

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Dr. Catherine Meeks
Sunday, February 18, 2024

Let us pray.

Good and gracious Spirit, fall fresh upon us this morning. As you drew forth life from the chaos at creation, draw forth something brand new from us this day, that your peace may fall fresh upon our spirits, that we might incline our ears to hear your word for us, and that in hearing we might respond. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. And all God's people say together, Amen.

Our text this day comes from the Gospel of John, the fifth chapter. We'll read from verses 1- 15.

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep gate there was a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, which has five porticos. In these lay many invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for 38 years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up. While I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat, and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a Sabbath, so the Jews said to the man who had been cured, "It is the Sabbath. It is not lawful for you to carry your mat." But he answered them. "The man who made me well said to me 'take up your mat and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you take it up and walk now?" The man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Here ends the reading of God's word.

Thank you. Good morning. Morning. I hope everybody can hear me all the way back there. All right, good. It's so good to be here with you today, and, especially, to see that wonderful parade of little people. I just love that you pay that kind of attention to the children, because in our rushing around and being busy, we sometimes get impatient with the children. And they are to teach us things, one of which is about being patient, and, so, thank you for having that sense to know to pay attention to them. It is good for me to be here. I grew up in Arkansas, just across the river in um Morrow, Mariana, Forrest City, that area, so I feel like this is in many ways a home coming for me and a reunion. As I told the Sunday School class a little bit ago, 62 years ago my father died here in the John Gaston hospital, and I stayed in the Lorraine Motel. And so yesterday I spent time visiting those spots, because it was important to me to remember, to remember more than just remembering, you know, to really think about how it felt, what it was like to be here back then as a kid who was losing her father; and it did lead me back to some places of grief that I would not have guessed were there. And I finally figured out why I wasn't feeling so good at the end of the day was because it did touch back into those spaces, which leads

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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me nicely into what I want to say today, to just tell you about that. I think that for one thing we're much too pretentious on Sunday morning. You know, we come into the church, and we've all got to look like we got it together instead of being able to confess how much bubble gum we needed to stick ourselves together to make it through the doors, so that's why I want to start by telling you that I sit here with a heavy heart, a bit, because I remembered a lot yesterday that I hadn't remembered that way in a very long time. And it's important to do that. And one of the things I learned about grief. A couple of years ago I had two hip joint replacements, and losing a part of your body is a reason for grief. It's a reason to grieve. I actually asked the surgeon if I could have my joints to take home, and because I wanted to have a little funeral with them, because a part of me was gone, and I, you know, I mean I'm—it sounds weird, but I felt it was right. The hospitals of course said no cuz they're afraid I'll get some germs from my hip joints, I guess, or maybe sue them for something. But I did appreciate deeply having an orthopedic surgeon who was willing to ask the hospital if I could have them. And why did I want my hip joints? Because I wanted to say goodbye to that part of myself in a good way. But what I learned from that whole experience is that there was some grieving around that and that when you start grieving, the current grief goes back and visits its relatives and brings old grief back to you. And I understand now why it's so hard for people to grieve and allow others to grieve, because it's disconcerting, it's disruptive, it does a lot of different things to you; so if you can just kind of figure out how to go really fast, maybe you can get past it, but you really can't get past it. You just have to sit with it. So I decided to sit with it and to walk with it and to be with it for a few days, and after a few days it went on back where it was, where it came from. And I'm offering that this morning to say I hope that those of you, there are people in this room that are grieving about something, and that you will allow yourself the space to do that, the time to do that, and to do it on your own terms. We're so good at wanting to tell people what...how they're supposed to get through stuff, and I can't stand it when somebody's having a really hard time, and somebody says, "Well, it's just going to be alright, you know. You just need to be quiet." Nobody wants to hear it's going to be all right when they're in the middle of it's not alright, but really what we want is "Will you hold my hand and walk with me until it's all right?" So it would be better to say to people rather than it's going to be alright, it would be better to say, "I will walk with you until it's all right," because that would mean more to me, to you, to whomever. And this is the kind of human being that Jesus was. We spend so much time trying to make Jesus holy until we miss figuring out who Jesus really was, I think, because I think he was indeed a force. He does bring a message that is disrupting for us, but it wasn't about being holy, it was about being fully human, connected to God in ways that made your life mean more than it ever would have meant if you didn't make that connection. And I'm so glad that I have learned that, and I've given up on trying to be holy. It's just not, you know, not going to happen in this lifetime. Maybe in some other lifetime, we'll see, but for right now, I'm here walking on this path doing...doing the best I can to hear what I can hear and to live the best ways that I can be, and then fully human, connected to the God that I understand to be merciful and loving and to Jesus, who helped me to be able to believe that it's possible to be connected to that God, even though I don't really understand that God. I understand Jesus better. And if you have a clearcut, completely mapped out understanding of God, please stand up and tell us about it, you know, because everybody in the room would be glad to hear it, cuz you would be very unique if you've got that all figured out. I wanted to ask

