

Glide Church
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THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY AT
GLIDE MEMORIAL CHURCH
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you so much, Cecil. Thank you Janice. Thank you, that wonderful ensemble. Thank you, musicians for your music. Thank you Mayor, we did the inventory after you left. [laughter] All we want is a picture of you in that robe with the backwards writing. We want that for our archives so please send me a copy.

I am so pleased to be back here, both in this city that I love and in this church. I am here tonight because I want to celebrate the village that Glide is. I want all of you who are part of that village to know how significant your efforts are. On Thanksgiving Day the President and I and all of our family were at Camp David. It was one of those nice holiday mornings where you wake up late and go for a walk and read the paper. And the President read about how many people you had fed here at Glide. And he picked up the phone and he called Cecil and said, "I'm giving thanks for Glide, and I want you to know, because what you do makes a difference, not just here, but around the entire country."

You know, I've been asked why I wrote this book and why I titled it as I did. Well, I wrote it because for more than 25 years I have worked on behalf of children and for nearly 16 I have been a mother. And I have seen so many of the problems that our children face, but I have also seen the promise. And I began to worry that here in our country, a country that is built on optimism and possibility and the future, we were in danger of giving up on many of our children. We were at risk of saying to ourselves, "There's nothing we can do. Look who those children are. Look who there mamas and their daddies are. Look where they come from."

I don't think that's something that we can afford to do. Not only is it wrong, but it's so self-defeating, because every problem we face in America has been solved somewhere. Glide is a place that embraces problems but offers solutions. That works to give people the hope and the love and the faith that all of us need. And so, when I come to Glide, I'm coming to thank you, to say that on behalf of people who may never come in your doors, we are grateful for your example.

Because every one of our problems has been solved somewhere, that means we have an obligation to work together to solve them everywhere. There are many churches in America that could become Glide churches. [Applause] There are many people who if their hearts and their minds were opened up would understand that there is no such thing as just "my child." All these children are our children. [Applause]. And that for each of us, there is something we can do. It may be mentoring or tutoring a child. It may mean serving a meal to a hungry child. It may mean taking a young mother and child to make sure that child gets immunized. It may mean working in a school or children's hospital or a clinic. It may mean just going next door and saying to that young single mother who's stretched so thin, "Let me look after your baby. You go out for a few hours and get a break from all this pressure." [Applause]

You know, it doesn't have to be big and earth-changing to be important and significant in the life of a child. And it also doesn't have to be somebody else's child. It is our responsibility. [Applause]. And there is not a single person, nor is there any institution that could not do more, starting today to help parents become better parents, to give them more economic security, to give them health security, to welcome them into the schools so they become partners in their child's education. There is so much we can do together.

For too long we've had this false debate in America. Is it the government's responsibility or is it the family's responsibility? The message of this book is that it is both and much more. It is everybody's responsibility. [Applause] And there are things that only the family can do, and there are things only the government can do. But there is much that the media and business and religious institutions and schools and day care centers and neighborhoods and police officers and everybody else can do as well. [Applause]

Think about what it's like to be a parent today. I think it's hard. It's always been hard. But we don't have the extended family, the clan, the village there to help us like people did in prior times. I know very well that when I had my daughter, I read all the books. I really studied this. I mean one thing I had been all my life was a student, so I figured if I really studied, I'd get this thing figured out. It took, well, let's see, she was born at 11:30 at night...it took until about 9:00 the next morning for me to realize that I knew nothing that I needed to know. There I was trying to breast feed my baby, which I thought should be easy. I'd seen my friends do it. And I'm just looking at her and I'm so excited about this new life in my arms. All of a sudden she starts to foam at the nose. I thought, my goodness my baby is dying. I started pressing almost every buzzer there is, the nurses come running around, into my room. And I will never forget the look on this one nurses face

as she surveyed the situation and said calmly to me, "It would help if you lifted her head up." [Laughter]

You know, all those years of schooling, all those degrees, all those things that I had done, nothing had prepared me. I needed a lot of hands-on help. And I don't know a mother or a father who does not need hands-on help. Some helping hands there to say, "Here's how you do it, here's what you need." If we could just in this country again recognize that for all this talk about family values, we do so little to value families and we could do so much more. [Applause]

And it's not just the hands-on instruction inside the home that makes a difference. It's what goes on outside the home. No family is immune from what goes on behind its walls. There are those who argue that we should just be rugged individualists. Every person and, I guess, every baby for him or herself. That's not the way the world has ever worked. Children come to us filled with love and such yearning to be cared for. But so many parents, as I and my husband do, worry about how we protect our children from what goes on outside.

Businesses can help by recognizing that we have to give people the dignity of work and a fair wage and give them an opportunity to support themselves and their children. [Applause]

Schools can recognize...and I visited one in Los Angeles today in a very poor community in the San Fernando Valley -- a charter school where parents and teachers are working together. Where parents don't feel like interlopers. Where they're welcomed into the classroom. Where there's a family center to assist parents in getting the services they need.

And the media has such a responsibility. If you look at all the changes that have occurred since I was a little girl, the single biggest is the pervasive influence of television on how our children live, what they see, and what they think.

And government can make a difference, as it did today when the President signed a bill that requires television manufactures to put in what is called the V-chip -- the anti-violence chip so that parents can program televisions so their children will not see what their children should not see or be exposed to. [Applause]

You know, as Cecil said, my husband and I were here on a Mother's Day. And it was one of the greatest Mother's Day celebrations I've ever been part of, except, I must confess, I missed my daughter because we were campaigning, and it was one of the few times we had not been together.

