

# Howard Thurman: Moral Anchor to the Civil Rights Movement

Class 3

Searching for Common Ground and The Beloved Community

October 18, 2023

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# Course Goals and Outline

## GOALS:

- Introduce Howard Thurman and place him in historical context
- Illustrate his influence on the American Civil Rights Movement
- Highlight his impact on American Christianity

## OUTLINE:

1. Up From Slavery: Introducing Howard Thurman in Historical Context
2. Mentoring the Movement
3. **Searching for Common Ground and the Beloved Community**

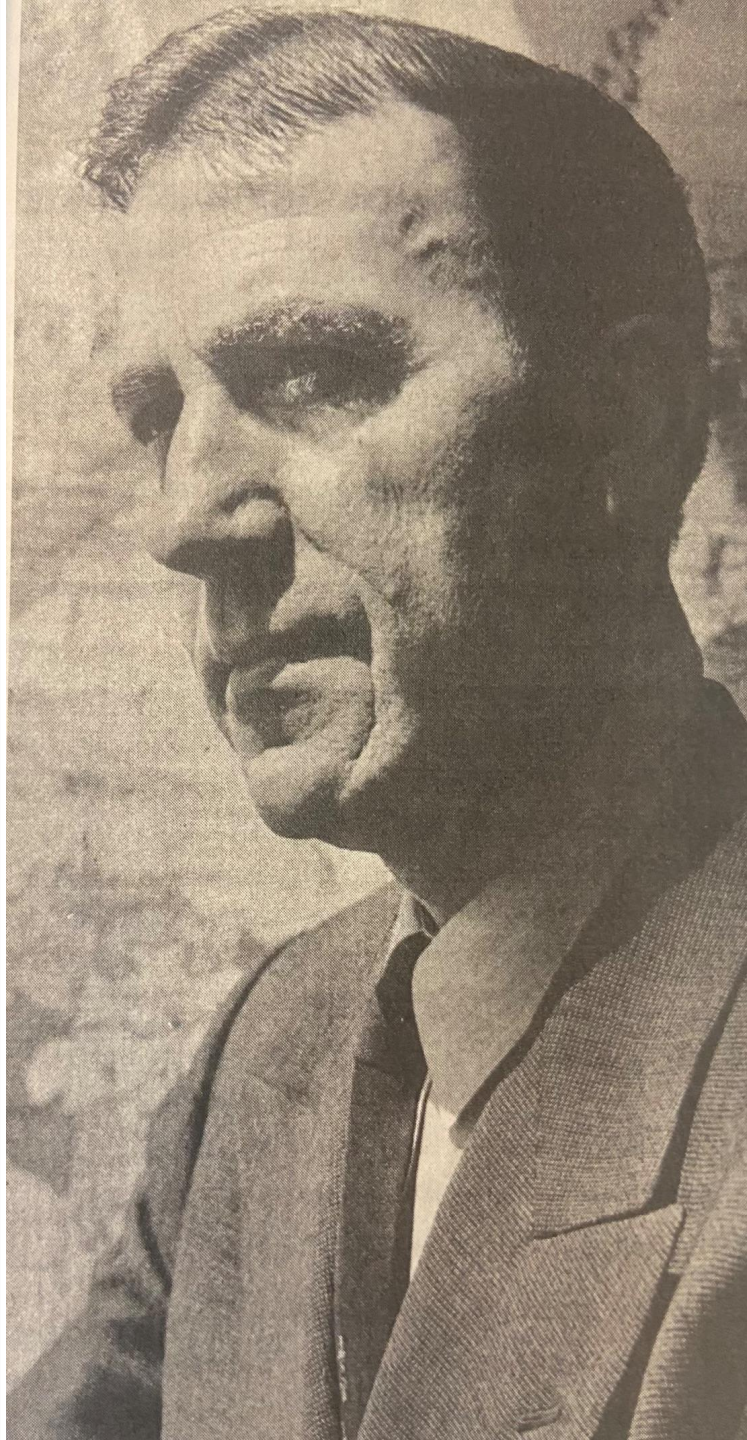
## Class Objective:

- To understand Howard Thurman's leadership through the Fellowship Church, Boston University, and through his educational trust and legacy as cementing his role as moral anchor: a moral anchor not simply to the civil rights movement, but to America.
- To understand that Thurman's goal was to utilize the common American faith of Christianity to realize the fellowship of humanity as G-d the Creator intended, by providing a moral clarity for American Christians.

