

In *Footprints of A Dream*, Howard Thurman says, “The movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of [humans] often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, they are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires.”ⁱ It is in this Spirit that Howard Thurman exposes the “hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of the disinherited” and calls for a dramatic revolution in the wills of the inherited and disinherited of society and religion alike.ⁱⁱ In his crowning work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman goes beyond the limits of a social commentary and expositis the call to which every follower of ‘the religion of Jesus’ must respond regarding “the poor, the dispossessed, [and] the disinherited” of society and religion.ⁱⁱⁱ

The primary question Thurman wishes is to answer is, “What does our religion say... to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall?”^{iv} In the first section of this work, Thurman presents an interpretation of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth that will lay the groundwork for answering this question. Thurman says that the very social location of Jesus was instrumental in determining the content of his message. Firstly, Jesus was Jewish, and thereby an inheritor of the effects of hundreds, even thousands, of years of persecution and oppression of a people who believed themselves to be God’s chosen. Also, Jesus was poor and a member of a minority group living in the midst of a majority group, which held control over his land and, in many ways, his people. Somehow, out of tremendous resistance, Jesus emerged as a leader and liberator of his people, with a means by which all could find freedom. Thurman says, “He [Jesus] recognized with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to determine the inner quality of his inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to his destiny.”^v Thurman demonstrates the fact that the religion of Jesus is, at its very core, “a technique of survival for the oppressed.”^{vi} Thurman says of Jesus, “Wherever his Spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.”^{vii}

Thurman employs several sources for developing his arguments and observations. Among the most central, Thurman uses the Christian scriptures, his personal experience and the particularity of his social

location to dispel the value of fear, hypocrisy and hatred as coping mechanisms for the burden of the disinherited. Much of what Thurman says about Jesus' life and teachings comes from the witness of the Christian scriptures and a historical-critical reading of the Scriptures. Thurman uses the account of Jesus' dedication at the Temple in the gospel of Luke and the Levitical law to demonstrate the fact that Jesus was poor. Thurman uses information about the conditions of Palestine under Roman rule to depict the oppressive conditions in which Jesus was living and ministering.

The central question of this work comes from an experience Thurman had with the Principal of the University of Colombo. The Principal asked Thurman how it was that a man whose own grandmother had been enslaved in the name of Christianity could come to India as a representative of that religion. In the long shadow of this question, Thurman expounds his interpretation of the religion of Jesus, and its meaning for the dispossessed and disinherited, over and above the religion of Christianity. Thurman says, "It is a privilege, after so long a time, to set down what seems to me to be an essentially creative and prognostic interpretation of Jesus as religious subject rather than religious object."^{viii}

Probably the greatest source for Thurman's work is the particularity of his social location. Thurman was an African-American man who grew up in northern Florida, lived with his mother and grandmother, a freed slave, spent much of his life in a segregated United States, was one of a small number of well-educated African-Americans, and lived almost all of his adult life in Boston and San Francisco, outside the hotbed of racism and violence that was the South. Thurman was, in almost every sense, qualified to be the social prophet that his life and work proved him to be. Able to report from a bank of experience with the fear, deception and hate he describes in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman was all the more able to speak candidly about the abominable conditions of life for the disinherited because he was reporting with a wealth of training and prestige, from a place where his physical existence would not be immediately threatened by challenging the status quo.

There are those who might not be able to realize the distinction Thurman is making between Christianity and the religion of Jesus. In that case, like the Principal of the University of Colombo, one might presume that Thurman's argument is inherently flawed, presuming this religion to be one only for the powerful, predominant members of society, with nothing to offer the rest. One with this perspective might

look to the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, which says, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ.”^{ix} Thurman deals with passages like these, I believe, in his interpretation of Jesus. Thurman, it seems, while an heir to the Christian tradition, is a devout follower of the religion of non-violence, life-affirmation, faith, hope and love—the religion to which Jesus was also a subject. Thurman challenges the acceptance of the status quo by the Christian Church by drawing sharp distinctions between the legacy of Jesus’ life and the practices of the Christian Church. Therefore, Thurman would encourage even the sharpest critics of the Christian faith to look to the original subject on which our faith is founded. In the life and promise of Jesus, as Thurman demonstrates, there is tremendous promise for the dispossessed.

In summation of the basic condition of life for the disinherited, Thurman says, “It is the similarity of a social climate at the point of denial of full citizenship which creates the problem for creative survival.”^x The beauty of this work is the seamlessness between the context in which Thurman writes and any other time in history. Indeed, as one reads Thurman’s depiction of life for the African-American in the 1960s, other disinherited communities quickly come to mind and heart. Not the least of these are homosexuals trying to secure the rights to marriage, hospital visitation, property rights, and more. Thurman describes the segregation of the Sunday hour and says, “The enormity of this sin cannot easily be grasped. The situation is so tragic that [persons] 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.”^{xi} Sadly, the voice of the Church is again loudest in its opposition to the rights and inclusion of homosexual people. The Christian Church remains a place of racial segregation and, in homosexuals, has found another community to keep outside the promise of the beloved community.

In the days of systemic segregation, churches became a place of renewal, restoration and refuge for African-Americans. Presently, the legacy of racial segregation lives on in the houses of worship that distinguish themselves by race and sexual orientation. In 2006, one has to ask: Do Christian churches distinguished by race and sexual orientation provide a still essential place of refuge and empowerment for communities of marginalized peoples, or do they perpetuate the systems of implied segregation still functioning in American society?

Derek Elkins – Christian Ethics – 2.24.06
Review of *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman

ⁱ http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/howard_thurman.html from Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959) page unknown.

ⁱⁱ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976) 74.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 36.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 11, 13.

^v *Ibid.*, 28.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 29.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 29.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 15.

^{ix} Ephesians 6:5

^x *Ibid.*, 34.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 100.