

“This is the Highway of our Lord”

I Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139; I Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 14, 2024, Epiphany 2, dedicated to Ellen Miret for her beautiful windows at First Church and across the world., to the memory of The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. Coretta Scott King, all the men and women in the Civil Rights Movement who prayed, sang, marched and fought for justice nonviolently in this nation and for those fight on & always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

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Jesus’ call to Phillip and Nathaniel to become his apostles builds the base of his ministry in John’s Gospel. For the young Samuel, God’s call to follow came in the heat of the night. Each of us receives a call to follow him in some form or another. For some it comes at birth and is witnessed by those who welcome a newborn into the world.

The call of Howard Washington Thurman to follow Jesus was mystical and pure in its origins. On the day he was born in West Palm Beach, Florida on November 18, 1899, Howard Thurman was actually wrapped in a thin membrane which is called a “caul” (**kaal**). This caul covered his head and was seen in his family and among his people as sign from God of mysterious

blessing. His name meant “Guardian” of my people and he was to live into calling and his name.

From birth and through early childhood, Howard Thurman was unique in all the world. This grandson of a slave experienced the world around him in mystical ways. As he grew through adolescence and early adulthood, he integrated his African American Christian heritage with his own mystical experiences as a child and youth and developed a distinctive interfaith, interracial, pragmatic, syncretistic, authentic, nonviolent Social Gospel witness for justice and peace. Thurman was an original thinker. Thurman’s original thinking and daring authentic example provide vivid proof that – in the words of Acts – God has never been “*left without a witness in doing good*” (1).

Those who heard Thurman preach and teach at Morehouse College, Howard University’s Rankin Chapel, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco (which he founded in 1944 as the first interracial, intercultural church in America), the Marsh Chapel at Boston University, or a myriad other locales would report being mesmerized by his deep resonant voice and his even deeper spirit. Churches which welcomed him for extended visits for teaching and preaching would report a radical “*slowing down*” and a “*quieting of head and heart*” (2).

In 1936, Thurman was the leader of a group of four African-Americans who made a pilgrimage to meet with Mahatma Gandhi in India and, thereafter, was the initial person responsible for bringing Gandhian nonviolence back to America as a methodology for social change. When they parted Gandhi said to Thurman, in what would become prophetic words, “*It will be through Black Americans that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world.*” For countless leaders of the Civil Rights movement, Thurman served as mentor, advisor and spiritual counselor. He was Martin Luther King Jr.’s mentor and teacher at Boston University when King was doing his PhD. It has been reported by biographers and friends, that King carried a copy of

Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* wherever he went during and after the launching of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama.

Preachers would flock to hear Thurman preach and leading theologians would appraise his impact as unquestioningly original and invaluable powerful. The late Rev. Dr. James Cone, often called the father of Black Theology at Union Seminary in NYC, has described Thurman as the most original theological mind ever to arise on American soil (3). Ecumenists and enthusiasts for interfaith endeavors came to regard him as generations ahead of his time. As an introvert, Thurman never sought the limelight. He was a revolutionary thinker who firmly believed humanity possesses an inherent, potential reverence, and he viewed Jesus as the premier guide and guarantor for connecting with God – “*to Jesus, God breathed through all that is*” (4).

The defining motif of Thurman's thinking was his incessant “*search for common ground*” (5) and a perpetual listening for “*the sound of the genuine*” (6). Astoundingly, his overall vision was a “*friendly world underneath friendly skies*” (7). In the beauty, anguish, and unalloyed faithfulness of Negro Spirituals, Thurman found genius expressions of humanity's most profound connections with God (8). Thurman understood forgiveness to be manifested when there is “*an awareness of... having done violence to the integrity of the soul and to the sense of goodness and righteousness which became manifest along our journey*” (9). For Thurman “*The God of life is the God of religion*” and not the other way round (10).

Thurman's views on prayer were varied and dynamically multivalent. He defined prayer as a way of connecting with God's “*divine agenda or working paper*” (11) and the main way “*to find a clue to God's purposes in the world*” (12). The openness of the human heart in prayer was, for Thurman, “*the swinging door that no one can shut*” (13). Ultimately, Thurman believed and operated under a consistent assumption and commitment: **all human beings can make a successful journey to an intimate connection with the God of their lives in “the inward sea.”** Such journeys and such intimate connections are what save us, within our earthen domains and into eternity:

“There is in every one of us an inward sea. In that sea there is an island; and on that island there is a temple. In that temple there is an altar; and on that altar burns a flame. Each one of us, whether we bow our knee at an altar external to ourselves or not, is committed to the journey that will lead him to the exploration of his inward sea, to locate his inward island, to find the temple, and to meet, at the altar in that temple, the God of his life. Before that altar, impurities of life are burned away; before that altar, all the deepest intent of your spirit stands naked and revealed; before that altar, you hear the voice of God, giving lift to your spirit, forgiveness for your sins, renewal for your commitment. As you leave that altar within your temple, on your island, in your inward sea, all the world becomes different and you know that whatever awaits you, nothing that life can do will destroy you” (14).

