

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

Lenten Devotional

March 2

Forward

In his forward, Vincent Harding describes Thurman's book as a "liberating spirituality" rather than liberation theology. Written for the disinherited, those who live with their "backs against the wall", it's a path toward "an emancipatory way of being", "an unchained life". In addressing the demands of this path, Harding writes, ". . .the ultimate issue is not being more moral than white folks, but becoming more free than we have ever been, free to engage our fullest powers in the transformative tasks that await us at the wall (xvi-xvii)."

But, as Harding reminds us, this way of living and following Jesus—this way of knowing and being transformed by the Spirit—is a way for all of us to become unchained. Could our Lenten journey, guided by Howard Thurman, be a journey to freedom? Might this be a time of learning ways that free our inner beings to reflect who we really are—Christ for each other and for all those who live with their backs against the wall?

Questions for Reflection

1. What does an unchained life look like for you personally?
2. If you are not someone with their back against the wall, does your life connect with anyone whose back is against the wall?
3. How might you "gather at the wall"?

Prayer

Jesus, you came that we might know the truth that will set us free. We long for this freedom but often turn away from the truth. Open our hearts and eyes, that we might receive what you are so ready to give us. Amen.

Forward by Pastor Renata Eustis, Christ Lutheran Church, Washington, D.C.

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

Lenten Devotional

March 6

Preface XiX

As Thurman begins his book “Jesus and the Disinherited” he asks this question. “Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion, and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself?” From my reading of the Bible, it is clear that Jesus identified with the poor and disinherited. However, many Christian leaders have used the faith, even some of the very words of Jesus, to support slavery and racial discrimination.

Questions for Reflection

1. How would you answer Thurman’s question?
2. Can we use Christianity to right the wrongs of the past?
3. Jesus stood up to evil, even giving up his life. Are you ready and able to stand up to the evil of racism? If you are what would that look like?

Prayer

In our efforts to dismantle racism, we understand that we struggle not merely against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities – those institutions and systems that keep racism alive by perpetuating the lie that some members of the family are inferior and others superior. Create in us a new mind and heart that will enable us to see brothers and sisters in the faces of those divided by racial categories. Amen

Preface XiX by Pastor Tom Knoll, Churchton, MD

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

Lenten Devotional

March 13

Reflection:

Chapter One - Jesus: an Interpretation

Years ago I spent some time in India. One memory burned in my brain is of a host exasperatedly asking me, "Why are you so worried about your safety?" Followed by something like ... 'The rest of the world doesn't get to worry so much....the rest of the world doesn't have the option or the privilege to consider their lost safety, security or comfort (like you do...)' Talk about a gut check. Power and privilege, connections and wealth easily keep a certain portion of the world, often those white and from the west, safe, secure and comfortable while a whole minority of marginalized, poor and unconnected people live lives absent of the same.

Thurman reminds us that Jesus did not come from power, privilege, and wealth, at least not as the world might define these. He reminds us that Jesus' ministry came into being through the pain and challenge of being the marginalized and the disinherited, of being the ones who were without safety, security and comfort, and of being the ones vulnerable to the powerful. Jesus ministry grew as he walked along side people much like my Indian host, people without the power and privilege nor earthly safety and security. Jesus message is and was one of hope. Hope grown in faith and love towards one another so that the faith and security found in Christ would sustain them in spite of the dominant and the powerful.

Questions for Reflection

1. What securities are you holding onto that might better be found in Christ?
2. What would change in our collective lives if safety and security was a goal for all people not just for those with enough to pay for it?

Prayer

God of awareness and grace, you sent your son Jesus to live in this world: he grew a ministry amongst those on the margins and amongst those lacking safety and security. These should be things all people have, yet today they still are not. Lord, enliven our hearts and minds that we may be bold to live lives that seek safety and security for us all.

