

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Catherine Meeks
Sunday, August 30, 2026

Good morning. Can people in the very back hear me? Okay. All right. Great. So, I don't have to yell. It's good to be back with you again today. After—it seems like longer than two years ago, but it's...time goes by so fast. I loved the children's illumination that you gave of my book, Pastor David. Thank you. I want to say a lot of things today, but it's a short time, so you're going to have to listen carefully and listen well. The first thing is the scripture that I've selected to kind of be an umbrella under which to operate is Hebrews 1 1:1-6, my favorite, one of my favorite sets of scripture that talks about faith. Having faith, that is. It is impossible to please God if we don't come to God with faith, but if we do come we have to be aware that God is quite pleased with us for searching for God through the lens of faith. And I asked myself, "So what is faith? What is that? What is that energy?" Because I believe that everything in life is about energy. So what is the faith energy really about? And some people have talked about faith being the ability to look at reality, look at a set of facts that look absolutely impossible and watch those facts change. To watch the change, to watch God actually do something that surprised you, to watch God work out situations that you didn't think could ever be different. I think I wrote Building Bridges Across the Rivers of Difference with a deep sense of faith that we can be somebody in the United States that we have never been before. I have that faith. I have that belief. I have that hope. And I have spent the last 50 years of my life working to try to make that possibility real by believing at the very core of myself that there is one God in the universe who has created everybody in the image of God's self. And that's...and that has made everybody a beloved person of the creator. I don't care where you live. I don't care what your zip code is. I don't care where you went to school or didn't go to school. I don't care if you live in a mansion on a hilltop or under a bridge. God loves us equally. Now sometimes we don't like to think that way because we want to be too special and we want to be better than somebody else. Human beings have some capacity to just want to be up at the top. And so we created this hierarchy of human value. So we decided if you went to certain schools or if you lived in certain areas or if you had a certain color skin, you were better than somebody who didn't possess those qualities. That only led us to here with divisiveness, violence, and unsettledness that I don't think is pleasing to God for one minute. And anybody who thinks it's pleasing or thinks it's okay needs to really interrogate themselves about who their God is. Because a God who would make some people one way and other people another way and some people better than others is a very confused being. And it would be hard to believe in that being, I think, anyway.

So today I want to ask you to think a little bit about the possibility that God really intended for us all to really be one, to really see each other as kin to one another. And I don't mean in some superficial way, just you know 'let me tolerate you' way, but at the deepest level of ourselves that we are being asked to see one another as part of ourselves and part of God. We say so many words that don't mean anything. We say so many words that are just words that we're saying because we know how to say words. And you know when I wrote Building Bridges Across the Rivers of Difference, I was hoping that we might start a new conversation, a new conversation

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on race, that we might start a conversation that could actually lead us to a new place, to a new understanding of one another, a new acceptance of one another, not new toleration. Because nobody wants to be tolerated. There's nobody on the planet that wants to just be tolerated. People want to be accepted as they are for who they happen to be. So, I want to ask you today to think about your conversations, the conversations that you're having with yourself about different kinds of stuff that's going on in the world, about what's going on in your own life, and how those conversations intersect with the larger conversation in the outer world that can't seem to get itself straight. And ask yourselves if your conversation with yourself as individuals needs to reflect something different, a different energy. Is it possible that we can bring something from inside of ourselves to the struggles outside of ourselves that can make things different? "How can I contribute to creating an energy that disrupts the negativity, the violence, and the disarray in this country and on this planet" is a very important question. It is a very important question. And don't let the answer be that I'm too small, that I don't have, I don't know how, I don't know what to do. Don't let that be the answer. Let the answer be "I have faith and I'm willing to try." Because I think at the end of the day, all we all have to do is be willing to try. Willing to try. Willing to try to be a little more open, willing to try to be a little more accepting, willing to try to be filled with a little more grace.

And I'm gonna tell you a few things that can help to make that possible. The first thing is to be really truthful with ourselves. To really think about who we really are and what we really want personally. What am I after in this life? What do I want for myself? And then to imagine how other people might feel. You know, we sometimes act like, as human beings, that there's a subset of human beings. There's us and there's them, and there's no such demarcation in God's eyesight. So if we have an us and them understanding of reality, it is a reality that's outside of the purview of the God that we say we serve. You know, I don't like knowing this because there are folks that I don't want to be thinking of as being connected to me. There are folks that I want to put on a spaceship and send them off to Mars without the capacity to return.