- The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, 1944-1953
- Boston University, 1953-1965
- Epilogue: The Howard Thurman Educational Trust, 1965-1981

# The Church of Fellowship for All Peoples

- Fellowship Church established the ability of African Americans to teach and lead in an institutional setting that included European Americans. In 1944, that was path breaking.
- Power and access versus integration and acceptance
- The Fellowship Church as a local institution and a national movement



## The Genesis of the Fellowship Church

- **The Sakai Group**
- **A.J. Muste**, Executive Director of FOR 1940-1953
- **Reverend Alfred G. Fisk**, Member of the Presbyterian Church and Department Chairman for Psychology and Philosophy at San Francisco State College

“For here is revealed that a man’s life becomes meaningful and whole to the degree that he is willing to stake everything on a conviction that what he does when he is most himself has the approval and the imprimatur of the Highest.”



Thurman's increasing dissatisfaction with African American Christians and the Christian Church in America led him to search for ways to create revolutionary behavior among Christians and within the Church



*“It seems to me to be the most significant single step that institutional Christianity is taking in the direction of a really new order for America.”*



Please use the chat to share your responses.

## “Is it possible to...?”

Thurman articulated his vision for the Fellowship Church with the following question that he posed in a letter to his friend Paul Robeson asking Robeson to give a benefit concert for the Fellowship Church:

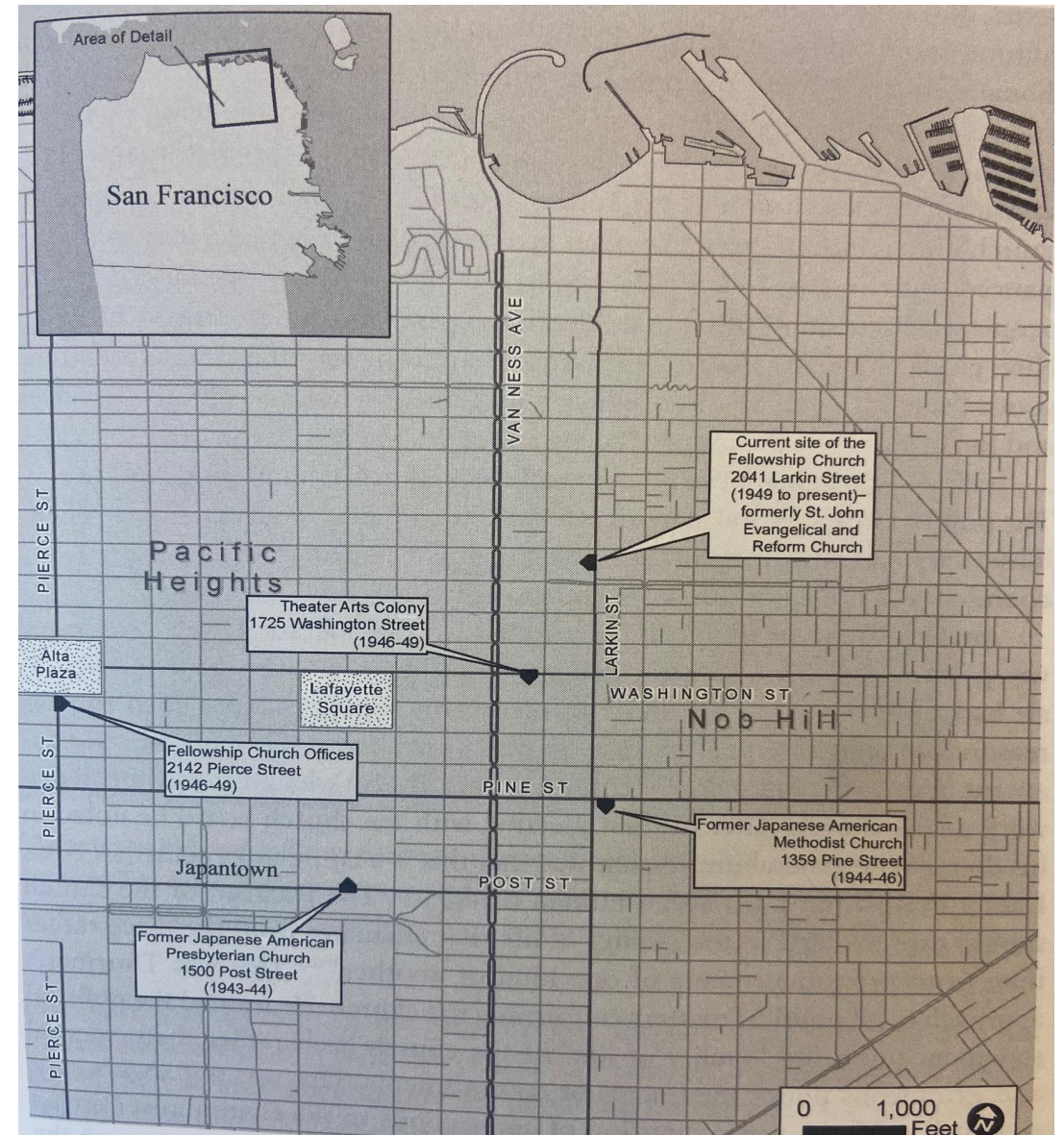
*“Is it possible to create an island of religious and racial community in a sea of religious and racial tension and animosity?”*

