

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Dr. Steve Haynes
Sunday, October 18, 2026

Please pray with me. Lord, as we hear your word read, silence in us any voice but your own and open our hearts and minds to your inspiration. Amen.

The scripture for today is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4:verses 1-4. Listen for the word of God as it's proclaimed by Paul the Apostle.

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one of your calling. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Here ends the reading of the word.

So when David asked me to preach in a sermon series titled Greek 101, I thought about my first encounter with biblical Greek, and it was almost 50 years ago—was my junior year at Vanderbilt. Along with a couple of my friends, we decided to sign up for the introductory Greek course at the Divinity School. Because we were planning on attending seminary after college, we thought it would be a good idea to get a head start on learning the biblical languages. As it turns out, Koine Greek, which is the language of the New Testament, is fairly easy to learn once you master the alphabet. It's also kind of fun since you get to translate passages of the New Testament that are familiar. And not only that, but learning Greek vocabulary can be theologically instructive. For instance, among the Greek 101 vocabulary words is ekklesia, which appears 114 times in the New Testament. English translations of the Bible render ekklesia as church, but Greek students know it's actually a compound of two words—of klesis, call, and ek, out. So ekklesia actually means those who were called out.

This means the word translated church in our Bibles doesn't refer to a physical structure but to the people called out of their culture and into the body of Christ. And in the first century there was usually only one ekklesia per city. So members were stuck with each other, and they managed controversy and division the best they could. And, trust me, there was a lot of controversy and division to be managed. If you don't believe me on that one, just read Paul's letters to the church at Corinth. Klesis, the root of ekklesia appears 11 times in the New Testament, and four of those are in the passage we just read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In every case, klesis refers to the individual callings of those within an ekklesia. And Paul is constantly reminding members of the churches he's founded that the ekklesia only thrives when everyone is living out his or her klesis. In the passage we just heard, Paul addresses disunity in the Ephesian church by exhorting Christians to lead lives worthy of their klesis. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul asked each member of the ekklesia, including those who were enslaved, to consider their own klesis. And in Philippians, Paul emphasizes that despite his imprisonment, he is pressing on with the goal of his klesis. Interestingly though, Paul never

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presumes to tell anyone what their klesis actually is, but he constantly reminds each of them to keep their calling in view.

Of course, the individual calling that Paul emphasizes in these letters is a central theme in the Old Testament. Just think of Abraham's call to relocate. Noah's call to build an ark, Moses' call to confront Pharaoh, Nathan's call to launch a rhetorical ambush on King David. Think of Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Amos who were called to announce the messages of judgment and repentance and eventual restoration to God's people. Think of Hosea, who's called to marry a prostitute. And think of Jonah, who was called to preach repentance to an enemy nation. Based on these stories and on Jesus' constant summons for people to follow him, Christians have always emphasized the importance of individual calling. The medieval church privileged a particular sort of calling, the divine summons to pursue a life of special sanctity by becoming a priest or a friar or a monk or a nun. But in the 16th century, Martin Luther, who, by the way, was both a monk and a priest, radically democratized the notion of call by applying it to every Christian. Whatever one's estate or occupation, Luther said, everybody from peasant to Pope was called to live a holy life in service of one's neighbor. And in the modern era, when people began to choose how and where they would live their lives, the Christian notion of call was democratized even further. One's calling was no longer assumed to be limited by one's class or gender or birth order, but it was assumed that it would take account of one's gifts and desires as well the world's needs.

And as people's options proliferated, discerning one's individual calling became the duty of every member of the ekklesia.

Today, the idea that we each have a divine calling has fallen out of favor among mainline Protestants. That's us. Is it because we think that given all the suffering, the homelessness, the hunger, the desperation of people in the world, it's selfish to believe that God could care that much about us? Is it that we've accumulated enough cultural capital to believe that we can take care of ourselves? Or is it that the idea that God has a plan for us sounds too evangelical or megachurchy?

The idea that God calls people was certainly taken for granted in the evangelical church I grew up in. And I know a lot of us are refugees from churches more conservative than Idlewild. But conservative doesn't really begin to describe my religious formation. In the early 1970s, my church group was an outpost of the Jesus movement. And as a young teenager, I identified as one of the Jesus people. I would say Jesus freak, but that implies long hair, and neither my parents nor my middle school would budge on that. So, I made up for that restriction by donning a one-way t-shirt, wearing a wooden ichthys fish around my neck, and preparing for the rapture.

