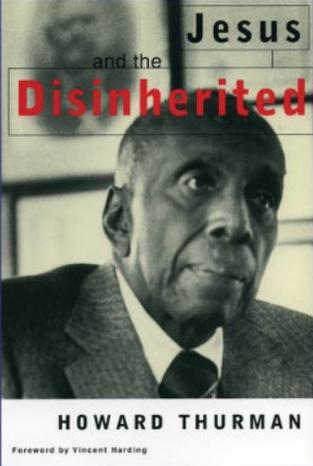


**Lenten
Reading Group**
Tuesdays, March 19 & 26
& April 2 & 16, 6:30 p.m.



**Soup & bread
served**

**Contact
diana@
allsoulsdc.org
for more
info**

HOWARD THURMAN
Foreword by Vincent Harding

Living in a climate of deep insecurity, Jesus, faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees, had to find some other basis upon which to establish a sense of well-being. He knew that the goals of religion as he understood them could never be worked out within the then-established order. Deep from within that order he projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security. There would be room for all, and no man would be a threat to his brother.

—Howard Thurman

Jesus was a poor Jew living in an occupied state.

Too often the weight of the Christian movement has been on the side of the powerful ... against the weak.

A Hindu in Ceylon:

"More than three hundred years ago your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. One of your famous Christian hymn writers, Sir John Newton, made his money from the sale of slaves to the New World. He is the man who wrote 'How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds' and 'Amazing Grace'— there may be others, but these are the only ones I know. The name of one of the famous British slave vessels was 'Jesus.'

"The men who bought the slaves were Christians. Christian ministers, quoting the Christian apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery. Some seventy years or more ago you were freed by a man who was not a professing Christian, but was rather the spearhead of

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certain political, social, and economic forces, the significance of which he himself did not understand. During all the period since then you have lived in a Christian nation in which you are segregated, lynched, and burned. ...

"I am a Hindu....I do not wish to seem rude to you. But, sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position." P. 5

Do you agree with this? Is Thurman – and by extension any of us who supports racist systems – traitors to the “darker peoples of the earth”?

See also page 19.

Paul

Paul was a free Jew who did not live under the same strictures as Jesus and many of his followers. He belonged to the privileged class that was comfortable with the established political and economic order. P. 21.

Do you see parallels with today’s social issues? Thurman believes that in most cases Paul was able to transcend his privileged upbringing, but not always, as in the case of slaves and obedience. Do you agree?

The Most Important Religious Question

The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose need may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own needs. The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest of modern life. P. 3

Why might this be the most important religious question?

Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story

<https://www.pbs.org/video/backs-against-the-wall-the-howard-thurman-story-cgv9gi/>

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I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall. ... The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? ... The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest of modern life.

Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited* (p. 13).

Childhood home, Daytona Beach FL

FEAR

Qualities of Fear

It is like fog, always present, but never with any particularity, like mid-grade anxiety. It is caused by isolation and helplessness before violence, both violent and non-violent. The threat of violence instills fear:

"There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count and that no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person. The threat of violence is ever present, and there is no way to determine precisely when it may come crushing down upon you." P 29

Have you ever experienced this kind of fear? In childhood or during sometime in your life. Or have you known people who have?

Segregation, Fear and Power

- Segregation is not a separation of two equal groups. It is a separation of the weak and the strong, in which the strong can move freely between groups (example of the train engineers and porters).
- Fear works within both groups, so that fear insulates the conscience of the powerful. The powerful are able to justify their treatment of the weak by focusing on their fear of what the weaker group or person will do to them. (Examples of the Jews in Europe and the Untouchables in India.)
- The disadvantaged person knows that in any conflict she or he must deal not only with the particular individual but with the entire representative group.

"Even recourse to the arbitration of law tends to be avoided because of the fear that the interpretations of law will be biased on the side of the dominant group. The result is the dodging of all encounters. The effect is nothing short of disaster in the organism; for, studies show, fear actually causes chemical changes in the

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body, affecting the blood stream and the muscular reactions, preparing the body either for fight or for flight.” (35.)

Thurman talks about an entire system built on fear. In what ways did this resonate with you?
Do you see this in our society?
What ideas were new to you?

Jesus and Fear: Who Am I?

Awareness of being a Child of God stabilizes the ego.

Or, in Biblical language:

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:.) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.

"In the great expression of affirmation and faith found in the Sermon on the Mount there appears in clearest outline the basis of his positive answer to the awful fact of fear and its twin sons of thunder— anxiety and despair...." P. 38

".... The essence of the religion of Jesus of Nazareth: Of course, God cares for the grass of the field.... And he cares for me! To be assured of this becomes the answer to the threat of violence—yea, to violence itself. To the degree to which a man knows this, he is unconquerable from within and without." P. 45.

Have you experienced this sense of being loved by God completely at some time in your life?
We sometimes talk about the difference between faith and belief. How is that difference relevant to knowing you are a Child of God?

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Deception and Hate

Qualities of Deception

DECEPTION is perhaps the oldest of all the techniques by which the weak have protected themselves against the strong. Through the ages, at all stages of sentient activity, the weak have survived by fooling the strong.
P. 48

Children are very good at deceiving their parents to get what they want.

