

*Jesus and The Disinherited:
An Inquiry by Howard Thurman into Spiritual Growth through the
Eyes of the Poor and Dispossessed*



Presented by:

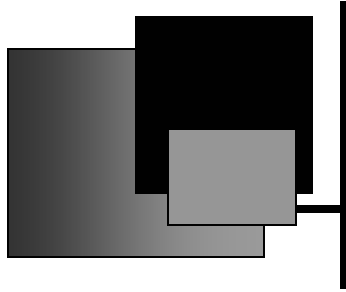
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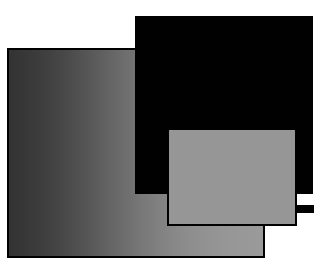
Goals of Our Session

In this session, we will:

1. Consider a different perspective on Jesus that is important to and for the "disinherited"
2. Explore some formative issues affecting Jesus' own spiritual development as Howard Thurman saw them
3. Examine Thurman's views on the impact of fear on the spiritual lives of the disinherited
4. Look into Thurman's views on the power of love on the spiritual lives of the disinherited
5. Introduce Howard Thurman and describe his place for the church today

NOTE: Occasionally, we use Dr. Thurman's own words from Jesus and the Disinherited.

NOTE: "Disinherited" = cut off, disowned, left penniless, dispossessed.



Jesus and The Disinherited

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman published Jesus and the Disinherited in 1949. The book has been described as:

- "A guide for transcending the heartache and humiliation of modern life and renewing one's vision of a spirited public and personal life."
- "This is a radical look at a radical man and, to me, Savior, Jesus Christ."
- "This gentle yet passionate look at Jesus offers insight into God's and our own relationship with the poor as well as some profound pathways to understanding racism... this book has changed my own personal history..."

We look at Jesus and the Disinherited today for what it offers as clues for deepening our spiritual experiences of life, God, and each other.

The Grandmother who raised Thurman was a former slave. A pivotal conversation between them was,

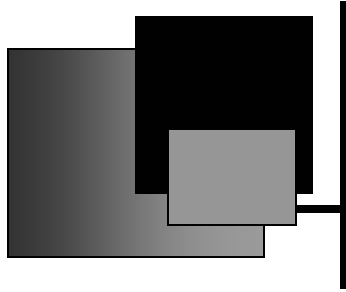
"Grandmother, how did you survive?"

Her response: *"By adopting the religion of Jesus."*

Throughout his career, Thurman argued that Jesus is:

- Not best viewed as a religious *object* of devotion and worship - He became closely identified with the domination of western Christianity and a tool of divisiveness, and cut off from the historical contexts of his earthly life
- Best viewed as a religious *subject* in quest for moral community and spiritual dignity.

**God and Jesus can appear different
for the poor and disinherited
than They do for
the well-to-do and privileged.**



Some Elements of Jesus' Earthly Life

Dr. Thurman observed that, in order to secure itself in an often hostile, contentious world, the church:

- Tends to side with the powers that be - the strong - against the weak.
- Tells the poor how to believe in and handle Christianity, doing so from the spiritual needs of the powerful rather than from what Jesus means to people in the depths of poverty
- Needs to examine the religion of Jesus against the background of His own time on the earth in order to understand more about the value of Jesus to the lives and religion of the disinherited

Three Key Elements of the Earthly Life of Jesus

Jesus was a Jew.

- Jesus cannot be understood without understanding His Hebrew heritage
- Jesus was "the product of the working of God's creative mind upon the life, thought, and character of a race of men."
- Jesus conditioned and organized Himself to embody a set of ideals

Jesus was a poor Jew.

- The dedication of Jesus in Luke describes how His parents offered a sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Leviticus required that if the person did not have a lamb to sacrifice.
- Being poor at birth initially placed Jesus with the great masses of men on the earth."

Jesus was a member of a minority group in the midst of a larger dominating group.

- Hebrew history evidences how Roman control created loss of status etched itself into the soul of Israel increasingly through the desecration of the Holy Land

Many shared these traits, yet were not also Jesus. Jesus' uniqueness was not defined by these circumstances, but his uniqueness did grow through and was nurtured by them.

