

Transcript — “Faith as Resistance: She Risked Everything” by Rev. LaWonder Cooley-McDowell (15 Feb 2026)

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Sermon by Rev. LaWonder Cooley-McDowell — Caldwell Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC
— February 15, 2026 — “Faith as Resistance: She Risked Everything”

Scripture Reading

Esther 4:14–16 (read by Pastor John): “For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that, I will go to the king, though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

(Also referenced in sermon: Mark 5:25–34; Luke 4:18)

Sermon

Theme: “Faith as resistance — she risked everything.”

Good morning. So, I’m very nervous this morning. I have to speak a word that it’s not going to be easy to hear. So if you’re sensitive, you might want to exit. Exit stage left.

So, I’m glad to be home. Glad to be here with my peeps this morning. Yes, I passed my ordination exams — I’m so, so, so excited. And yesterday was my 55th birthday. Me and my oldest son. I had him on my 21st birthday. So, I got all that out the way.

Okay, let’s get ready for this word. I want to sing — I’m going to try to sing a little bit of this song.

All right, y’all. Let’s go.

Faith as resistance. She risked everything.

Grace and peace to you this morning on this Sunday in Black History Month. We are sitting inside a powerful theme. Faith as resistance. Faith as resistance. Faith as resistance.

Not decorative faith. Not polite faith. Not Sunday-only faith — but faith that pushes back. Faith that survives systems. Faith that risks everything.

Repeat after me: Faith as resistance.

Our anchor text today comes from Esther 4:14–16. The heart of this passage is that sometimes faith requires stepping into danger for the sake of justice — trusting God beyond self-preservation. And from Mark 5, beginning at verse 25, the story of the woman with the issue of blood. A woman whose body had been suffering for 12 long

years. Misdiagnosed. Financially drained. Socially isolated. Religiously excluded. Physically exhausted.

Both of these stories reveal that faith often requires risk, courage, and embodied action when silence would be safer. By the time I finish, y'all might be saying, "Silence would have been safer." But not today.

And yet, she presses through the crowd and touches Jesus. Not because she had permission, not because she had status, but because she had faith — and she refused to be silent. That touch was not only a belief. That touch was resistance.

Church, one thing history keeps proving is this: Systems lie. Labels lie. Power lies. But the body tells the truth.

This woman in Mark 5 had been treated, studied, dismissed, and drained by professionals. The text says she suffered under many physicians and grew worse instead of better. Have you noticed — not every treatment is healing? Not every authority is right. Not every diagnosis is true. And yet she says within herself, if I can just touch the hem of his garment — that is resistance faith. That is embodied faith. That is risk-taking faith.

Repeat after me: Faith that moves.

Today I want to introduce to you a woman by the name of Leela Coleman Benham. Born in 1890 to Clarence and Mary Peacock Coleman in rural Georgia. She was born into abject poverty — a Black woman trying to survive in a world not designed for her safety.

At the age of 35, after her tenth child, she developed what appeared to be a mental illness. She was admitted to the Georgia State Sanitarium in Milledgeville, Georgia — separated from her husband, separated from her children. Her youngest baby was only weeks old.

I want you all to pause here for one minute and listen again. She was 35 with 10 children. Ten children at the age of 35. We read through stories like this way too fast. She was a mother. She was taken away from her children and her family — not because she was broken, but because she was deficient in what the system failed to provide.

She was diagnosed with paranoid dementia praecox. After testing, it was discovered that she was not mentally ill — but her neurological system was severely malnourished. It was malnourished of vitamin B and niacin. And they called it pellagra — starvation on the cellular level.

Pellagra disproportionately affected poor rural African American women in the early 20th century in the US, due to diet, with over two-thirds of victims often being women. It causes the four Ds: dermatitis, diarrhea, dementia, and then death.

Not only was she treated for several years, but she also became part of a nutritional experiment that later influenced vitamin fortification in breakfast foods. As we know when we study Black history, many Black people were part of medical experiments. This

woman was. So when you get your box of cereal and you see the vitamins and the minerals in it — she was a part of that.

The youngest child who was left was Mary Francis Benham — my grandmother. Leela Coleman Benham was my great-grandmother.

Let me say this carefully and clearly. What was done without her consent, God still refused to waste. Her suffering led to discoveries. Her body told the truth. Her pain was not madness. It was neglect. And that truth is part of why I do the work that I do today. The body tells the truth.

My work in women's wellness — with what you hear on a daily basis, "Good morning, vaginas" — is not a trend. It's a call for women and those who love them to wake up to your wellness, to wake up to yourselves. It is faith as resistance.

It's not rebellion against faith. It's not cultural noise. It's not something I say just to sound good. It's ancestral obedience. Because when women learn their bodies, that is resistance. When women are nourished, that is resistance. When women are believed, that is resistance. When women are healed, that is resistance.

Jesus did not heal souls only. Jesus healed bodies publicly. Luke 4 says, "He came to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and release to the oppressed."

Oppression is not only political. Oppression can be medical — it was for my grandmother, for my great-grandmother. Oppression can be nutritional. Lack of food is oppression. Oppression can be gendered. And healing is not only spiritual. Healing is wholeness.

In our Reformed theological tradition, we confess that God is sovereign over all of life — not just heaven, not just worship, but systems, structures, bodies, and the bread.

Micah tells us what the Lord requires: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. Justice is not an optional ministry department. We don't get to join the justice group. This is what we do. Justice is discipleship.

Which means women's wellness is not extra work on the side. It's gospel work. Because when a woman's body is ignored, justice is violated. When a woman's pain is dismissed, justice is violated. When a woman's health is neglected, justice is violated. And faith — real faith — resists violation.

Faith as resistance.

Hebrews said, "We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." I believe my great-grandmother is in that cloud — watching, witnessing, cheering.

Some of us are not starting movements. We are finishing prayers. I'm finishing a prayer. I'm doing ancestral work. Some of us are not being radical. We are being faithful to interrupted healing.

When we heal women, we heal our daughters that are not yet born. We answer cries not fully heard. We honor bodies once ignored. That is lineage healing. That is sacred resistance.

The woman touched Jesus. Jesus stopped the crowd. Jesus called her forward. Jesus named her daughter. Jesus restored her dignity — not secretly, not in a back room, not quietly — but publicly. Because healing deserves witness.

So, Caldwell, here is the call:

Learn your body. Honor your health. Believe women's pain. Support women's healing spaces. Fund wellness work. Reject shame — I do, and I speak that over every person. Reject shame, because that's why we are where we are now. Because we've been brought up and built in a wall of shame. Not anymore. Reject shame. Tell the truth about suffering. Practice justice in care.

Because faith is not denial. Faith is resistance. And sometimes resistance looks like a woman deciding her body will no longer be ignored.

When you heal the root, you heal the tree. Amen.

Attribution Notes

1. Source video:

https://www.youtube.com/live/dNgz-B_9E2g?si=1EIHfTf8xpDbgwQ9&t=1873

(Timestamps: 31:13 to 47:21)

2. Unedited transcript generated / extracted with <https://www.youtube-transcript.io>

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4. Resources created by Wes Fryer, shared on

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