Please take 5 minutes to replace “racial” in both phrases with an area of tension and animosity within your community or society (locally or nationally) today.

**What other kinds of difference do you think could be explored in this way?**

“The Growing Edge”...Thurman’s vision was for the church to be “the growing edge of a radical implementation of the Christian ideal in human relations.”

- Location
- Association with Presbyterian Church
- Aspirations for Church to become a movement with national reach and to be reproduced about the country
- concern for Japanese Americans
- Coverage in Press



## Early Board Members:

- Mr. Russell
- Mrs. X
- Miss Anderson
- Mrs. Lucas
- Mr. Britton
- Mrs. Jones
- Mr. Thwaites

## Non Board

## Member Support:

- Rabbi Irving Reichert,  
Temple Emanu-El



## A Formal Commitment: The Pledge

“I desire to have a part in the unfolding of the *idea of Christian fellowship* through the union of men and women of varying national, cultural, and racial heritage, in church communion...(to seek) a vital interpretation of the highest manifestation of God- *Jesus Christ* in all my relationships.” (1944)

## A Formal Commitment: The Pledge (1945)

“I desire to have a part in the unfolding of the *understanding all men as sons of God* through the union of men and women of varying national, cultural, and racial heritage, in church communion...(to seek) a vital interpretation of the highest manifestation of God- *Jesus of Nazareth* in all my relationships.”

## A Formal Commitment: The Pledge (1948)

“I desire to have a part in the unfolding of the *understanding all men as sons of God* through the union of men and women of varying national, cultural, and racial heritage, in church communion...(to seek) a vital interpretation of the highest manifestation of God- *Jesus of Nazareth and other great religious leaders* in all my relationships.”



## Fellowship Church:

### “The Movement of the Spirit of God: “An Interdenominational, Interracial, Intercultural Church”



“People are always trying to tie a label on me. I’m nothing.”

*“I wish you might visit the church sometime and have the sense of wholeness that comes from participating in the fellowship of God as a human spirit without age, sex, race, or denomination. There is something cleansing about ridding oneself of barriers that separate one from one’s fellows.”*

# The “STRENGTH OF CORPORATE WORSHIP”

What are Thurman’s purposes or goals in creating the Fellowship Church?



- A place for Seekers
- Open to all
- Serious and meaningful engagement of spiritual and religious life
- Multicultural, interracial