Dr. Thurman believed there was at least **one critical, overwhelming question** the Roman occupation of the Holy Land posed to the Hebrews:

Under what terms is survival possible?

1. What must be the attitude towards Rome?
2. Was any morally tolerable attitude possible that left self-esteem intact?
3. For the "responsible" Hebrew, what quality of life was possible without that question first being resolved?

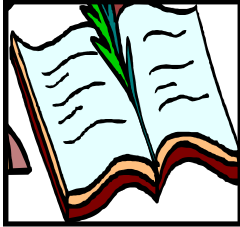
Such questions, Thurman believed, have been as critical for the poor and dominated throughout the ages as they were for Jesus and His contemporaries. Thurman also believed that such questions forced a shape to the spiritual lives of those disinherited peoples. *

In Jesus' day, Thurman and others wrote, there were two main perspectives that enabled response to the question of survival under the Romans:

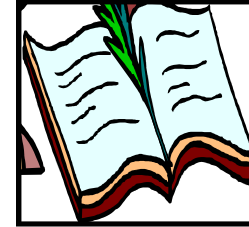
➤ To Not Resist

➤ To Resist

Each alternative has sub-alternatives within it.



Two General Plans of Non-Resistance



Under what terms is survival possible?"

Imitation

- Aim - Assimilate the culture and social behavior pattern of the dominant group.
- Reduce outer or external signs of difference ... reduce causes for active violence or oppression.

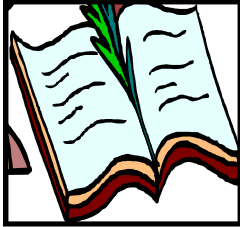
Herod - the excellent example

- Sadducees - another example.
- "They loved Israel, but they seem to have loved security more."

Cultural Isolation

- Aim - Minimize contact with the enemy.
- Keep one's resentment under rigid control.
- Security is sure only as long as the *status quo* remains intact. So you are safer when you use your power to give others a sense of insecurity.
- Pharisees - an example. "no active resistance against Rome - only a terrible contempt."

How would lives shaped by each plan affect prayer lives?



Two General Plans of Resistance

Under what terms is survival possible?"



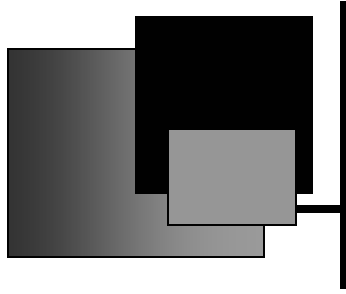
Armed Resistance

- Aim - Provide a form of expression that releases tension and frees the oppressed from a sense of impotency and helplessness.
- "It is better to die fighting for freedom than to rot away in one/s chains."
- Caution is interpreted as either compromise or cowardice. The cause is just, it cannot fail.
- Zealots - an example.

"The Kingdom of God is in us!"

- Aim - Thrive physically, socially, etc. in the face of tremendous opposition.
- "Anyone who permits another to determine the quality of his inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to his destiny."
- "It seems clear that Jesus understood the anatomy of the relationship between his people and the Romans, and he interpreted that relationship against the background of the profoundest ethical insight of his own religious faith as he had found it in the heart of the prophets of Israel."
- "In him was life; and the life was the light of men."

How would lives shaped by each plan affect prayer lives?



Fear as a Spiritual Root

Of all the kinds and sorts of fear, Dr. Thurman chose to focus on this particular kind of fear as being a critical element in the shaping of the spiritual experience of the poor and oppressed:

- ✓ Always present
- ✓ Deeply rooted in the relations between weak and strong, the controllers of the environment and those controlled by them

Some Key Points:

Q. How does this kind of fear develop, and what does it mean for life?

A. Isolation + Helplessness x Exposure to forms of Violence → Fear

Q. All violence?

A. No. Only violence without contest. Violence where power and tools are all on one side. Violence where there is no recognizable form of protection. People know they cannot fight back, know they cannot protect themselves.

