Malcolm Clemens Young Exodus 24:12-18

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X6 Psalm 99

Last Epiphany (Year A) 11:00 a.m. & 6:00 p.m. Eucharist 2 Peter 1:16-21

Sunday 26 February 2017 Mathew 17:1-9

**Howard Thurman Transfiguring Our Lives**

*“Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here…’”* (Mt. 17).

Sisters and brothers it is good for us to be here. In my heart I say these words so often. It is good for us to be here – together. It is good to see the light shining through these glorious windows. It is good to join our prayers with all those who came before us and those who are to come. It is good to have our hearts lifted by this heavenly music, to share this bread. It is good to pay attention, to listen, to dedicate this moment for a higher purpose, to open our heart to God.

We especially need this today. *The New York Times* technology writer Farhad Manjoo published an article about trying to follow the news but at the same time avoiding coverage of our president. He pointed out what we all know. This has become impossible. He writes, that coverage of Donald Trump, “may eclipse that of any single human being ever.” “He is no longer just the message he has become the medium, the ether through which all stories flow.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

To explain this Manjoo cites a paper by Microsoft researchers who studied consumer music downloads. Half the subjects knew just the song title and band. They provided the other half with the song title, band name and the number of times the music had been downloaded. This “social signal” made some mediocre songs wildly successful and made a lot of what otherwise would be have been regarded as good music simply disappear. He argues that regardless of whether you actually use social media, it may be having a similar effect on our society.

You see it everywhere. Three and four year olds at the preschool are talking to their teachers about what they have heard about the president. At then end of our democracy book discussion on Wednesday night, I asked for one word that summarizes each person’s feeling about our common life. Some of the words that came up were: fragile, crisis, distressed, conflicted, divided, total, fear.[[2]](#endnote-2)

This week it is especially good to be here. At the end of the season of light, called Epiphany, only days before we turn inward for Lent, we have this chance. Like Peter, James and John we might see Jesus in a new way. We too could be transformed by God’s love.

Our translation says that Jesus leads his friends up a mountain, but the verb (anaphero) could mean to bring up, to raise, to take along, to join someone to yourself. It seems like a kind of analogy for maturing in Christ, for becoming a spiritual grownup.

Suddenly, before their eyes Jesus is transfigured – his face shines like the sun. His clothes become dazzling white like the angel at the scene of the resurrection (Mt. 28:3). In another chapter Jesus describes resurrected life he says, “the righteous will shine like the sun” (Mt. 13:43). Jesus shows his friends a new way to be human, a new way beyond death.

Suddenly again two figures appear and speak with Jesus. Moses represents the law and Elijah stands for the prophets. Their conversation with Jesus reminds me that the Bible is not just what is written down. The word is what we clarify through our conversations with each other and ultimately in the way we live.

When Matthew writes about the voice from the shining cloud, he repeats twice the Greek word “idou.” It means “behold,” “Look,” “Pay Attention!” It is both a passive and an active verb. It is actively paying attention and passively being open to what appears. It is as close to being a direct order from God as you are likely to find. And it leaves the disciples beside themselves with fear. Jesus touches them and brings them, not quite back to themselves, but to a new, more durable and powerful self. My question this morning is simple. How can we look more deeply, more closely, so that Jesus might transfigure us?[[3]](#endnote-3)

These days the twentieth century African American religious leader Howard Thurman (1899-1981) has been especially inspiring us. Together some of us studied his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*. He wrote it in San Francisco during the years he co-founded The Church of the Fellowship of All Peoples, one of the first major interracial, interdenominational churches.

For the majority of his career Thurman served as the dean of religious life first at Howard University (1932-1944) and then at Boston University (1953-1965). He was friends in seminary with Martin Luther King, Senior and was most famous as a mentor for Martin Luther King, Jr.

Thurman begins with the observation that, as an impoverished Jew in the repressive Roman Empire, Jesus experienced something similar to African Americans struggling with 1940’s style segregation.[[4]](#endnote-4) Jesus understands what it feels like to be dehumanized by the prevailing powers in a society, to have your dignity denied in countless ways. Jesus knows what life is like for people whose central problem is “under what terms is survival possible” (20)? In fact, Thurman describes Christianity as a technique of survival for the oppressed (29). It is a practical way to have the quality of our inner life determined by God and not by our oppressors.