When I was 14, I got on a bus with some people from my church to drive from Miami to Dallas to attend something called Explo 72, which was an evangelical festival that Time Magazine

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dubbed the Christian Woodstock. And while there, tens of thousands of us engaged in door-to-door evangelism with a tract called The Four Spiritual Laws. On the off chance that you've not seen one of the three billion copies of The Four Spiritual Laws that have circulated since the 1950s, let me break it down for you. First, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. Second, sin has separated you from God. Third, Jesus Christ is God's only provision for sin. And fourth, to be reconciled to God, you must personally receive Christ as your Lord and Savior.

Revisiting that period in my life over 50 years later, I'm struck by two things. First, that as a 14-year-old, I had the courage to knock on strangers' doors armed with nothing but a religious tract. But second, that despite the theological changes I've undergone in the last half century there's nothing in the four spiritual laws that I don't believe. I do see that emphasizing klesis, individual call, to the exclusion of ecclesia church is a mistake since it gives the impression that it's possible to lead the Christian life in isolation from others. But here's the thing that I'm drawn back to. If you and I don't take seriously God's plan for our lives, then whose plan are we following? Not sure God has called you to a particular profession? Fine. Your employer will be happy for you to serve the company's bottom line. Don't think God cares about where you live or how you spend your spare time? Fine. Your family, your peer group, or your Facebook friends will gladly fill that void. Don't believe God cares about the details of your life? Fine. The culture you've been called out of has a script for you. I think perhaps we resist the notion that God has a plan for us in part because it puts so much pressure on us to discern what that plan is.

Believing we have a divine calling raises some urgent questions. What is my calling? How do I recognize it? And worst of all, have I missed it? Over the years, each of these questions has haunted me. I mentioned I decided to study Greek in college because I was headed to seminary. But actually, I didn't really feel like I had much choice. Ever since my Jesus person days, everyone I knew had been telling me that I was called to ministry. I assumed they had to be right. How could so many pious people be wrong? But something unexpected happened when I tried to live out that calling. I went to seminary. I fell into a debilitating depression. I dropped out of school. I went home to Florida feeling disobedient and carrying a huge load of shame. Telling myself I was only taking a break, I took a job at a church and signed up for something called Clinical Pastoral Education at a local hospital. basically training the chaplain.

But a year later, I had quit CPE and had been fired from the church. And at that point, I had to admit I was on the wrong path. To pay the bills, I took a job as a teacher and a coach at a local high school. Although I really had no idea where that path might lead, if anywhere. Eventually, teaching remedial math at an inner city high school convinced me I wanted to be a college professor, and coaching became a way to pay for graduate school. But the fear that I had missed God's call stayed with me and eventually led me to finish seminary just in case. When I arrived in Memphis at age 31, I wasn't sure whether I was called to an academic or to a pastoral vocation. In hopes of somehow combining them, I asked the Memphis Presbytery to affirm that

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God was calling me to teach, which they did by ordaining me to teach at Rhodes. And since 2001, that's 25 years by the way, Idlewild has allowed me to develop the pastoral part of my call in ways that have been generous and profound for me. So if my life is any guide, God's wonderful plan for your life may not be straight or obvious and may only become clear in retrospect. I've shed a lot from my Jesus person days. A lot of hair, t-shirts, jewelry, bumper stickers, language, and beliefs. But I hold on to klesis, the conviction that each of us has a divine calling. Following that calling, of course, doesn't mean you won't suffer. I still have no idea exactly how my depression, my addiction, my divorce, or my long COVID fit into God's plan for me. And I'm even less confident about how my dad's cancer, my mom's Alzheimer's, my cousin's death from AIDS, or my niece's Down Syndrome fit into God's plans for them. And I can't tell you why God's plan for some of you has included disease, divorce, bereavement, and family alienation. But I do know that Paul's own calling was far from obstaclefree. If you can call flogging, stoning, shipwreck, exposure, and incarceration obstacles.

Perhaps you find it tough to trust in God's places. Or perhaps you're confident in your ability to manage your own life. Perhaps you've inherited good genes. Perhaps you eat well and exercise regularly. Perhaps you've got access to good healthcare. Perhaps you've figured out the work life balance thing. Perhaps you've done some sound financial planning. But taking klesis seriously, accepting that God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our life can free us up from having to rely on our health, our financial resources, or our good genes.

What remains when we set those things aside is the certainty of God's plan for us. Even if that plan turns out to be as opaque and as conflicted as mine has been.

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to whom be all glory and honor forever and ever. Amen.

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