Reflection by Interim Pastor Kirsten Laderach, St. Matthew's Church, Woodbridge, VA

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

Lenten Devotional

March 16

Reflection:

Chapter One - Jesus: an Interpretation

Howard Thurman pulls no punches in his first chapter of *Jesus and the Disinherited*. His words, published first in 1949, still ring distressingly true in 2022. Thurman states that although there are many ways of understanding the life and teachings of Jesus, few deal with what is most important. What does Jesus have to say to people who stand “with their backs against the wall” who are “the poor, the disinherited and the dispossessed?”

Thurman goes on to castigate Christianity for diluting the liberating power of Jesus’ life and teaching for those with their backs against the wall. He names the bankruptcy of a religion that has become “muffled, confused and vague,” justifying slavery and supporting ongoing racial oppression.

In chapter one, Thurman wrestles with the question, why he remains in a faith tradition that actively harms him and his community. His answer is that he stays because of who Jesus was in his own time and context. In first Century Palestine, Jesus was poor, disinherited and dispossessed. This Jesus knows and speaks to the plight of those with their backs against the wall today.

Thurman distinguishes between faith *IN* a whitewashed Jesus who champions white supremacy, and the faith *OF* the historical Jesus, who confronted the oppression of rigid religiosity and occupying powers in his day, and ours. Thurman dives into Scripture to uncover the faith of Jesus who “recognized with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to determine the quality of his inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to his destiny.” (p.18) Jesus, Thurman writes, lived and taught the kingdom of God is within us. He drew strength from that reality. This inner kingdom is where the Spirit lives, where fear is banished, where love abounds, and out of this inner kingdom, all who are poor, disinherited and dispossessed can draw strength to confront their oppression and live an authentic Christianity.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the difference between faith *IN* Jesus and the faith *OF* Jesus to you?
2. How do you describe the faith *OF* Jesus as you imagine his life, his teaching and his death?
3. How might your life change if you practiced the faith of Jesus?

Prayer

Jesus, lead me to the faith you lived. Guide my mind, fill my imagination, draw my heart to you so that I may follow in your steps to accompany people who have been made poor, the disinherited and the dispossessed and to be an advocate in church and society for greater justice and deeper peace. Amen.

Reflection by Pastor Amy Reumann, Christ Lutheran, Washington, D.C.

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

Lenten Devotional

March 20

Reflection

Chapter 2: Fear

Thurman discusses at great length the harm that fear has on the poor, the oppressed, those he generally refers to as the disinherited. Fear can destroy a person. However at the end of the chapter Thurman concludes with this. "Here we reach the high-water mark of prophetic religion, and it is of the essence of the religion of Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, God cares for the grass of the field, which lives a day and is no more, or the sparrow that falls unnoticed by the wayside. He also holds the stars in their appointed places, leaves his mark in every living thing. 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 as man knows this, he is unconquerable from within and without.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you experience the presence of God in your life when you are afraid?
2. Where do you see God working in your world of experience today?
3. As Thurman explains life is hard, "harder than crucible steel,,,"but God will take care of us." What can you do to share this message with those around you especially those who consider themselves disinherited?

Prayer

Help me Lord to trust in the simple words "you will take care of me." When the world, when life, when even the simple things seem to be crashing in, fill me with your peaceful spirit. Comfort my fears with your presence and empower me to be a "person of peace" to those around me. Lord, grant it. Amen

Reflection by Pastor Tom Knoll, Churchton, MD

Reflection

Chapter 3: Deception

The senior pastor of my childhood congregation used to distribute handouts after worship entitled “What, then, are we to do?” They were meant to be a take-home exercise in connecting key points of the sermon with opportunities for action in our daily lives. My folks would occasionally engage us kids in this guided conversation, but it usually was too academic or theoretical for us, rarely helping us examine our actions and consider alternatives. In Thurman’s chapter “Deception,” he says: “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.51f)

