

## RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Texts on Sunday, January 29, 2017

Job 7: 7-21; Matthew 5: 1-12

In preparation for our talk today, I read again Howard Thurman's little volume from 1949 called *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Many of you know the book and know, moreover, how you have lived the question that Thurman poses. It is this. *What has Jesus to say to those whose lives are everywhere limited, threatened, and cut down by the dominant powers of their society?* Thurman has no interest in the question comfortable Christians commonly put to themselves, namely, *What sort of charity should be shown to the poor?* No, Thurman examines only how the word of Jesus can bring life for people abused and disinherited by the unjust society.

Now, for me, a white man—whose ordeals, whatever they were, were only of his own making—to address a congregation of African-Americans on how the faith of Jesus can matter in a racist society is a situation fraught with tension. If you are feeling apprehensive about what foolishness might come from white lips on this subject, I get that. I am not your instructor. You know the walk, the talk. It is you should be speaking, and I listening.

Still, my testimony may matter to you exactly because it comes from these lips, and because it rises not ten days after a man took the seat at the top of government—a white man for eighteen months went venting feelings of injury, fear, hatred and disgust upon many people dispossessed in this land. Regardless his “real feelings”—if that is not itself an oxymoron—there can be no question that this figure was placed in the most powerful seat in the world by a large cohort of white people who do feel injury, hatred, and disgust for people unlike themselves. I hope it may be of some use to you to learn how this preacher, as a white man and as a Christian, understands the spiritual and moral disorder at work in many white people and in all white power in America over these last 500 years.

In the days before the inauguration, I viewed a four-hour documentary on PBS. Called “The Divided States of America,” it examined how Americans grew far apart during the presidency of Barack Obama. Grief gripped me as I watched. Frame after frame revealed the unrestrained hatred of countless Americans for our former president. The films prove that the hatred had nothing to do with policies. It was there in the 2008 campaign before he even spoke. It was there in the appalling “birther” attack on his citizenship. It hung like stinking smoke from year to year of his administration. It still flows down. Where to look for the source of this river of hatred?

Hatred is always twinned with fear. When hatred is born from fears of violence and injustice, the source needs no more searching. For those terribly harmed, hatred may seem the only weight the powerless can lay in

the balance against the injustice. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, hate and fear are two of the three reactions to injustice which most concern Thurman.

But sometimes a person full of hate can point to no wrong done or planned, not to him or to any. That was the sort on display in the film. When hate has no source in injustice, it rises inside the one who hates. To find the source of such emotional sewage, we need to pull away from the battlefield of politics and look instead at the needs most basic to human being.

We humans are a strange creature. We hardly know how to value ourselves. Thomas Jefferson, in masterful confusion, called it “self-evident . . . that all [people] are created equal.” But if it were self-evident, he would not have owned slaves. No, what is self-evident is that all people are completely different, unique, not equal in any measure whatsoever. This one is stronger, that one smarter, she is wiser, one child kinder, another funnier . . . and on and on and on. No one is equal to anyone—except in one thing: it is self-evident that all of us will fail, all stink, all die, all will be as forgotten as dust. Everyone is indeed equal—equal to the dust and ashes we come from.

And yet, and yet . . . we know this! As Pascal phrased it: “The human is only a reed in the field, but he is a thinking reed.” Even more, Ecclesiastes: “God has put eternity in our mind.” Yet whatever is put in our mind by God is by definition *not* self-evident. Whatever is put in us by God is “revealed” in us. Reason cannot deduce it. Moreover, what is revealed is not seen by everyone. Why, Thomas Jefferson self-evidently did not see the revealed truth in his own saying. Why? Because what is eternal in us is not self-evident. Dirt is self-evident, but it is a gift of God to see that all are made and held in the eye of the Eternal. Yes, all humans are created equal—but they can only see this if they know they are creatures and that they owe all things to their Creator. To see this is revelation itself: to live aware that our life is dust; and that God breathes eternally right through the dust.

The great religious traditions focus all attention on our getting these 2 equations right: our equality in dirt and our equality in the eye of God, because getting this math wrong is the start of all wrong. Why does Jesus offer his beatitudes—blessed, the poor; blessed, the wretched; blessed, the hungry; blessed, the peacemaker—but to confirm in the egos of wavering, wondering, weakening hearts, worn by the hatred and disgust of powerful men, that you are seen, you are real, you are children in the eye of God, eternal in the heavens. Thurman says “This idea, that God is mindful of the individual, is of tremendous import in dealing with fear as a disease.” (p. 49)

But let us face a tragic fact. Very many people never find the balance. More fragile than birds’ eggs, their estimate of the value of their own existence swings erratically between negative and positive poles. American culture supports unhappy imaginations in the belief that a person’s worth is

only derived from his dollars. Hence, the desperate features of the “American way of life,” driven by attempts to read the meaning of the self from others’ estimates of one’s successes and failures.