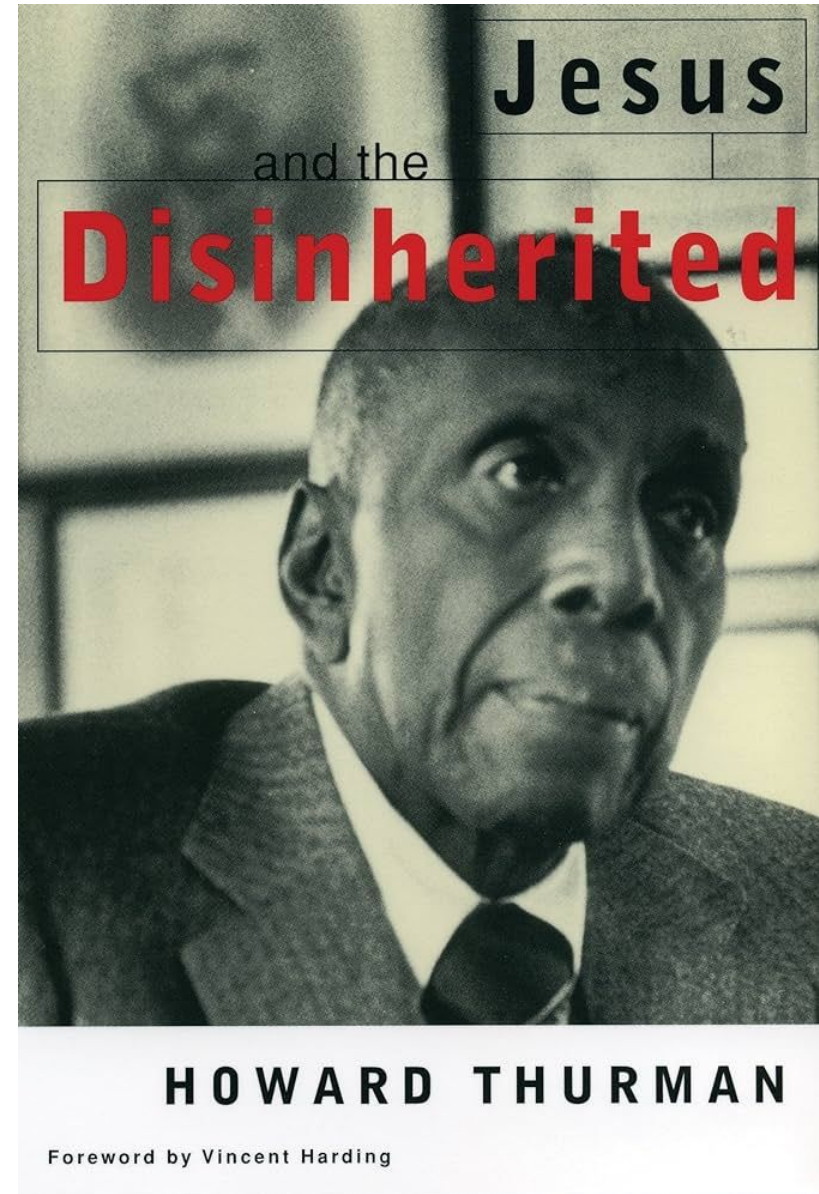



# Calling Americans to Spiritual Unity



# Jesus and the Disinherited 1949

- Considered by many to be Thurman's most significant work
- Began - lecture series delivered in 1948 at an HBCU in Austin Texas
- Thurman had been building these ideas as we have seen in this course, in some form or fashion for all of his career
- Thurman argues that in order to understand the religion of Jesus we must first contextualize him as an oppressed Palestinian Jew without access to the privileges of Roman Citizenry
- fear, deception, and hate
- love as prescription for those "who stand with their backs against the wall"
- Love as "radical" and "nonviolent"
- Love as the prescription which liberates both the oppressed and the oppressor





# Marsh Chapel & the Boston University Years

**BOSTON, 1953-1965**

# Great Preachers

THESE 12—AND OTHERS—BRING AMERICANS BACK TO THE CHURCHES

PHOTOGRAPHED FOR LIFE BY MARK KAUFFMAN

The Hebrew prophets of old, men like Isaiah and Jeremiah, were the first to preach the word of the one God, Jehovah. They were without keener in their own land and few people heeded them, but they spoke like thunder and they became the archetype of the Great Preacher.

Most of the men who preach in the churches and synagogues in the U.S. today speak more softly than the ancient prophets or even the classical pulpit orators of the last century. Spellbinding has given way to a more informal, personalized preaching. But more people hear

the preachers today than ever listened to Jeremiah or St. Paul. One minister whose sermons are broadcast has a radio audience of two and a half million, another an audience of one and a half million. A Roman Catholic bishop was selected last year as TV Man of the Year because of the popularity of his talks. In some churches the ministers are having to preach two identical sermons on Sunday to take care of the overflow crowds.

