

Introduction: *Howard Thurman and Jesus and the Disinherited*

By Dr. Walter Fluker

Who Was Howard Thurman?

Howard Thurman (1899–1981) was one of the leading religious thinkers of 20th century America, a mentor to the leaders of the civil rights movement and a mystic who pioneered influential innovations in liturgy, worship, and spirituality in the quest for *common ground*. His life was an extraordinary journey from Jim Crow Florida at the turn of the 20th century to meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, co-founding one of the first interracial churches in the United States, and becoming the first African American dean of chapel at a mainstream university. Thurman's place in the pantheon of American religious and civic leadership has been widely celebrated since his death in 1981, but what is not so well known about Thurman is that he was also a keen observer and an astute interpreter of American democratic dogma. Often caricatured from within and without the African American community as a powerful preacher and detached mystic, until recently Thurman has been ignored, or at best considered irrelevant to the pressing social issues impacting public life in general—and black life in particular. His approach to social justice issues has been labeled by some as unresponsive to the concrete realities of oppressed peoples. This reading of Thurman, however, is misinformed and unjustified. Any serious, reflective reading of the Thurman corpus reveals a fundamental concern with the plight of the oppressed. In fact, Thurman had very clear and strong convictions about African Americans and the nature and destiny of the "national community" and what Sarah Azaransky calls "this worldwide struggle."ⁱ

Thurman influenced countless individuals and his quiet and powerful idiom still rings in the hearts of preachers of social justice like Jesse Jackson who says, "[W]e knew it was a blessing to give this prophet a glass of water or to touch the hem of his garment." Benjamin Mays, the stalwart and scholarly president of Morehouse College and once Thurman's student advisor, remarked, "[H]e generated in the minds of young Negroes the idea of freedom. When they saw Howard Thurman, most of them, for the first time, saw a free man. When they heard or read Howard Thurman, for the first time they experienced a free man and this freedom was contagious." This was certainly my experience of meeting Thurman as a student in a seminar entitled, "The Footprints of the Disinherited" in October 1979, which you will read in my essay, slated for *Week 1*, Preface: "Thurman, Howard, and Walter E. Fluker."ⁱⁱ Perhaps his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, states it best when she says, "He leads people home."

The Search for Common Ground

A key theme in Thurman's development is his intensely personal understanding of community. He identified his life-long quest for community as "the search for common ground." For him, the ideal of community served both as the goal or *telos* toward which all life strives and the norm for ethical reflection. Community refers to wholeness, integration, and harmony. Another word for "community" in Thurman's usage, which I have adopted is "integrity." Vincent Harding does a fine job of underscoring this in his Foreword.ⁱⁱⁱ

His vision of community is deeply rooted in his experiences with nature. In his interpretation of the plight of the oppressed and those quarantined from democratic rights and responsibilities he used nature and its many creatures to depict how political violence played out against the disinherited: the rabbit quivering at the onslaught of the rapacious hounds; the traumatized dog behind the fence that had learned to react to the very threat of violence; the alarmed cuttlefish's release of sepia fluid to camouflage its escape from larger predators; and the smaller bird "playing dead" as a defensive tactic against the more powerful hawk. All of these were discoveries that he drew from nature's manifold wisdom and guidance.

Thurman's mysticism, likewise, is rooted in his early encounters with nature, which gives us a clue into his understanding of community. Later in life, he speculated that it might be possible to get beyond "the wall, barrier, or context" that separates one form of life, one species, from another.^{iv} What this meant for Thurman was, as he wrote in 1944, if "the cosmos is the kind of order that sustains and supports life and its potentials," then it "sustains and supports the demands that the relationships between men [women] and between man [women] and God be one of harmony, integration, wholeness, all that we mean by love." If "life is alive," he argued, then life is indivisible. Segregation and artificial separation between people and peoples equal death.^v This was Thurman's deepest mystical vision.

In his innovative liturgical experiments at the Rankin Chapel of Howard University, The Fellowship Church, and Marsh Chapel at Boston University, Thurman explored the efficacy of the body as a site for communion. Through the arts, music, dance, poetry, iconography and silence, Thurman sought to create an egalitarian ecclesiological space for interracial, intercultural and interreligious gatherings that honored the aesthetic dimension of the body: seeing, feeling, smelling, touching, hearing and knowing.^{vi} Thurman's understanding of the nature and place of the body will be an important theme throughout our discussions. For *Week 5*, my essay, "Howard Thurman: Intercultural and Interreligious Leader" will serve as a backdrop.^{vii}