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sunday, February 18, 2024

you, to invite you to put yourself into this story that we just heard. Put yourself at the pool, put yourself there, and where would you be if you were there? Would you be the angel stirring the water? Jesus? The others that are hopping in the water and not paying attention to who's around them necessarily? You know, we've taught this scripture for so long as a social justice kind of thing. We need to pay attention to other people. We need to be helpful, that's all true, but I think there's so...Jesus is always talking about a whole lot of stuff. Every time Jesus is talking, and we pick what we can pick, and then we go off and we stay with it, then for the next 50 years, so we miss the other, the rest of it. But it seems to me that there are layers and layers of things here to get at, and so I want to get at a different layer, the layer of who are you in the story, where are you in the story? The gentleman on the mat that can't quite get into the water to get the benefit of the Angel's power, the stirring of the water, whatever? Who are you if...if you put yourself in the story, if you can use your imagination to do that enough to put yourself in the story? We hear the scriptures so much and we hear it and we don't hear it, because we've heard it so much we miss hearing it. So what is it, what is this passage saying to you this morning if you put yourself in it? And then if you're there and you're not the man on the mat, do you wonder at all why Jesus is talking to him? Or if you're the man on the mat, do you wonder why is Jesus talking to you? How come Jesus is talking to me when all these other folks are here? And then how come Jesus knows something about him already? It says he knows that he'd been sick awhile. You know these are all questions that we're not going to get to answer, so you can answer them any way you want to, because you, I mean you might go home and ask Jesus, but I think you can just answer. You can just—one of the ways that I like to do this is to stay with the wondering, wondering, wondering what made him see him. How, why, how did Jesus see him? And then also wondering how can I see people and where they are and what their...what their struggle happens to be? But then there's that profound troublesome question—do you want to be well? “You know I've been here 30 years,” this man says; and usually when I used to read that I would say, “Oh, my God, what a bunch of unconscious folks were around this poor man! They let him lay there for 30 years, and nobody helped him get in the pool.” And then, um, in other days when I was really aggravated with the man on the mat, I would say, “Well, why didn't he just fling himself in the pool?” I mean, good gracious, in 30 years you could drag yourself over a little bit at a time and get there. You know, all of these little judgmental, quick responses that keep me from answering the question, “Do you want to be well?” So I keep the question out there somewhere while I'm judging back here. Don't we do that? You know, get to the essential. The essential is not ‘why isn't he in the pool?’ The essential is why am I not in the pool? Healing is offered to me, and Jesus is offering me consciousness, awakens, aliveness, a chance to live a different way, and maybe I'm just saying, “Oh, well, I'll come back later, or I'll get there when I get this, when I get that done, when I get something else done.” What do you want to be well? And I had to answer that question for myself, and...and I shouldn't say I had to answer it. I should say I have to answer it, because I don't think you answer it once and it's answered forever. I think the question is asked over and over and we have to keep deciding what is our answer. So from...and if you heard me preach at the Washington National Cathedral a couple years back, I talked about my journey with rheumatoid arthritis, and how arthritis was one of the pivotal places where I had to say, I had to deal with, “Do I want to be well or not?” And then if I wanted to be well, I had to make choices to be changed, to be different, to live differently, to eat

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Dr. Catherine Meeks
Sunday, February 18, 2024