On these pages LIFE shows 12 of the country's most eminent preachers. These men—

and many others like them—have been responsible in good part for the recent great religious upsurge in the U.S., which has brought church membership up from 49% to 69% of the population in the last 10 years. The 12 preachers were selected solely for effectiveness in the pulpit, as determined by a polling of ministers, priests and theological schools of all faiths. They are pictured here in repose—in their churches or studies—to show LIFE's readers what manner of men are shaping the spiritual life of America today.



DR. LOUIS HADLEY EVANS  
*Presbyterian*

For 12 years Dr. Evans (opposite page) has been head minister at the First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, and the congregation has increased from 2,500 to 6,400 members to become the largest in the denomination. This success surprised Evans: "It made a rancher out of me instead of a shepherd." On May 1 he will leave the church to become Presbyterian minister-at-large in the U.S., devoting most of his time to preaching, talking over radio and television, in churches and universities. In college Dr. Evans, the son of the late Dr. William Evans, a noted Bible teacher, was an all-state football and basketball player. In the pulpit at 55 he stands on impressive 6 feet 3 inches and still looks like a powerful athlete; his mouth firm, jaw jutting, eyes soft but piercing. His sermons which occasionally contain an athlete's phrases like "Who's coaching your life?" are simple but deeply earnest and as strong as the man delivering them.

DR. THEODORE P. FERRIS  
*Episcopal*

Tall and smooth-faced, 44-year-old Dr. Ferris (above) seems too young to be rector of Boston's Back Bay Trinity Church, which is as rich in age and tradition as its gilt, carvings and stained glass. Dr. Ferris had been rector of only one other church when he was called to Trinity in 1942 to take over a parish which has had only 14 other rectors since it was established in 1733, but he had already established his reputation as preacher and writer. Bishop Henry Knox Sherrill of New York has called him "the best expository preacher of the Bible that I know of today." Dr. Ferris speaks simply but has a way of insinuating his thoughts into listeners' minds. He is particularly popular with students and Boston's professional people. His sermons are printed by the parish and sent to people who have requested them in all the 48 states and in 12 foreign countries. An accomplished pianist, he has written music for the Episcopal hymnal.



DR. RALPH WASHINGTON SOCKMAN  
*Methodist*

For 16 years Dr. Sockman has been pastor of Christ Church on New York's Park Avenue and for 25 years he has preached on Sundays on the National Radio Pulpit, which has two and a half million listeners and is radio's oldest "hour." Three times Sockman has turned down a bishopric because he prefers preaching. The 63-year-old minister keeps his sermons as neat as he keeps his own appearance, talks in a personal way which inspires his listeners to send him 5,000 letters a week.



DR. HOWARD THURMAN  
*Baptist*

Dr. Thurman, 54, pressed pants to get through school. In 1944 he became pastor in San Francisco of the Fellowship Church which, composed of whites, Negroes and Orientals, was an experiment in "total Christianity." Under Dr. Thurman the "experiment" has been successful. He preaches to, not at, his audience, giving ideas to wrestle with, thoughts to meditate upon. This month he accepted Boston University's offer to become university preacher and professor in the School of Theology.



RABBI ARON  
*Jewish*

Dr. Silver, who stands here beside a replica of Michelangelo's Moses in the Temple in Cleveland, has the imposing look of an ancient Jewish leader. Tall and dark, he has a massive head and a shock of black, graying hair. When he preaches, his words come out in organ tones. Born in Lithuania, Dr. Silver represents the fifth generation of rabbis in his family. Recalling that Moses, because he was "slow of speech," had to have his brother Aaron talk for him, Dr. Silver feels that the modern rabbi