Jesus and the Disinherited

Thurman summed up his religious and political thinking in what is arguably the most significant and personal of all his works, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, published in April 1949. The product of a lecture series he delivered in April 1948 at Samuel Huston College, a historically black college in Austin, Texas, the short book argues that the key to understanding the religion of Jesus (as opposed to the more complacent Christianity preached by the Roman citizen Paul) was his lack of Roman citizenship and then explores the lives of southern blacks, who, like the disinherited Jesus, lacked effective citizenship. After devoting one chapter apiece to the three great evils of social powerlessness—fear, deception, and hate—the final chapter, on love, provides a radical, nonviolent way out for those "who stand with their backs against the wall": learning to love their oppressors to establish their common humanity; and with enough forceful, concentrated, focused, and unsentimental love to destroy Jim Crow. Our second article for *Week 3*, "How Howard Thurman Met Gandhi and Brought Nonviolence to the Civil Rights Movement" will offer some historical background on his view of the efficacy of love and nonviolent resistance.^{viii}

The little book was a great inspiration to many in the civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr., who read it as a young seminarian within a few months of its publication and quoted it, without attribution, in several of his student papers. King quoted the story that Thurman's grandmother told him, about the exhortation of the slave preacher: "You—you are not niggers. You—you are not slaves. You are God's children." It was for King an example of how "being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and bring new courage."^{ix}

May we also discover, in our study of this most important book, the courage to love as the fruit of our relationship with the God of Jesus in our struggles for justice and hope in these strange and troubled times.

Renovaré Book Club Session Two <i>Jesus and the Disinherited</i> (by Howard Thurman) Facilitator: Rev. Dr. Walter Fluker			
Week/Date	Reading Assignment	Resources/Rhythm	Live Component?
Prep Week Monday, November 16	Book Club Introduction (No separate study guide)	Introduction, Study Guide, Reading Schedule	N/A
U.S. THANKSGIVING BREAK (1 WEEK)			
Week One Monday, November 30	Foreword and Preface, pp. vii - xx	Article #1	N/A
Week Two Monday, December 7	Chapter 1 - Jesus, pp. 1-25	Podcast #1	N/A
Week Three Monday, December 14	Chapter 2 - Fear, pp. 26-47	Article #2	N/A
CHRISTMAS BREAK (2 WEEKS)			
Week Four Monday, January 11	Chapter 3 - Deception, pp. 48-63	Podcast #2	N/A
Week Five Monday, January 18	Chapter 4 - Hate, pp. 64-78	Article #3	N/A
Week Six Monday, January 25	Chapter 5 and Epilogue, pp. 79-102	Readers' Questions Webcast (live & will be recorded and posted later)	Tuesday, January 26, 2021 at 1 PM Pacific Time
Week Seven Monday, February 1	Catch-up Week	Wrap-Up Week	Online All-Member Mingles: Wednesday, February 3 at 8AM and 5PM Pacific Time

ⁱ Sarah Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press; Illustrated edition, 2017)

ⁱⁱ Walter Earl Fluker, "Thurman, Howard and Walter E. Fluker. *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*. Vol. 1. Columbia, SC: The Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ All life, according to Thurman, is involved in goal-seeking. In each particular manifestation of life, there is the potential for it to realize its proper form, or to come to itself. The actualization of any form of life is synonymous with community. Community as "actualized potential" is true at all levels of life, from tiny cells to human society. See Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community*. Friends United Press, 1986.

^{iv} Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, 67.

^v Howard Thurman, “The Cosmic Guarantee in the Judeo-Christian Message” (June 1944), in Folder 11, box 7, HTC, was reworked as “Judgment and Hope in the Christian Message,” published in 1948, and reprinted in *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume Two: “Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?” April 1936-August 1943*. Edited by Walter Earl Fluker (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 242–47.

^{vi} See Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (Wipf and Stock, 2009). The quote is from a sermon preached at the Fellowship Church in 1949, where he references the church’s commitment to diversity and expanding the boundaries of the self:

Now, [think of] dimension is an aesthetic sense. The experience of unity in the presence of God, of the oneness of God, puts a scent in my nostrils that sends me, in all of the things that I do, trying to express it. In my work, in my relationships with people on the street, I look with new eyes on those with reference to whom, when I was imprisoned in my little narrow self, I had no experience of oneness. The fears that I had, that kept eating away at the basis of social security, are now removed, because I have let down my guards in an effort to move creatively into an understanding of other people and let them move creatively into an understanding of me. And in that moment of shuttling, they become a part of me forever. [brackets added]

^{vii} Walter Earl Fluker, “Howard Thurman: Intercultural and Interreligious Leader-Leaders Who Have Shaped U.S. Religious Dialogue,” in *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, Volume 2, edited by Sharon Henderson Callahan. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013, pp. 571-578.

^{viii} “How Howard Thurman Met Gandhi and Brought Nonviolence to the Civil Rights Movement” January 31, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/how-howard-thurman-met-gandhi-and-brought-nonviolence-to-the-civil-rights-movement>

^{ix} King’s quoting of Thurman was one of the few instances in his student papers that he discussed African American religion or cited, however obliquely, an African American religious thinker. *Jesus and the Disinherited* was one of King’s first exposures to the ideas of radical pacifism.