Q. What is the chief outcome of this kind of fear on spiritual development?

A. Not fear of death. Humiliation arising from the fact that you die for no cause or benefit. You are killed or beaten merely because of the other's wrath or indifference. That the other needs no moral passion to deal with you.

Other questions include:

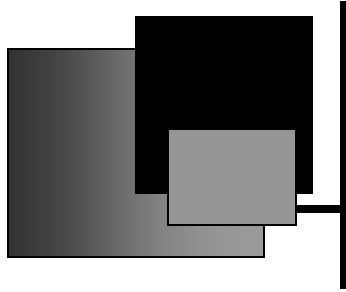
- How might memory or knowledge of previous violence affect a person?
- Does violence have to happen in order to produce fear in the heart?
- How might a fearful group of disinherited people affect the lives of the powerful?
- How might fear affect the lives of the poor as they seek to be what God intended for them to be?

Dr. Thurman wondered if Jesus knew such fear and searched in Jesus' own sense of religion for clues on how the disinherited could deal with their fear. Here is some of what he discovered.

- In Luke 4 ('The Spirit of the Lord is on me...')
- Matthew 10 ('Therefore, do not fear them...')
- In other places, Jesus seems to be saying that humans are children of God and that Jesus suggests that it not reasonable to assume that "God, whose creative activity is expressed even in such details as the hairs of a man's head, would exclude from his concern the life, the vital spirit, of the man himself. "
- That God is mindful of the individual is critical in dealing with fear.

If a disinherited one actively determines that he or she is a child of God, then:

- What happens to self-respect?
- What happens to his or her natural responses to the threats of violence?
- Other implications for spiritual growth and development that responds to fear?



Love as a Spiritual Root

"Hear, oh 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 they might," and "love thy neighbor as thyself."

The religion of Jesus makes the love-ethic central.

- Define & love neighbor directly, with no barriers between
- Opposition to Jesus within His own community deepened as He taught to:
 - Love opponents who were Hebrews
 - Love enemies of the Hebrews

Let's look at how Jesus worked out His love-ethic.

Turning Enemies to Neighbors - The Central Challenge of Jesus' Love-Ethic

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<p style="text-align: center;"><u>The Personal Enemy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Currently or formerly part of one's own primary & intimate group ▪ Conflict resulted from misunderstanding, tempers, too much pride, old feuds, etc. ▪ To love such a one requires confession & restoration ▪ "If you bring your gift to the altar and there, you remember that your brother has something against you, leave there your gift at the altar, ... and go be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift." ▪ This kind of enemy is easy for disinherited to deal because they are "your own kind". To those who have no such claim, there is no responsibility." 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>The Shameful Enemy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Persons who, by their activities, make it difficult for the group to live with without shame or humiliation. ▪ Tax collectors - the Israelites who understood the psychology of the people & could function with spiritual ruthlessness ▪ Loving The Shameful Enemy was an insult ▪ Jesus' securing the love and friendship of a tax collector, his Good Samaritan story, & his appreciation of the Syrophenician woman were spiritual triumphs ▪ To love such a one - 1) recall he, too, is a son of Abraham, a son of God. 2) help him recover that knowledge & he will attack his betrayal as only he can. ▪ Disinherited always deal with the Shameful Enemy. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>The Roman Enemy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enemy is both personal & impersonal, religious & political ▪ "To love the Roman first meant to lift him out of the general classification of enemy." The Roman & Jew had to emerge to each other as valid persons ▪ Individual desires to be regarded for oneself alone or be disassociated from all the entanglements of birthright was impossible and irrelevant. A Roman remained a Roman, a Jew remained a Jew. Mutual validation was difficult and risky. Attempters could be seen as hypocrites & become extremely isolated. ▪ Love of this enemy requires an "unscrambling" process

How might "unscrambling" occur?

The religion of Jesus says to the disinherited: "Love your enemy. Take the initiative in seeking ways by which you can have the experience of a common sharing of mutual worth and value. It may be hazardous, but you must do it."

Why must the Disinherited do this?