differently, to exercise more, to do a whole lot of things that were not a part of my consciousness before. So I ask you today to ponder with me—are there places in your own journey, in your own soul, in your own space, the space that you're standing in right this minute, or I should say sitting in right this minute, where there is the question, “Do I really want to be well? Do I want to be well of that, you know, do I want to be well of my own little quirky stuff, of...at the end of the day sometimes being able to remember the wounding, the slights, the hurts much more than the gifts and the joy?” Letting you know somebody said a word over here that besmirched me and then I that's all I can remember, and I get to the end of the day, and the 40 other wonderful things that people said I don't know what they were cuz I'm so busy paying attention to that one person who said that one little thing back there that my little bitty ego said, “How dare you do that? How dare you think of me that way? How dare you speak to me that way or not speak to me?” Do I pay more attention to the half empty glass or they have full glass, and do I want to be well of that; and if I want to be healed from that, what do I have to do, because if I say yes, I want to be well, then my next question is the next question that comes after that, though Jesus didn't say that is what do I have to do, and this gentleman knew he was, he knew he knew he had some responsibility, so he says...he starts to explain why he hasn't been able to live into his responsibility. I'm thinking it feels to me at least like Jesus heard his hunger for wellness in the midst of what he was saying, and I...and it just speaks well to me that if I take a tiny half a step in that direction, I will be met by the energy, the Jesus energy, that will help me to do what I have turned my head in the direction of. The real question becomes do we believe any of it, which is much more than the biggest question we have to answer. Do you want to be well is a fantastic question, and has to be answered, but the bigger question over it is, “Do I believe being well is even possible, or do I think I even need to be well?” Maybe you think you already are. You know you're going to grow up. We grow up with this cultural narrative of these are the things we need to do, and then life will work for us, and we'll be great, and everything will just go the way it's supposed to. Maybe you think you're there, and if you do think that, then this is a moot point. But if you think you maybe could still improve a little or things could be a little different, and...and I want to say if they, if you are already there, the world is waiting on you to bring that message, cuz it's not there. It is not there. The world outside of these doors is not well. It needs us who have the courage to say we want to be well and willing to struggle in that direction to be a voice, to be a light to try to help people catch a glimpse that wellness is possible. But we have to believe it, cuz nobody's going to hear what we say if we don't believe it. You can be as eloquent as you want to be, as smart as you want to be, have read as many books as you want to read, if you don't believe what you're talking about, nobody will believe you. For a while they might, you know, mistake you for being authentic, but eventually folks will find out that you don't know. You, you, you talk about this stuff, but you don't know about it. Howard Thurman—as I mentioned earlier today, one of my most important teachers and mentors, along with arthritis and my children, and then just the ups and downs, Howard Thurman would say, the vicissitudes of life. My great teacher, Howard Thurman, talks about searching for the genuine. So the question, the answer to ‘yes, I want to be well,’ encompasses being willing to search for ‘what does wellness mean for you.’ You know, wellness may be one thing for me, something else for somebody over here, something for somebody over here, but ultimately you have to answer for yourself. “Is what I'm doing making me feel like I'm a well person?” And Thurman

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sunday, February 18, 2024

says that one of the ways we can answer that is by searching for what is really genuine, what do we really think, how do we really feel, what do we really want? The culture tells us we don't have the right to even ask those questions, because it thinks it can answer for us; but I tell you until you ask and answer those questions, you will live in a state of turmoil and discontent. And Thurman says you will be blown like a willow tree by every wind that comes by. To be blown like a willow tree because I haven't answered the basic bottom line human questions for myself. You know, we had in the black church, we sing an old song about standing in the need of prayer. "And it's not my mother, it's not my father, it's not my brother, not my sister, not all these other folks, it's me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer." Well, it's me, oh Lord, standing in the need of answering for myself these questions, and if I can do that, and this is what for me the story of Jesus asking this gentleman, "Do you want to be well?" It's an essential question that we have to answer individually. We have to answer as institutions. We have to answer collectively as a country and as a world, and there's no getting around it, I mean, we tried, we tried everything. We tried money, we tried greed, we tried power, we tried blowing up people and all, and we keep coming back to the same place. We're still in a mess. So, you know, like if you've tried everything, maybe you ought to try to try something new, try something new. Maybe try stepping back and being a little humble and being a little willing to see if there's another way. I want to encourage you to clear the competing voices out of your heads, all of us. And when I say that, I'll say it to you. I say it to myself. The voices that keep on arguing with us about answering this question and how we answer, you know the voices that say, "Well, you'll look really stupid if you do that." But maybe you'll be really content if you do that. So I'll...I will trade contentment for looking stupid any day of the week. I'll trade it. I'll take a chance on it. I'll take a chance on being well regardless of whether it looks well to anybody else. But being able to rest in the place of—I'm trying to be open here to the truth about myself, about my history, about my family, whatever, I'm willing to take a chance on—that for the sake of contentment. Not, you notice I didn't say happiness. I said contentment. Contentment embodies being able to live with the present without having to be an addict, without having to numb yourself, without having to be busy or sedated by shopping or substances or whatever. Contentment means. I can sit with the present and be okay, no matter what. I don't have to have noise. I don't have to have activity. I don't have to have distractions. I can just be with myself.