Thurman holds up a mirror to the acts of deception--by both the disinherited and the power-holder--and in the end invites us to embrace what he calls “a complete and devastating sincerity.” (p.59) I think of those times as a child when I set up my little brother to take the blame for something that I did. Also, I think of times when he spoke the truth to our parents with “devastating sincerity” and completely disarmed them! Today, the stakes for telling the truth are high, maybe matters of life-and-death. What, then, are we to do? Says Thurman: “...be simply, directly truthful, whatever may be the cost in life, limb, or security.” (p. 60)

Questions for Reflection

1. Recall an occasion in which you used deception to protect yourself in a dangerous or demoralizing situation. Have you ever disclosed the full truth of your actions? Why or why not?
2. Recall an occasion in which you found yourself disarmed by a truth-teller. What kind of impact did the experience have on you going forward?

Prayer

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

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

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

I give thanks for your persistent Spirit and your lovingkindness. Teach me anew to do your work with faithfulness, grace, and above all, devastating sincerity. AMEN

Reflection by Deacon Kati Miller-Holland, Ephiphany Lutheran Church, Burtonsville, MD

Reflection

Chapter 4: Hate

“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.” p. 76

“The logic of the development of hatred is death to the spirit and disintegration of ethical and moral values.” p. 77

Devotion:

There is an energy and sense of purpose that can come to a person who chooses hate as their response to a life of constant discrimination, abuse and violence. Howard Thurman carefully lays out the stages of victimhood and bitterness that can destroy a person’s self-worth. When that occurs, he writes, the emotion of hatred can actually help a person rebuild a sense of dignity and affirm their right to justice. But there is a great cost to be paid for that empowering feeling of hatred. Jesus lived with the violent and dehumanizing way the Romans dealt with the Jews, and he understood how those emotions can lead to hatred. Yet Jesus, in one of his most radical teachings, told the Jews to love the Romans. “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.” LK 6:27 What?! Some followers must have felt Jesus was betraying them by not supporting their feelings about the Romans. They knew of the times in Hebrew Scriptures when God had thoroughly destroyed their enemies. It could not have been an easy or popular position for Jesus to take within his community

But Jesus knew how crucial it was for them, and for all of us, to accept his command to love, and then spiritually move to a place where we no longer have to hate our enemies. To do otherwise would be to destroy our souls and our relationship with God.

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever experienced the sense of power that can occur when you have decided to right a wrong by turning to hate?
2. Thurman writes: “Once hatred is released it can not be confined to the offenders alone.” Do you agree.

Prayer

God of love and mercy,

Guard our hearts from turning to hate when we feel we have been wronged. Teach us to forgive people we are tempted to label as enemies. Let us see all people through your eyes of love. Amen.

Reflection by Pastor Sarah Withers Lewis, St. Luke’s Lutheran Church, Derwood, MD

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

Lenten Devotional

April 10

Reflection

Chapter 5: Love

Reverence for Personality

The first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value. This cannot be discovered in a vacuum or in a series of artificial or hypothetical relationships. It has to be in a real situation, natural, free.

The experience of the common worship of God is such a moment. It is in this connection that American Christianity has betrayed the religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption.... The enormity of this sin [segregated churches] cannot be easily grasped.

Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, pp. 88, 90

In chapter 5 Howard Thurman advances his case for respect -- even reverence -- for personality by first describing its opposite, enmity in all its forms. It is reverence for personality that will abolish enmity. Thurman reminds us of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11) whom Jesus engages with reverence -- "always the gentleman," says Thurman -- without ignoring her sin.

Reverence for personality would seem to be a natural attitude in Christian churches, where we are taught first of all to love God and our neighbors. Thurman was writing when segregation was still legal, of course, and we'd like to think our churches have improved from there. In fact our Synod probably has more integrated, inclusive congregations than many. But we have a long way to go. And even in these congregations, reverence for personality may not be a prominent feature.

I hate to think of the times reverence has been a distant glimmer in my relationships with others. Yet I know God has forgiven me -- God has treated me with reverence! Maybe reverence for others is the way we can live out forgiveness and redemption. Consider asking yourself:

Questions for Reflection

1. Do I and members of my congregation treat one another with reverence?
2. Do we treat strangers with reverence?
3. Do I need to repent of my attitude toward any particular people?