Thurman tells a story of a young German woman who had escaped the Nazis. “She described for me,” he writes, “the powerful magnet that Hitler was to German youth. The youth had lost their sense of belonging. They did not count; there was no center of hope for their marginal egos. According to my friend, Hitler told them, ‘No one loves you—I love you; no one will give you work—I will give you work; no one wants you—I want you.’ . . . Hitler stabilized the ego of the German youth.” (p. 50)

How horrifying to hear today this account of the magnetism of a ruthless man who climbed for a time to the top of the world on the fragile egos of millions of people who had lost their center, who could no longer see themselves as beloved children of God. Let it be said never more plainly. The source of the river of racist hatred that has flowed through all of American history is fear, the fear that my self, my life, amounts to nothing, and the necessity therefore to thrust something, someone below me.

This fear of being nothing cannot easily be brought to awareness, yet while hidden, it destroys every good thing. The great religious traditions know this. They address the fear head on, but many religious adherents never let go. Instead of being converted to love, they convert their religion to an engine of hate toward those not in their clan. The hatred shores up the weak ego with instant, violent comparisons made between one’s own loathed self and people supposed to be beneath them. This kind of fear and hate deliver the opposite of liberty and justice for all because it is lashed to a mis-measure of what it means to be human. It is stuck on the yardstick of inequality, never conceiving the golden ruler of God’s love. To be blunt, no person who knows God can hate as so many white Americans hate. And no person who hates knows the light of God at all. I did not invent that judgment. In the First Letter of John, the Spirit says, “He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still . . . and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.” (1 John 2.8-11)

In total rebellion against the love of God, such hatred has lain in the stomach of white America for hundreds of years. Its source is the unacknowledged fear of being nothing at all, the fear of ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Only love can cast out that fear. Let us come then to the question of love.

We heard from the story of Job this morning. Of course we have not time enough really to preach Job—we should be here all afternoon—but I do want you to take unto yourselves the spirit of Job, which is not patience, which is not loyalty or perseverance or following the rules. No, the spirit of Job breaks through in unfathomable anger at his unjust suffering. Through

the many, many words of his supposed friends who are instructing him in shuffling obedience, he listens. But now, he shouts—you heard it—“*Therefore I will no more restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you set a guard over me? . . . I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone, for my days are a breath. What are human beings, that you make so much of them, . . . visit them every morning, test them every moment? Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spit?*”

I am certain that you have friends, children, spouses, parents who have needed to shout like that at the injustice of racism in America. Let the word of God in Job be a guide. Do not restrain the mouths. May they speak in the anguish of their spirits. And know this. Whether in utmost gratitude and respect for black Americans, or in utmost confusion, white Americans know that your love for this whole people and this American project, in spite of all that has been done to your people for centuries—your love, your forgiveness, yes, your well-spoken anguish of spirit, is the only thing that is saving this nation from utter self-destruction.

“Like it or not,” Michael Eric Dyson writes to white America in his brand new book, *Tears We Cannot Stop*, “black humanity has been the only salvation white American humanity has. Democracy might well be a wounded bird incapable of flight without the poultice of black forgiveness pressed to its wings . . . We have given this country the spiritual will and the moral maturity it lost in the bitter divorce of principle and practice.” (p. 142)

What so very many Americans really do not know, you know. It is the word they need more than life—that God’s eye is on the sparrow, and you know, God is watching, watching over you.

Let us close with a testimony, a kind of prayer, offered by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the terrifying, violent rule of Adolph Hitler, who put Bonhoeffer to death in 1944. Yet Bonhoeffer’s own words sing out fearlessly, certain of life without end except in God.

I believe that God can and will make something good out of everything—even out of evil. For that [God] needs people, who will bring about good from everything. I believe that God wants to give us during any distress the amount of resilience we need. But [God] does not provide it in advance so that we do not rely on ourselves, but on [God] alone. Within such faith all fear of the future ought to be conquered . . . Even our errors and mistakes are not in vain . . . but [God] waits and will answer sincere prayer and responsible acts.

Amen

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