That would suit me. But I don't get to choose. I don't get to say who they are. I don't get to do that. I get told by the God that I serve, "I made them, too. And I love them in ways that you will never understand." So, it behooves me to keep my heart as open as possible to the possibility that even if I want to put them on a spaceship, a one-way trip spaceship to Mars, that there's a possibility I can see them differently. Because whatever it is about those people that disturbs me so greatly that that would be my attitude, perhaps if I will be more open, I will hear some good news for myself. I will become somebody who is more conscious. We have tried to make the development of consciousness a bad thing in this country. You know, we assuage consciousness by talking about being woke, and that's a bad thing. Well, let me tell you something. Consciousness is not a bad thing. Being conscious is a good thing. Being open, having your eyes open and your ears open so you can hear, your eyes open so you can see,

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your heart open so it can receive, that's a good thing and don't let anybody tell you differently. We cannot afford as people of faith to play this game that the culture wants to play. We have to be willing to stand taller than that. So my book is about how do we stand taller together and build bridges to each other? How do we allow for the possibility that we can really heal the division between us as different people in terms of between marginalized groups in this country and white people? How can we do that? And it is a conversation that has not happened really because what we have really been doing is saying how can we tweak it so we can keep on being who we are and sort of feel better. We can't tweak it. We have to fix it. And fixing it is not tweaking it. Fixing it means that we are willing to look for new ways to be together, new ways to build bridges between us that are really sustainable.

When I wrote this book, I spent a lot of time telling myself that I felt crazy because it felt crazy to be proposing that we could fix this mess that we've made. I also told myself, how in the world are you going to talk about this so anybody understands what you're talking about? How in the world are you going to in one book get somebody to understand the new paradigm that you are considering is valid. And it was very agonizing to me because one of the things I realized is that I had come to a new place inside of my own head in my understanding about where and how to do this work that I hadn't realized I was that clear about, that we marginalized minority groups have got to take responsibility for the healing, for the racial healing. No system of oppression up to today has ever stood up and said, "You know, we've been oppressing these people. We need to stop it." Oppression doesn't do that. It does not interrogate itself. And if it did, it would interrogate itself and reaffirm itself, realign itself with its system. So it's not going to come, the system itself is not going to say "replace me," right? I mean, what system is going to say replace me? So the people who need to be set free are going to have to take the responsibility to work to create the space for the freedom to come.

Now I want to tell you that I don't believe in violence. I am a serious pacifist, and I believe that we can do this work without having to be mean, without having to be violent, without having to be anything except wounded people looking for healing. Wounded. All of us are wounded by the system that is holding us captive. And we can be free if we have the faith and the willingness to be humble. To be humble, to be patient, and to be open to God's amazing grace. And being patient means that we understand it's God's timeline and not ours. And I have to be very confessional about that. I don't always like God's timeline, you know? I want God to work faster and better and this and that and all, all I get is be patient, persevere, persevere. I love the words that Reverend David just gave to the children about building a bridge because just yesterday I made this little paradigm for perseverance that said you need courage, curiosity, creativity, conviction in order to be willing to persevere. Because perseverance means that you are willing to stay on the path no matter what. So does faith. Faith means you don't give up. You know, when I think about...I sit here as a black woman in America with education. I have five degrees

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hanging on my wall. My mother spent 18 years getting one degree. So I have a deep responsibility to persevere because perseverance has taught me that perseverance is what one does no matter what. And my mama knew that already cuz it took her 18 years to get a bachelor's degree because of the circumstances of her life, not because she wasn't smart. She was way smarter than me. But she persevered.

So what is the conversation that you need to have with yourself about faith, about perseverance, about courage, about curiosity, about conviction as you walk in this present moment? What is the conversation? How does that conversation need to change or be enlarged or be abandoned? It may be that you're having the right conversation or the wrong conversation, and you only can judge that, and you will know about which one it is based upon the energy that comes to your life.

I don't know what time it is, and I don't want to talk too long here, but I want to say a couple more things. Your energy is the best thermometer that you will ever have to help you know if you're on the right track. So if you're just having, there's a difference between persevering because something is hard and trying to do something that wasn't yours to do in the first place. There's a difference between that. And how you know if it's yours to do in the first place is generally, even if it's hard, you have the energy to do it. Do you understand? Does anybody understand what I'm talking about? Do you know? Has this been your experience that when you are doing a hard task and it's yours to do, you just keep at it. You keep at it. You keep at it. If it's not yours to do, it drives you crazy practically. And so, we don't need to let other people assign their work to us. We need to make sure we're doing our work.