To use Thurman’s words, Jesus has a message for people, “with their backs to the wall” (11). It is a way of responding in particular to what he calls the “persistent hounds of hell” – the fear, deception and hatred that dog oppressed peoples. Each of these responses to the world makes sense in the beginning. Each seems like a prudent, valid way to deal with a world that threatens our inner integrity and humanity.

Today whether you feel like you were sold out by the coastal elites or are one yourself, whether you are an immigrant fearing deportation or are just deeply concerned about the direction you see this country is moving, you may feel tempted to give yourself over to fear, deception and hatred. Let me summarize briefly what Thurman had to say about them.

1. Fear. Thurman knows fear. He vividly describes what it feels like to be in danger, not because of anything that you might have done, but because of who you are (38). That arbitrariness, the sense that you could be killed or humiliated for no reason at all attacks a person’s self-respect and dignity.

He points out that for the truly dispossessed fear makes a lot of sense. It can keep you from getting killed. It can become what he calls “a safety device” that protects the oppressed from total nervous collapse (40). But there is more. In the situation of segregation fear becomes contagious among the dominant group too. In a powerful observation for our own times he notes that fear insulates the conscience against a sense of one’s own wrong-doing (44). Our fear justifies treating others horribly.

Thurman has tremendous respect for his grandmother who was born into slavery. She told him about secret religious meetings among slaves. The minister there said you, you are not the horrible names white people call you. “You – you are not slaves. You are God’s children” (50). To really believe you are a child of God is to be released from the idea that death is the worst thing in the world (51). This faith gives you inner security (56).

2. Deception. Thurman introduces lying as a technique that the weak use to protect themselves against the strong (63). At first it might seem like a way to secure political, economic and social rights. In our society right now there is a new pressure on the truth and it does not just concern politicians and the media. Ordinary people like you and me need to be more careful about what we say.

Rotary Club has its Four-Way Test. Especially in times like these before speaking we should ask: 1. Is it the truth?, 2. Is it fair to all concerned?, 3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?, 4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?[[5]](#endnote-5)

Thurman argues that it is a “simple fact of psychology” that by calling a lie a truth we “tamper dangerously” with our ability to form value judgments (64). We make it impossible for us to even recognize the truth. Thurman believes that this is the unforgiveable sin – to permanently lose contact with the truth by lying to discredit another. In the place of hypocrisy Jesus offers sincerity. It becomes second nature when we fully realize that all people are children of God.[[6]](#endnote-6)

3. Hatred also seems at first to be a protective measure. When the dispossessed face a legal code that is stacked against them, when they suffer from intolerance and a kind of centuries old terrorism, hate can make it easy to feel self-righteous (82) and morally justified (84-5). Hatred seems to provide a sense of creative purpose (85), a chance for survival with dignity (86).

The problem for Thurman is that once we begin to indulge in hating it becomes impossible to control. Hatred destroys the core of our life. It leaves us isolated. So Jesus says, “love your enemies.” Jesus rejects hate because it means death to our mind and spirit, death to our communion with God (88).

In place of fear, deception and hatred Jesus offers another way. Thurman calls it love or “reverence for personality” (104). It means meeting the other person where they are and treating them as if they have already become what they ought to be. This is how Jesus met the woman caught in adultery and how we should greet each other.

In conclusion, as we actively pay attention and passively open ourselves to what appears we begin to notice that the spirit of Jesus is here. It surrounds us. It lies within us as the source of our being and our fulfillment. It is the divine mystery of who we are.

As we mature spiritually, as the Bible ceases to be words on a page and becomes actions in our life, Jesus frees us from the persistent hounds of hell. In the place of fear, deception and hatred we discover our capacities as children of God filled with sincerity and love. The righteous will shine like the sun. It is good to open our hearts to the holy. It is good to be here.

1. Farhad Manjoo, “I Ignored Trump News for a Week. Here’s What I Learned.” *The New York Times*, 22 February 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/technology/trump-news-media-ignore.html?\_r=0 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Even the positive words (like robust, go back to go forward or hope) seemed like an effort to make the best of a bad situation. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. When the disciples are paralyzed by terror, Jesus brings them back to themselves with his touch (hapsomenos) a word that also means to ignite or light. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Page numbers are from Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976 (reprint 1949)) 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Wikipedia “The Four-Way Test,” 22 February 2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_Four-Way\_Test [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Thurman calls hypocrisy a form of tribute that the weak give to the strong (73). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)