Prayer

Forgive us our sins, merciful Lord, as we forgive those who sin against us. Amen.

Reflection by Pastor Eva Steege, Lutheran Church of the Reformation, Washington, D.C.

Reflection

Chapter 5: Love

In “Love,” the final chapter to *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman discusses how the privileged and the underprivileged can break down centuries of barriers and end segregation, “a complete ethical and moral evil... [that] poisons all normal contacts of those persons involved.”

Noting “The first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value,” Thurman suggests one commonality is the experience of Christian worship, “in which the relations of the individual to his God should take priority over conditions of class, race, power, status, wealth, or the like.”

And yet, because separate churches have been created for various ethnic groups and races, American Protestant churches especially tend to be segregated.

Moreover, Thurman says, “American Christianity has betrayed the religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption” by setting up segregated churches based on race. He adds, “The situation is so tragic that men of good will in all the specious classifications within our society find more cause for hope in the secular relations of life than in religion.”

Eleven years after publication of Thurman’s book, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., appearing on NBC-TV’s “Meet the Press,” said, “I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11:00 is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours in Christian America... and any church that... has a segregated body is standing against the spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ and it fails to be a true witness.”

Little has changed since Thurman and King made those comments. The Public Religion Research Institute’s 2020 census of American religion found that two-thirds of Black Protestants attend churches where most of the congregation and leaders are Black.

Questions for Reflection

1. Do we believe it is our Christian duty to respond to the challenges Thurman and King raised?
2. What loving steps can we Lutherans take to break down the ethical and moral evil of segregation that still remains in our churches and in society in general?
3. Who do you consider to be the disinherited?
4. In what ways do we follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and be true witnesses for our Savior?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, give us the wisdom and courage to be true witnesses for you and to follow your teachings in our churches and in society. Help us to understand what we can and should do, and give us the strength and ability to follow through. Make us bold to speak truth to power and, in love, lift up the disinherited and end class, caste, and racial differences in this country. In your name we pray, Amen.

Reflection by Kristine Heine, Christ the King Lutheran Church, Great Falls, VA

JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

Lenten Devotional

April 16

Reflection

Chapter 5: Love

Two freed spirits. What a great way to describe Jesus' vision of reconciliation! When an angry teen and the victim of their robbery attack were able to come together during a process called "Restorative Justice," both persons found freedom and reconciliation. It wasn't an easy path, and there were no guarantees, but both parties experienced a restoration.

In Thurman's last chapter, "Love," he talks about 3 kinds of enemies: Personal (like the guy next door), Collaborators (like tax-collectors), and Others (like Romans). His solution is to find and create situations where people can have "normal experiences of fellowship," and begin the process of honoring and valuing one another on equal terms: ". . . love is possible only between two freed spirits. What one discovers in even a single experience in which barriers have been removed may become useful in building an over-all technique for loving one's enemy." (p. 91) And, where can such fellowship take place? Is there any hope for followers of Jesus to make such barrier-free spaces—where opposing spirits can each be freed? Our churches don't have a good track record, but we have some encouraging words: "We love because God first loved us."

Questions for Reflection

1. Are you the enemy of someone? What if you were invited to sit in a truth-and-reconciliation session and listen to their grievance?
2. What are some techniques you have found successful for getting someone to trust you?
3. What are some examples you have witnessed of persons meeting "the other where he [sic] is and there treats him as if he were where he ought to be"? (p. 94)

Prayer for Deeper Knowledge of God

Most Holy God, how can you love me the way you do? I cannot understand it in this moment, but I ask you to hold me anyway. By the power of your Spirit, guide me to honor and respect others in deeper ways, and as I have power, help me open doors for healing and freeing fellowship among your people. AMEN

Reflection by Deacon Kati Miller-Holland, Epiphany Lutheran Church, Burtonsville, MD