And I thought about that because I tell a story in my book

that to me symbolized what children give to us as well as what we owe children. You know, we learn a lot if we will only let children teach us what unconditional love is. What need is. What vulnerability and dependency on other people means. And when Chelsea was about four we were in church on a Mother's Day and the minister called the children forward for one of those "Children's Sermons" where you never know what's going to happen and everyone holds their breath. And he began to ask the children if they could give their mothers anything for Mother's Day, what would they give them. And one little girl said "The most beautiful flowers in the world," and a little boy said "A dress covered with diamonds." And my daughter said, "Life insurance." [Laughter] And so there I was, sitting in the pew, in one of those moments where you're kind of wishing you weren't there and not knowing what that meant. After the service a life insurance agent came up and tried to sell me a policy. [Laughter] So in the car on the way home, I said to her, "Honey, what did that mean? Why would you want to give me life insurance?" She said, "Mommy, so you could live forever." You know, that is the kind of love that our children can give us if we invest in them.

And because we are here at Glide, I want to say a special word about the role of our religious institutions. And particularly about the need for a spiritual renewal. Not of the kind we hear about on television these days, where it seems to consist of finger pointing and blame-placing, but a real spiritual renewal that comes from deep within, from the well-springs of love and faith that we were meant to experience. And our religious institutions have such an opportunity to help us with our children. Not only to offer services, not only to reach out and bring them into church and Sunday School, but by example to show them what it means to be a loving person of faith in today's world. To minister to and care for those who are unlike us, who have terrible problems, but who in God's eyes are just as much worthy of respect as any of us.

And so if one looks at the role of all our institutions, I think we have to ask ourselves, what can more religious people do to make sure that we do give children the feeling of comfort and caring and that "life insurance" doesn't come from any human being, but from our God. The struggle to live up to spiritual values is not only an individual one, it is also one that engages societies, organizations, and it has in our country been the source of much debate and discussion in the last few years.

I was struck some time ago by a comment made by Lee Atwater, a political strategist credited with the victories of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, but who was struck with terminal cancer when he was a relatively young man. When he was dying, he told Life Magazine the following:

"Long before I was struck with cancer I felt something

stirring in American society. It was a sense among the people of the country, Republicans and Democrats alike, that something was missing from their lives, something crucial. I don't know who will lead us through the nineties, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul."

I cut out that passage and put it in a little book of sayings and scriptures that I've been collecting for a long time. I think the answer to his question, "Who will lead us out of this spiritual vacuum," must be all of us. Not just any institution, not just our government, not even our leaders or our preachers or our rabbis or anyone in position of authority alone. Each of us has a chance to be part of this journey that will again rejoin us one to the other.

We have to be careful as we do it though, not to permit religion to be misused to further political, personal and even commercial agendas. [Applause] If religion or spirituality is employed as an excuse for intolerance, divisiveness or even violence, we betray its purpose. The true believer that proclaims that God or the Gospel or the Torah or the Koran favors a particular political action, and that anyone who opposes that action is wrong, is asserting an absolutist position that permits no compromise, that permits no discussion, permits no democracy. Religion is about God's truth, but none of us can grasp that truth absolutely, because of our own imperfections and limitations. We are only the children of God, not God. [Applause] And therefore we must not attempt to fit God into little boxes, claiming that he supports this or that political position. It is not only bad theology, it marginalizes God. People of faith belong to the larger village, along with every other citizen, whether they have any faith or not. But we have to recognize that the kind of harmony that should flow among believers and non-believers alike requires mutual tolerance and respect.

Now, as someone who has met a lot of the great leaders of religions around the world, I have been struck in my conversations with them, that despite their profound differences, they often speak from that well-spring of love that affirms life, that yearns for men and women to open their hearts like children to God and one-another. Indeed, there are many religions that say something along the lines of what the Bible says, "And a little child shall lead them." When we find ourselves growing impatient, ungrateful or intolerant, children can remind us to appreciate our daily blessings, to practice kindness, even to love our enemies. And when we pray for and help children, we help ourselves, and we find the energy to bring that help to wider and wider circles. Prayer, spirituality, religion, they can protect children from the cruelties and indifference of the world.

In her book of prayer, my friend, Marian Wright Edelman looks back upon a childhood that was a marvelous mixture of spiritual joy and exuberant though disciplined family and communal life. She [end of tape]...."we black children we wrapped up and rocked in a cradle of faith, song, prayer, ritual and worship which immunized our spirits against some of the meanness and unfairness that exists in the world." Immunize our spirits and immunize the spirits of our children.

A friend of mine and a friend of Glide's, Maya Angelou, writes in her autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, about the rape she experienced as a child which left her mute for several years. Her life today represents a triumph of spirit that she attributes in part to the deep spirituality that she developed as a traumatized child. And she tells us, of all the needs a lonely child has, the one that must be satisfied if there is going to be a hope of wholeness, is the unshaking need for an unshakable God.

There is so much we can do to give children that sense of purpose, that hope for the future. It takes a village, and it takes the churches and synagogues and mosques and religious institutions in that village to promote love and harmony, tolerance and respect. But if we build a village worthy of our children, they will not only be the ones who will prosper, we will as well. Thank you very much. [Applause]

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