You are I and all who enter this church for years to come have been and will be influenced by Howard Washington Thurman. It was Thurman who deeply influenced another one of God’s beloved “originals” who was called to create beauty in this world – Ellen Merit – the artist who designed and created The Music Window (dedicated to the work of Dene Barnard) in 2003 and the Social Justice Window in 2023 – which was placed in our Narthex just four weeks ago – looking out on the Social Justice Park and looking into our beautiful Gothic Cathedral.

This week I asked Ellen to share some thoughts on her window. I also recommend go on the First Church Arts website and listen to Melissa Kulwicki’s interview with Ellen. Ellen offered these thoughts.

First, my thoughts on Howard Thurman...I think he would be sad to see the state of our country. What once seemed so promising in terms of civil rights has been so diminished by SCOTUS...and almost half the country thinks we should have minority rule by religious zealots, fanatics and frauds. He lived through the rise of fascism and white supremacy in our country and in the world. And here we are. Just look at the state of our country and government. The third anniversary of the insurrection. A confederate flag carried through our capital

that day. Only the boots have been held responsible, not the suits. I hope the window reminds people of the cost of justice and to never give up looking for it.

I do love the window. It's vibrancy and movement along with the excitement of working with the history of social justice. All our conversations and research came together without the need for a didactic visual approach. It does leave open so many possibilities for learning and conversation. I also got to use the glass saved over the course of my life waiting for just the right project- and here it was, becoming a bookend knowing it completes the church and possibly my career in stained glass. The details make the window come alive. There is a whole lot of symbolism packed into a small space. I love that it sits across from the Music Window and today, I am especially holding Dene in my heart. Professor Thurman loved music. He wanted to make music. He wrote: "the gift of intimacy is revealed by the magic music creates when a person who is so blessed makes an instrument sing." (God bless Dene and Howard).

*The Window has the notation – "This is the Highway of the Lord." This comes at the end of the chapter on Hate in *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Drawing from one of his poems in "The Greatest of These," he states that "hatred tends to dry up the springs of creative thought in the life of the hater, so that his resourcefulness becomes completely focused on the negative aspects of his environment." (Quite the Prophecy!)*

He closes the chapter on "Hate" with these words: "Jesus rejected hatred. It was not because he lacked the vitality or the strength. It was not because he lacked incentive. Jesus rejected hatred because he saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit, death to communion with his Father. He affirmed life; and hatred was the great denier. To him it was clear:

Thou must not make division.

Thy mind, heart, soul and strength must ever search

To find the way by which the road

To all men's need of thee must go:

This is the Highway of the Lord.

Ellen finishes with these words: *Professor Thurman speaks of the paradoxes of the human adventure – “we live inside all experience, but we are permitted to bear witness only to the outside.” Today the fight for justice continues and his legacy now more than ever needs to stay front and center. It’s my hope that the window continues to be a focus and inspiration to fight the fear and move towards the light.* Two geniuses come together in one window.

In I Samuel 3, we hear the voice of God calling to Samuel in the night. The young Samuel is confused, but the old Eli is not. He knows it is God at work calling his young prophet to step up and answer his call to ministry. Just as Phillip and Nathaniel were drawn in to follow Jesus; and Samuel was called in the dark of the night to follow God, and Howard was wrapped in “caul” – a mystical membrane of protection and set loose in the world to create social change through mystery, prayer and nonviolence; and Martin was born 95 years ago tomorrow, anointed by God to “save the soul of our nation,” and Ellen was anointed by the Spirit of God to create two windows of sacred beauty – one for music dedicated to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and one for social justice dedicated to the inspiration of Howard Washington Thurman – **EVERYONE ONE OF US NEEDS TO ASK OURSELVES – “What is the call of God in my life?” What is God calling me to do on the Highway of our Lord?**

Ponder these words from Howard Thurman as you consider God’s call in your life – *“Do not ask yourself what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive and go and do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”* **Come alive my friends and let us step forward on the Highway of our Lord. Amen.**

- (1) Acts 14:17.
- (2) From a conversation with Dr. Alvin O'Neal Jackson during his participation in Spirit Fest, June 2005, at Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri, as he recalled his time as a ministerial intern with Dr. T. Garrott Benjamin of Second Christian Church (now Light of the World Christian Church) in Indianapolis, Indiana, when Thurman would spend a week with the clergy and congregation there.
- (3) Declared during a "Vacation Liberation School" lecture at the "Forty Acres and a Mule" Campus of St. James United Methodist Church, Kansas City, Missouri.
- (4) Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 30.
- (5) See Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).
- (6) Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 38 and 99.
- (7) Howard Thurman, *The Greatest of These* (Oakland, CA: Eucalyptus Press, 1944), p. ix.
- (8) See Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* (Oakland, CA: Eucalyptus Press, 1945; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955).
- (9) Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row 1963), p. 103.
- (10) Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953; Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981), p. 23; in a memorable conversation with Dr. Dorsey Blake, the current pastor of The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, in San Francisco, California, August 2001, this notion was emphasized again and again.
- (11) See Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, edited by Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 87.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- (13) See Thurman, *A Strange Freedom*, p. 286; see also Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, p. 127.
- (14) Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp. 43-44; see also Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, p. 15.

