a business opportunity for you from someone who knows. I am convinced that there needs to be a service. Call a mom or phone a dad. That you call when you abruptly figure out that now you're the adult in the room. Somebody to tell us how to make that dip that we had that one time at that barbecue in the summer. Or somebody to tell us how to miter the edges of a frame, but then just do it for us anyway. and maybe somebody to give us some wisdom on how to get rid once and for all of the grief that makes us want to burrow under the covers.

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After Jesus healed and taught and raised Lazarus from the dead, after the crowds shouted hosana and waved their palm branches, after the disciples had joined into Jesus's heady ministry on fire for Jesus, as it were, they were at supper together. Jesus washed their feet. He knelt in front of them and washed their feet and tried to impart some knowledge once again. You know, they never got it. The disciples never got it. But maybe this time you can imagine that tender scene.

Jesus says that he will be gone like final words from a beloved relative.

Jesus told them again and again that he would leave them. And can't you imagine? Have you ever felt how the breath leaves you when you hear something like that? How you can't believe it. An incredulous grief settled around them. How adrift, unmoored they felt after living in the fire around Jesus.

There's a theologian named Leonardo Boff, and he spent much of his life working among the poorest of the poor in South America. The spirit remains the source of hope for him and his communities as they work for justice. Boff's words about the spirit can be words of assurance for you and for me. When the spirit seems to have gone away, he said, "The spirit is that little flicker of fire burning at the bottom of the wood pile. More rubbish is piled on and rain puts the flame out and wind blows the smoke away. But underneath everything, an ember still burns, unquenchable. The spirit sustains the feeble breath of life in the empire of death."

Jesus told us that he would ask God to send another advocate, the paraclete, the Holy Spirit to be with them and us. He would not leave them or us orphaned.

Perhaps, beloved, you have felt the gentle breeze of the dove's wing or the wind from the flap of the wild goose. Perhaps you have felt, like our Methodist siblings, a strange warming of the heart. Maybe you haven't. Doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. All who love him and keep his commandments are still called, are still empowered, are still trusted to carry out the work of Jesus and the will of God, reconciling, restoring, and singing for justice.

You are not left alone.

The fire still abides in you and in me. It's not dependent upon our knowledge or our doctrine or our fancy theology.

No, it only depends on our trust that the God who is and was and will always be is with us now and forever more. Amen.