Carl Jung had a patient that was really having trouble, and he told the man, "Go home, be in a room by yourself. Don't do anything. Just try to confront yourself, try to listen to yourself, try to look at yourself." And the guy went and came back the next session; and Jung said, "Well, how did it go?" And he said, "Well, I played some music," and he named a few more things he did. Jung said, "No, that wasn't the point. I wanted you just to be in the room with yourself." He said, "Don't you know I can't stand to do that?" So if you can't stand yourself, who else can stand you? And if you can't stand yourself, what do you bring to the cultural narrative? This upheaval, disheveled energy that doesn't contribute to creating anything that begins to be healthy and whole. How do you clear out competing voices? Well, you got to learn what your voice sounds like, you got to acknowledge, we have to acknowledge, we have to separate. It's...it's difficult to separate my voice from my mother and my father and my sisters and my brother and my teachers

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Dr. Catherine Meeks
Sunday, February 18, 2024

and all these people, but that's part of the 'yes Lord, I do want to be well.' So let me hear because once you get clear about your own voice, you might stand a chance, we all might stand a chance to hear what God is saying to us, but in the meantime we don't know cuz there are too many things going on inside of our heads. Everybody has to figure out their own process in this. You have to decide. I do a lot of silence, a lot of journal keeping, a lot of interrogating of myself. You do what you do and whatever we do, it's fine if as long as we're trying to say 'yes, I do want to be well.'

I'm not here to say there's a prescription. I don't have any prescriptions. What I have is a narrative about a journey, the one that I've been on that I'm...that I've been talking about now for the last few minutes, and you're all on a journey of some sort, going from somewhere to somewhere. And this maybe is just a little bit of information about bandage closets, some bandage closets that you may not have thought about or seen that might be helpful to you. I think we need to be much much better, get much much better at wrapping our arms around each other and trusting that folks do have some sense of how to go forward, and we want to go with them. We want to go together. We want to be supportive. We want to be on the journey together. We're all wounded, wounded, everybody in this room wounded in different ways by the ways in which we have constructed the society around race and difference and all kinds of difference, but gender, economic, race, all of that stuff. We have all these differences and all of these issues and most of that stuff is just set up to make a hierarchical structure work for the people with the power to do that. Now we're caught in that energy, but we don't have to live in it in silence, and we don't have to accept it as the final answer.

The final answer for me as I finish with speaking to you is you start close in. The poet David Whyte, who's somebody I love a lot, and, "Anybody know David White in the audience?" Yeah a handful of people know David Whyte. He has a little poem called Start Close In.

Start close in, do the first thing first
the thing you don't want to do
do the first thing first, the thing you don't want to do
not the second, not the third, the first

So I ask you to take these two things with you. If you're at the pool of Betha or Bethesda, however you say that word in English, in Modern English I mean, and Jesus is asking 'do you want to be well' and you have said 'yes, I do,' then what is the first thing? What is the first thing that you need to do to bear witness to the truth of the answer that you gave to Jesus? And nobody can answer that question for you but you. Nobody knows that answer except you, and you have to have the courage to answer and let the answer take you where it takes you. And to be honest, to really be honest, you know, we just, I just think that maybe it's because next week I'm going to be 78, so I am done with pretense, games, silliness. Don't waste my time, cuz I've lived longer than I've got to live. So let's be, let's just bring what we got to the table, and let's enjoy it and

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Dr. Catherine Meeks
Sunday, February 18, 2024

celebrate and be the best we can be with what we've got, and let's not have pretense here. So try to sit with this, and make sure you're answering for yourself, not for your neighbor, not for your kids, spouses, siblings, but for yourself. When I ask that question, it has to be for me, and the answer has to be about me, and I have to decide how much truth I'm going to tell to myself, because there's no, you know, it's silly to think we can hide our truth from God. God knows already, so we're just hiding from ourselves, really. I mean but isn't that just a human thing to do, you know?

I'll tell you this last little story here about the native peoples. It comes from native people's culture. The wise ones that were creating the Earth were thinking that they wanted to when they made...creating humans, when they made us, they wanted to put the secret to what would make you fully human and live your life well, they wanted to put that someplace where people would go on the journey to get there. So they thought that they would put it, they talked about putting it in the sky, but they said no humans were so clever they would go look in there quickly for it, and they wouldn't go on the journey the way they needed to. And so then they thought they would bury it in the Earth because that would, they could, that would take a while, but they'll still not do the work the way they need to. They would put it in the ocean, but the same thing was true, and then they decided they would put it in the heart, because that would be the last place we would look—inside ourselves. We would go excavate the universe before we go excavate our hearts. Jesus's invitation is to heart excavation, and it's a rough journey sometimes, but it's the best journey. And I thank you for being on it in whatever ways you're on it and hope that these words today encourage you to be more connected to being on it, and if you're not on it, to invite you to consider getting on it. The planet needs you. The planet's health and wellness and continued salvation needs us to get on with it and not to play and not to make excuses, but to work at really trying to be well, and to do that we start close in. Amen.