The "enemy status"

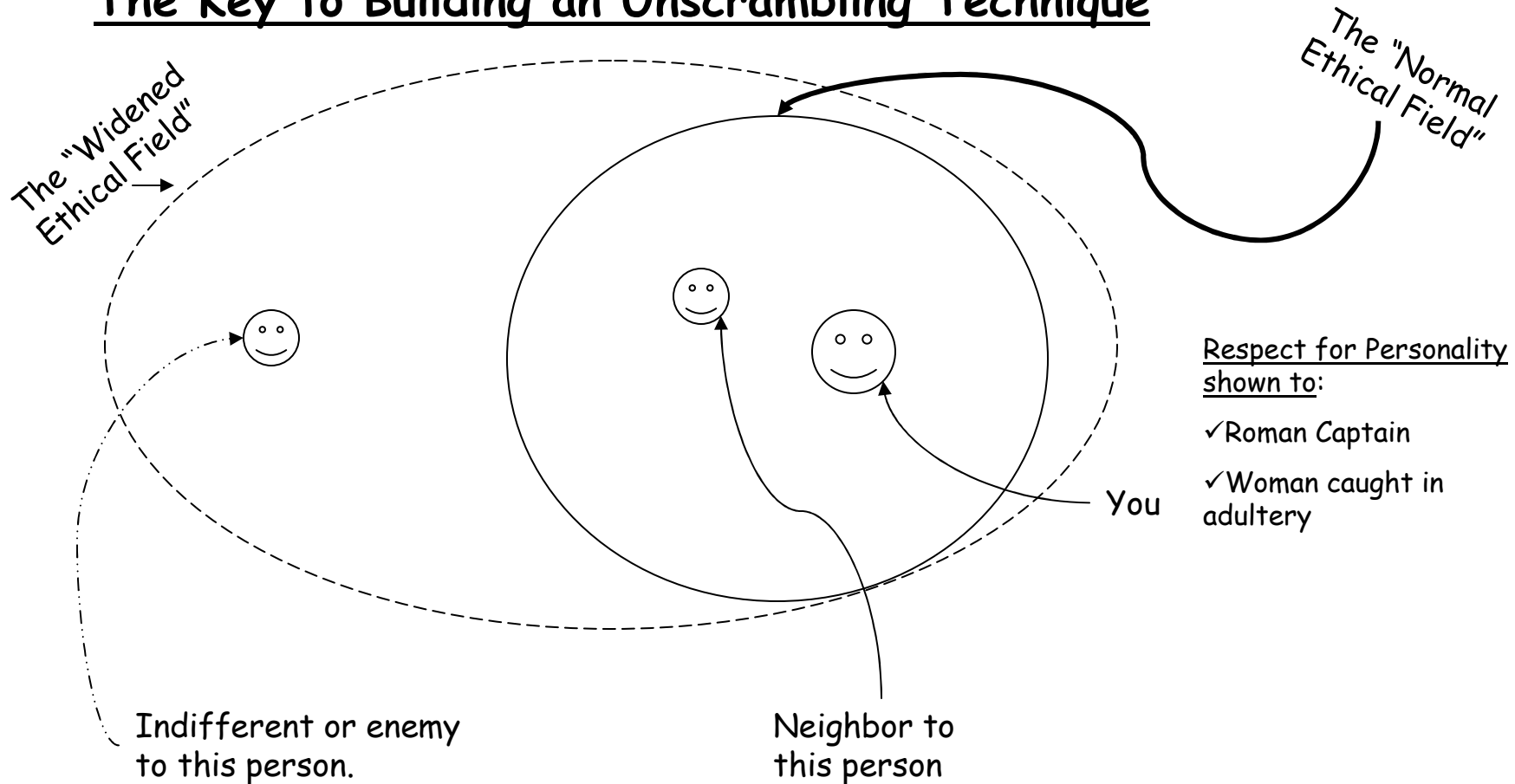
(which affects the Disinherited's experience of fear, deception, and hate)

must be attacked!

What are some outcomes of the attempt to unscramble?

- The underprivileged person makes him/herself status-free
- Love becomes possible
- One lowering of the barriers might yield useful information on building techniques for loving one's enemy and increased inner freedom

The Key to Building an Unscrambling Technique



The "attitude of respect for personality" is normally extended to all the individuals who are within what may be called the ethical field.

By both expanding the range of one's ethical field and creating opportunities that help one to move others from outside it to inside it, one turns indifference or enemy towards becoming neighbor.