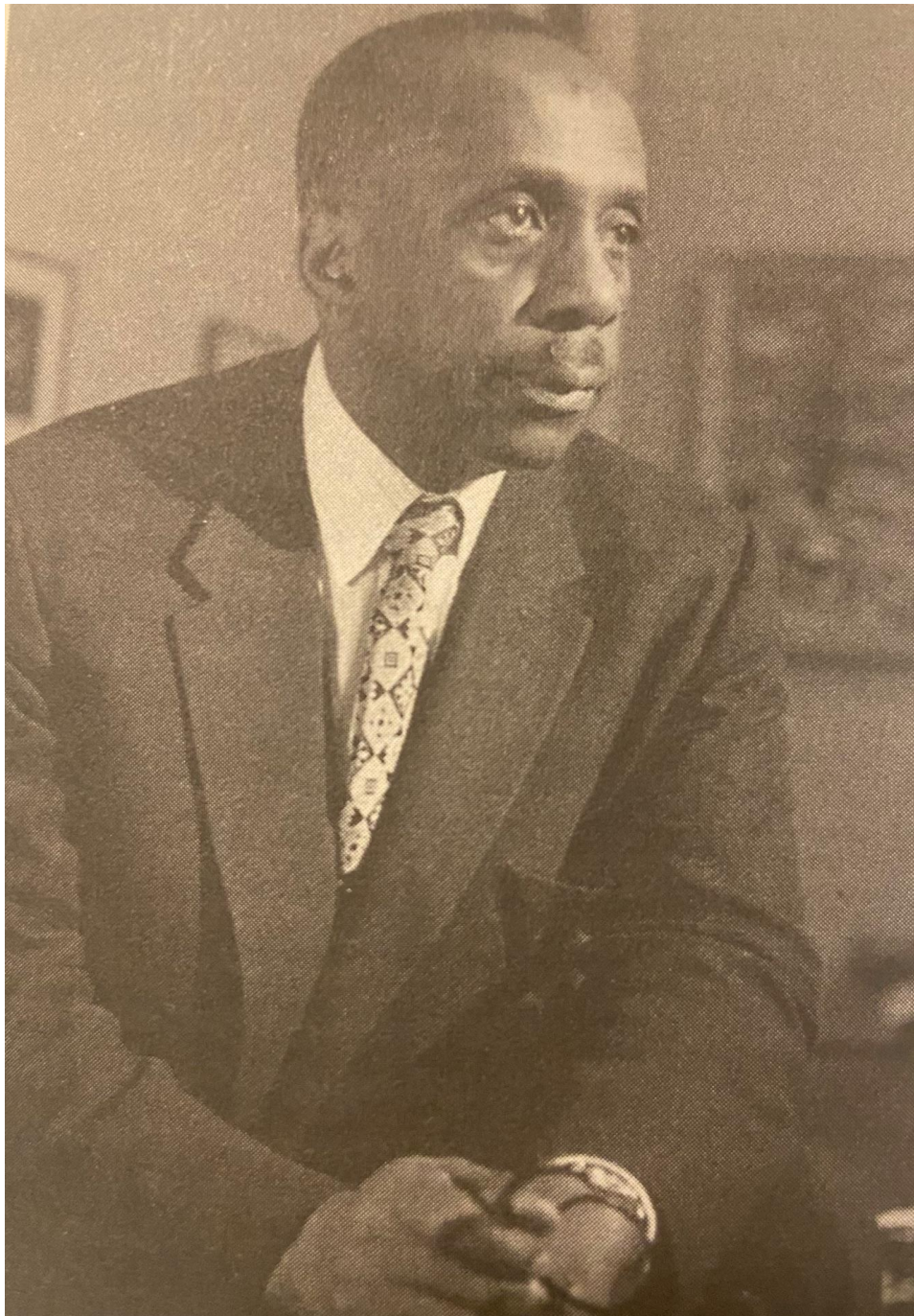
## Thurman emerges as an *American* Religious Leader

*“President Case wants to project, through my leadership, the development of a community church at the university, membership of which would come from the university family and the community of Boston. This would be a non-credal, non-sectarian, interracial, interfaith and intercultural religious fellowship.”*

- BU as an expansion of the work of the Fellowship Church
- In 1953 accepts an appointment as the First tenured African American Professor and Dean of Chapel
- Mentors leaders of Boston’s African American religious, cultural and educational institutions



*“Whenever man has the scent of the eternal unity in his spirit, he hunts for it in his home, in his work, among his friends, in his pleasures and in all the levels of his function. It is my simple faith that this is the kind of universe that sustains this kind of adventure. And what we are fumbling towards now...Tomorrow will be the way of life for everybody!”*



- In the classroom: students were guided by Thurman's goal of attempting to help them "*clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us*"
- 6:30-8:00 am "Laboratory" sessions
- Psalm 139 read aloud by Thurman, class participants asked to "*open his mind to the music of the words, to the general atmosphere which listening to the psalm generated in the mind*"
- Followed by meditative slow music (eg. included J.S. Bach, Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* or Max Bruch's *Kol Nidre*)

## Thurman's Laboratory - Instructions for Next Slide

1. “Open [your] mind to the music of the words, to the general atmosphere which listening to the psalm generated in the mind” without paying attention to its meaning or ideas.”
2. Listen to the musical selection: Kol Nidrei Op. 47
3. Select “a sentence, a phrase, a word, or an idea to which individual attention could be given for purposes of reflection, thought, meditation, or prayer” and contemplate this silently for forty minutes.