You sit here in this city in the midst of brokenness, chaos, violence, trouble, a lot of it. I'm in Atlanta. Same story. It doesn't matter. Put your finger on a spot on the globe and you can say trouble is there because it's everywhere. So, what are we being asked to do while we are here in the midst of what's going on in the world? What is the conversation we need to be having in the midst of that? Do you need to be having in the midst of the realities that are external to you? That's a hard question. And maybe you didn't come to church this morning wishing to hear it, but you showed up and you're hearing it and it's yours to answer. Nobody else can answer it except you. One of the things I say in my book is that part of the reason we haven't done better is because we have shied away from asking the hard questions. We choose to ask the questions that are the easiest to answer or that make us feel good rather than asking the hard questions that sometimes we can't answer and that we just have to live with. You know, I love it that Rilke said to the young poet that kept writing to him with question after question being so disturbed. And you know that book Letter to a Young Poet by Rilke. Rilke said, "Be patient toward yourself and learn to love your questions, because it's in loving the questions and living the questions that you might live into an answer." Not that you can find an answer floating around on the street

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or that you can find an answer from somebody somewhere. You have to live your daily life, and in the process of living you begin to get a clue of what your, what your question is really about. Now, I know that takes patience, and we're good, smart, wonderful people in the West who know how to analyze and find data and get answers. And so, we don't like to have to go through the process. But at the end of the day, you have to go through the process because God is patient. God is faithful and God is engaged with us and wants to teach us to learn to be patient and to have faith and to believe that we can do more than we have ever done before because we have chosen to have faith.

That Hebrew passage also says that there's a great cloud of witnesses. There's a great cloud of witnesses. So I want to say as I finish, who constitutes your cloud of witnesses? Who is in your cloud of witnesses? Historical people, people from scripture, people from your own life journey, people that have been there for you to help you be who you are today make up the great cloud of witnesses. On the wall when I was running the Absalom Jones Center, I used to have a picture of Sojourner Truth, Fanny Lu Hamer, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Mary McCloud Bethune, and my mother. And that was just a little tip of the iceberg of my cloud of witnesses. But every day when I walked into my office and sat down, those women said to me, "You can grumble, you can gnash your teeth, you can do whatever you need to, but when you finish, you get to work." Because when I think about the journey that those women traveled, I have got no reason to complain. I have got no reason to doubt. I've got no reason not to be an empowered woman. And the same is true for every one of us in this room. We have no reason to be afraid. None whatsoever. We have so many reasons to be hopeful, to be faithful, and to believe that we are part of a bigger picture, a bigger construction, and that we can make a country that honors and supports and respects and cares about all of its people and not just some of its people. Do you believe that? Do you believe? Do you believe that you can make a difference? Do you believe that you can have a conversation that's empowering with yourself and with those around you? Do you believe that you are called to do something special because you are here? Every one of us got sent here with an assignment. Every one of us has an assignment and it's our job to find out what it is and to live into it. And I wonder if that's what we really are as a nation, I'm pretty sure we don't believe it, but I hope that there are individuals all across the nation who do believe it. That we are here on assignment, and God will give us the tools we need to do our work. It gets tiring and you wish sometimes to rest and you can. You can watch dumb movies. You can take a break. You can. I like to watch fairy tales, you know, because they're just so wonderful. Everything ends up just happy, and then you say that really is a fairy tale cuz you know that that's not always the way things work. But I want you to think about, if you don't get anything else out of hearing me talk this morning, I want you to think about what you're doing and why are you doing it and is it what you need to continue to do or do you need to do something else? Because we have got to take the assignments more seriously. And I believe we can. And I'm never going to stop believing that. I'm never going to stop believing that we can

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have a better country. We can have a better land. We can be a better people. Even though most of us are good already, you know, we just caught in a bunch of dynamics that we need to do something about. But I think there are more good people here than not. And I'm not going to quit believing that either, you know.

But we do need to make changes. And I'm sure you would agree with me that that is the case. So, can we be together as sisters and brothers? Can we be together as humans? Can we be together as people who can dream of new possibilities and new visions and be willing to persevere even though we might not get to see the results? Because you know that Hebrew passage makes it clear that some of those folks had faith and that they never saw what they were hoping for, but they kept having faith because your faith is not about did it work. It's were you, were you willing to stay faithful? So I say to people every day, I'm 80 years old. I have pretty severe rheumatoid arthritis, and I have one job—to be faithful and focused. To be faithful and focused. That's it. That's the work. And writing books, preaching, doing whatever I do. It's about being faithful and focused. And God will do what God will do. And I am so grateful that I believe that. And I pray that you will be people of faith that are so empowered until folks will wonder what's the matter with you. And may God bless you as you seek to be reminded of your assignments and rejuvenated and encouraged and inspired to do what you were put here to do. And if you're not clear about it, to become clearer about the willingness to look to find out what it is, to look under every rock. To look under every place that it might be hidden to see what you need to know. If you don't know, look for it. Don't be ashamed. Just admit to yourself, I don't know, but I want to know.

And may God bless you, bless you to be faithful and courageous and curious and convicted and creative and humble and willing to persevere. Amen.