Traditionally, women have also been placed in this role – think of *I Love Lucy* or other '60s sit-coms in which women fooled men in order to get what they wanted.

Why do you think Lucy and Ethel behaved this way? Can you think of examples in your own life – as a child – in a relationship – in which you've taken part in this kind of deception – or as a parent or a person in power, of times you have been deceived?

Deception as Moral Decay

The question of deception is not academic, but profoundly ethical and spiritual, going to the very heart of all human relations. For it raises the issue of honesty, integrity, and the consequences thereof over against duplicity and deception and the attendant consequences.
P. 51

The penalty of deception is to become a deception, with all sense of moral discrimination vitiated. A man who lies habitually becomes a lie, and it is increasingly impossible for him to know when he is lying and when he is not. In other words, the moral mercury of life is reduced to zero. P. 55

How does a person who lies become a lie? Is there an alternative to deception – and to *being a "lie"*? Is it just to ask people who don't have power to live without deception?

Possibilities for Change

Thurman says "A profound piece of surgery has to take place in the very psyche of the disinherited before the great claim of the religion of Jesus can be presented" What does he mean?

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In the presence of an overwhelming sincerity on the part of the disinherited, the dominant themselves are caught with no defense, with the edge taken away from the sense of prerogative and from the status upon which the impregnability of their position rests. They are thrown back upon themselves for their rating. The experience of power has no meaning aside from the other-than-self reference which sustains it.

P. 62

How might this be true?

Hate -- Described

Thurman describes the pathways of hate, which end in the objects of hate being “objects” rather than subjects.

Have you experienced this?

Despite all the positive psychological attributes of hatred we have outlined, hatred destroys finally the core of the life of the hater. While it lasts, burning in white heat, its effect seems positive and dynamic. But at last it turns to ash, for it guarantees a final isolation from one's fellows. It blinds the individual to all values of worth, even as they apply to himself and to his fellows. P. 76

Thurman says hate cannot be defined, only described.

How would you describe hate?

Have you found ways to overcome your experiences of hatred of other people?

Psalm 139

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

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⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

¹²even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

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¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end^[a]—I am still with you.

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Qualities of Love



“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.”

“Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Once the neighbor is defined, then one’s moral obligation is clear.

Howard Thurman identifies *two types of relationships* through which we know each other. He also identifies *three types of enemies* who we are asked by God to “love.”

The *first type of relationship* is with an intimate, perhaps a member of your family or group of friends, or beyond that, with people with whom you feel comfortable or have a connection. For Jesus that was fellow Jews. When he broke with them, it was as someone within the family or group changing the expectations.

“Jesus did not consider himself as one who stood outside of Israel. If he had regarded himself as one who was starting a new religion, a new faith, then it would not have been hard to account for bitter opposition. With justice, the defenders of the faith could have opposed him because he would have been deliberately trying to destroy the very grounds of Judaism. But if it be true—as I think it is—that Jesus felt he was merely serving as a creative vehicle for the authentic genius of Israel, completely devoted to the will of God, then in order to love those of the household he must conquer his own pride. In their attitude he seemed to see the profoundest betrayal of the purpose of God. It is curious that as each looked on the other the accusations were identical.”

Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited* (p. 80). Beacon Press.

What does Thurman mean when he says Jesus was a Jew working within the creative genius of Israel?

Are you a member of a group or groups in which it is clear to you the ways in which you belong?

What are some of the assumptions you make that you don’t have to explain to each other, but that you might to someone one the outside?

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Have you or a fellow member ever tried to make a fundamental change in the way the group understands itself?

The **second-type of relationship Jesus describes** is with someone outside the group. For Jesus this relationship was with a member of the Samaritans, a religiously and socially separate group, and the Romans, a group that wielded great political and psychological power over his group, the Jews. In both cases Jesus applies an ethic of love.

Relationships can treacherous between individuals of different groups, especially ones where the power imbalance is so stark as it was between the Jew and the Roman.

Can we see this relationship imbalance in American history? In recent current events?

Three Types of Enemies

The **personal enemy** is the friend or family member who injures you. The relationship is grounded in personal associations which are stretched and put under stress through some sort of conflict. To love this enemy, we may practice reconciliation and forgiveness in order to work to reestablish the relationship

Thurman implies that this sort of “loving the enemy” that most of us are familiar with is fundamentally different from loving enemies with whom there is no “broken” relationship:

The **traitorous group member** (see first type of relationship above) who sells out the wellbeing of other members of the group. For Jesus this was the taxpayer:

“It was they who became the grasping hand of Roman authority, filching from Israel the taxes which helped to keep alive the oppression of the gentile ruler. They were Israelites who understood the psychology of the people, and therefore were always able to function with the kind of spiritual ruthlessness that would have been impossible for those who did not know the people intimately..”

P. 83

Who in our own society and times, or in your own experience, would you consider a traitorous group member?

The **third type of enemy is the religious and political enemy**. To see each other as “personalities” they must become neither Jew or Roman but a person. To rid a person of enemy status and we must respect their “personality.” The concept of reverence for personality removes any externally imposed status from the person. It treats them as if they are where they ought to be.

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Thurman gives the example of the woman who commits adultery – how is her “status” removed, and her personality returned? How does Jesus return her to where wants to be? (p. 96)

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