Your ethical field:

- Contains individuals you consider at deep levels to be part of your human family
- It includes those you *think and feel* close to, not whom you merely believe to be close to
- Contains "*my kind of human*"
- Those outside receive increasingly lesser respect and recognition as being within the circle of your fully human family. They deserve less love, less neighborliness, less truth. They more easily can be feared, lied to, hated, and killed.

What might be some ingredients to expand our ethical fields, our circles of human families?

- Embrace the risk of challenge the limits of our circles
- Pursue in each encounter with another outside our field a feel for the fact that this person is a child of God, and seek for God's interest in him or her
- Develop a hunger in your own heart to be a deep respecter of persons and personalities
- Seize meetings as opportunities to discover a new neighbor

Conclusions:

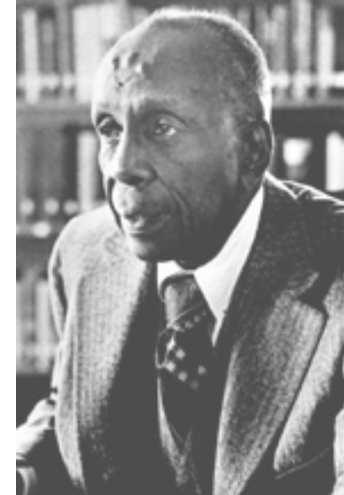
Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman published Jesus and The Disinherited in 1949. Much has happened in the US since then. Some things have not happened. This book is still relevant for our spiritual growth and development because barriers between privileged and non-privileged continue to exert influence on our lives.

Fear, deception, and hatred remain operative in how people deal with each other. The continuing development of the love-ethic of Jesus is required for:

- People to learn more about being sons and daughters of God
- The church to learn more about its calling to side with the disinherited
- Society to be continuously re-grounded in justice and equity



Afterward: Howard Thurman



Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman (1900 - 1981) as a pastor, theologian, preacher, author, Dean of the Chapel at Howard and Boston Universities, mentor to 1000s worldwide, founded and pastored the first inter-racial, inter-ethnic, inter-denominational church in the U.S.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of those mentored by Dr. Thurman. Dr. King reportedly carried Jesus and the Disinherited with him during his many campaigns for freedom and justice around the U.S. 21

Partial List of Thurman's Book Writings

Deep River. (1945). Explores the beginnings of the spirituals and their significance in our day as well as in the day of the slave.

The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death. (1947) Similar focus as Deep River.

Jesus and the Disinherited. (1949). Subject of this study.

The Growing Edge. For Thurman, the sermon was an act of worship. In these searching, meditative sermons he focuses on enemies, prayer, God, peace, festivals, and Christian character.

Deep is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness. (1951). Meditations written originally for the bulletin of Marsh Chapel, Boston University. Themes: A Sense of History, A Sense of Self, A Sense of Presence, For the Quiet Time.

Meditations of the Heart. (1953). Devotional. "From life, love, race, death, pain and joy, this book is a must read for the poet and the seeker of the very heart of God." (a reader)

Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. (1959).

The Inward Journey. (1961). Third of a series of profound books on meditations.

Disciplines of the Spirit. (1963). A guide to a more God-filled life using five disciplines: Commitment, Wisdom, Suffering, Prayer, and Reconciliation. He offers illustrations and concrete suggestions on how to achieve a more spiritual filled life.

The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope. (1965). A commentary on what segregation does to the human soul. Points to the ground of hope which can bring all people together.

The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis for Man's Experience of Community. (1971) Thurman's book on community. He calls us at once to affirm our own identity, but then to look behind that identity to that which we have in common with all life.

The Centering Moment. A collection of prayer-meditations selected from worship services. Themes: Mood of Celebration, No Man is an Island, and Search Me, O God.

The Creative Encounter. (a reader) I recommend this to anyone of any faith, or lack of faith, as a way to rediscover the true meaning in their relationship with a higher power." Interprets religious experience as it involves the total person, including feelings and emotions.

With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman. (1979). One of the great American memoirs of the 20th century. "I read much of this book during a 12-hour prayer vigil and found it very exciting and satisfying." (a reader)