

Reading
with
Leader's
Guide

VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Howard Thurman (1899-1981)

The significance of the religion of Jesus to people who stand with their backs to the wall has always seemed to me to be crucial. It is one emphasis that has been lacking... This is the question which individuals and groups who live in our land always under the threat of profound social and psychological displacement face: 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? The question is searching, for the dramatic demonstration of the impotency of Christianity in dealing with the issues is underscored by its apparent inability to cope with it within its own fellowship. (*Jesus and the Disinherited*)

What comes through most clearly in Howard Thurman's words?

How would you respond to Thurman's observation that Christianity seems impotent to deal with discrimination and race?

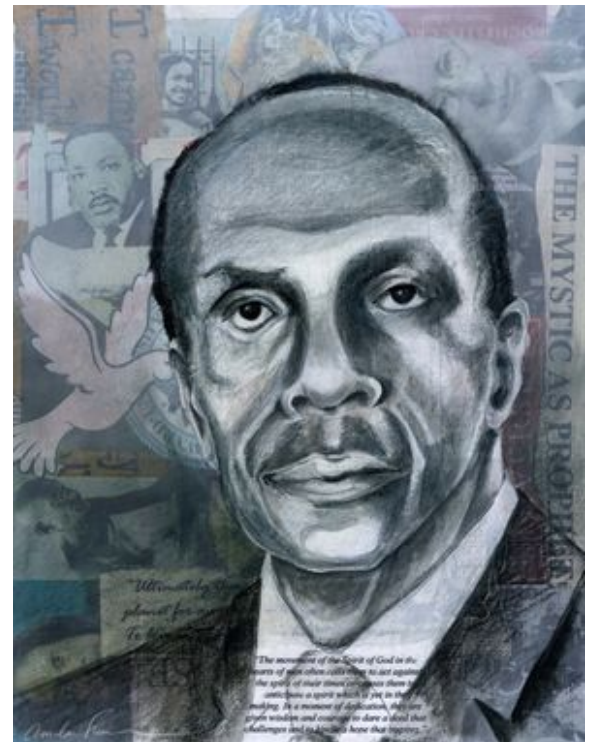
What could Thurman mean when he speaks of "the genius of the religion"?

Think of someone you know who rejects Christianity because of what they've seen of Christians in the world. What would you say to that person?

Note: the next passage includes the word "niggers" – You may want to make the group aware that an offensive word is coming

Once when I was very young, my grandmother, sensing the meaning of the constant threat under which I was living, told me about the message on one of the slave ministers on her plantation....On the rare occasions when we was able to hold services for his fellow slaves, the climactic moment came in these exhilarating words: 'You are not slaves; you are not *niggers* condemned forever to do your master's will—you are God's children.' When those words were uttered a warm glow crept all through the very being of the slaves, and they felt the feeling of themselves run through them.

Even at this far distance I can relive the pulsing tremor of raw energy that was released in me as I responded to her words. The sense of being permanently grounded in God gave to the people of that far-off time a way to experience themselves as human beings....The community of Christian believers are under the judgement of a command to love God, which is the response to the awareness that God cares or loves the individual and one must love one's neighbor as oneself. (*The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*)



What is the religion embraced by Thurman's grandmother? What are the essentials and implications of this faith? How does this compare to the Christianity you've heard preached in your own context?

There is an order, a moral order, in which men participate, that gathers up into itself, dimensional fulfillment, limitless in its creativity and design. Whatever may be the pressures to which one is subjected, the snares, the buffetings, one must not for a moment think that there is not an ultimate value at stake. It is this ultimate value at stake in all experiences that is the final incentive to decency, to courage, to hope. Human life, even the life of a slave, must be lived worthily of so grand an undertaking. At every moment a crown was placed over his head that he must constantly grow tall enough to wear. Only of that which is possessed of infinite potentials, can an infinite demand be required.... *(The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death)*

What do you make of Thurman's phrase "ultimate value"? What do you think motivates people toward decency, courage and hope? How might you grow tall enough to wear your crown?

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 man would be a threat to his brother. "The kingdom of God is within." "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor."

The basic principles of his way of life cut straight through to the despair of his fellows and found it groundless. By inference he says, "You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception and dishonesty, even to save your lives....Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven." *(Jesus and the Disinherited)*

Imagine yourself a person on the margin living in the Roman empire of Jesus's time. What would Jesus' message say to you in particular? What does Thurman teach you about hatred?

There is no need to fear evil. There is every need to understand what it does, how it operates in world, what it draws upon to sustain itself. We must not shrink from the knowledge of the evilness of evil. Over and over we must know that the real target of evil is not destruction of the body, the reduction to rubble of cities; the real target of evil is to corrupt the spirit of man and to give to his soul the contagion of inner disintegration. When this happens, there is nothing left, the very citadel of man is captured and laid waste. Therefore the evil in the world around us must not be allowed to move from without to within...To drink in the beauty that is within reach, to clothe one's life with simple deeds of kindness, to keep alive a sensitiveness to the movement of the spirit of God in the quietness of the human heart and in the workings of the human mind—this is always the ultimate answer to the great deception. *(The Meditations of the Heart)*

How do you think Thurman is defining and describing evil here? How does that compare to your own definition of evil?

This next section is a prayer. You may choose to read the prayer line by line, pausing along the way. You may invite individuals in the group to take turns reading a sentence. Make time for silence and reflection.

We are deeply conscious of our stubborn wills, the hard core of resistance to Thy Spirit, as it would wizen our minds, make tender our hearts, and sensitize our spirits, our Father. We want to yield ourselves to Thee. We want to give over into Thy custody the things that disturb us, that frighten us, that fill our days with uneasiness and our nights with the kind of foreboding that challenges sleep and rest. This we want to do but we don't know how to do it. Besides, we are never sure that we can trust Thee with the things that are ultimately a part of the fabric of our lives. To be rid of them would be to expose ourselves in ways that may destroy the kind of balance with which we function from day to day.

We wait now in Thy Presence with the silent hope that something may transpire within us that will relax the hold we have on the things that do not make for our peace. While we wait we remember. We remember those whose

lives are a part of our own lives in ways that are direct and sure. We would include them in this waiting moment, but here again, our Father, we are not sure that this is what we really want to do.

We wait, that our spirits may be clarified and our willingness may be at the disposal of the demands of our hearts. We remember our world and all the excitement of the last few days. We are troubled in our spirits because one part of us wishes so much that we may win the race for power and another part of us wishes so much that we may give ourselves freely and completely to the quest for truth on earth, in the heavens, and in the hearts of men, and trust the decision of power to Thee in whom at last all power finally rests.

With all arrogances put aside, with all weaknesses laid bare, with all our deep-lying hungers exposed, we wait, our Father, for the baptism of Thy Spirit, that we may walk confidently on the earth by the strength of our hearts and the inspiration of Thy Spirit. If this be our portion, it is enough, O God, our Father. This is enough. (*The Centering Moment*)