## Engagement Strategy: Psalm 139 - Selection: **Meditation**

You have searched me, LORD,  
and you know me.

You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.  
You discern my going out and my lying  
down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.

Before a word is on my tongue  
you, LORD, know it completely.  
You hem me in behind and before,  
and you lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your Spirit?

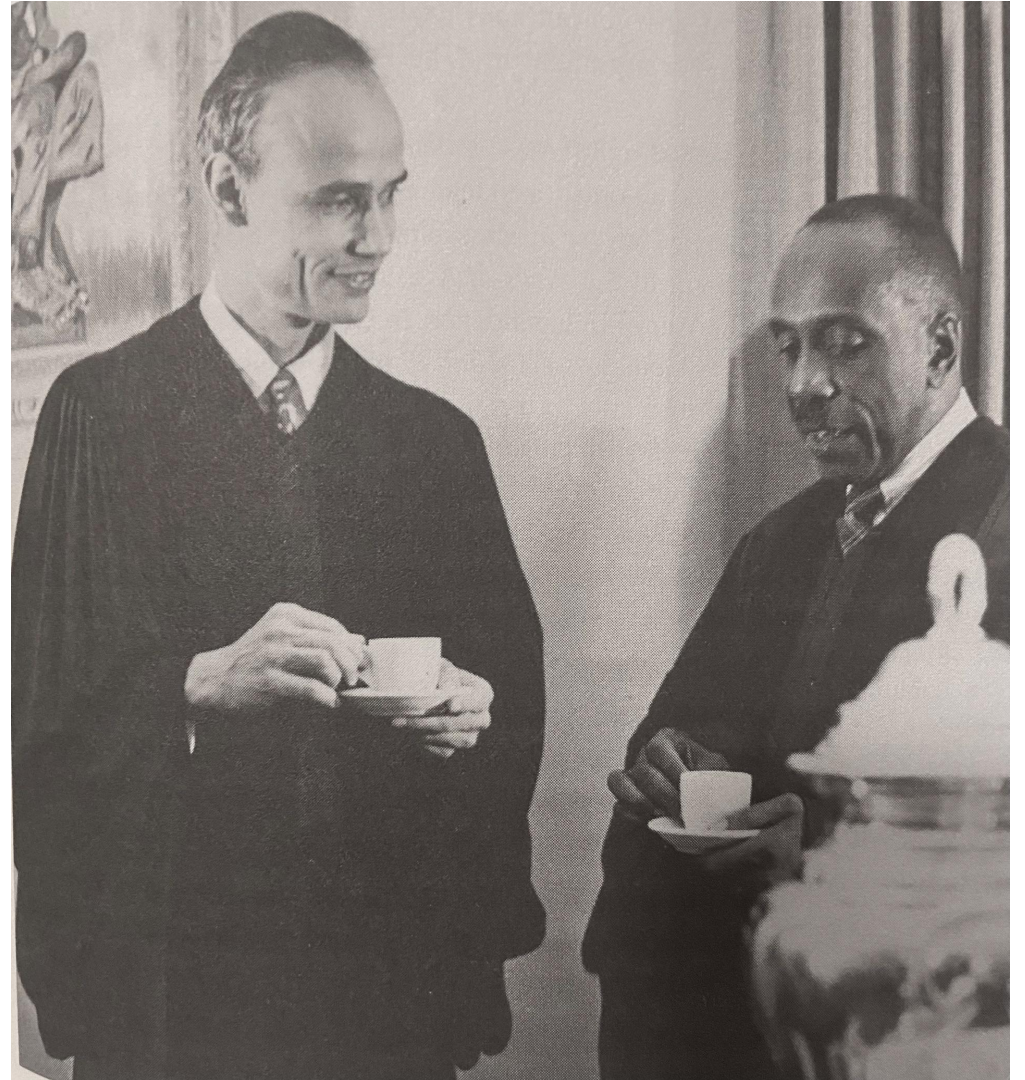
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are  
there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"  
even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

## In the Classroom and Outside of it...

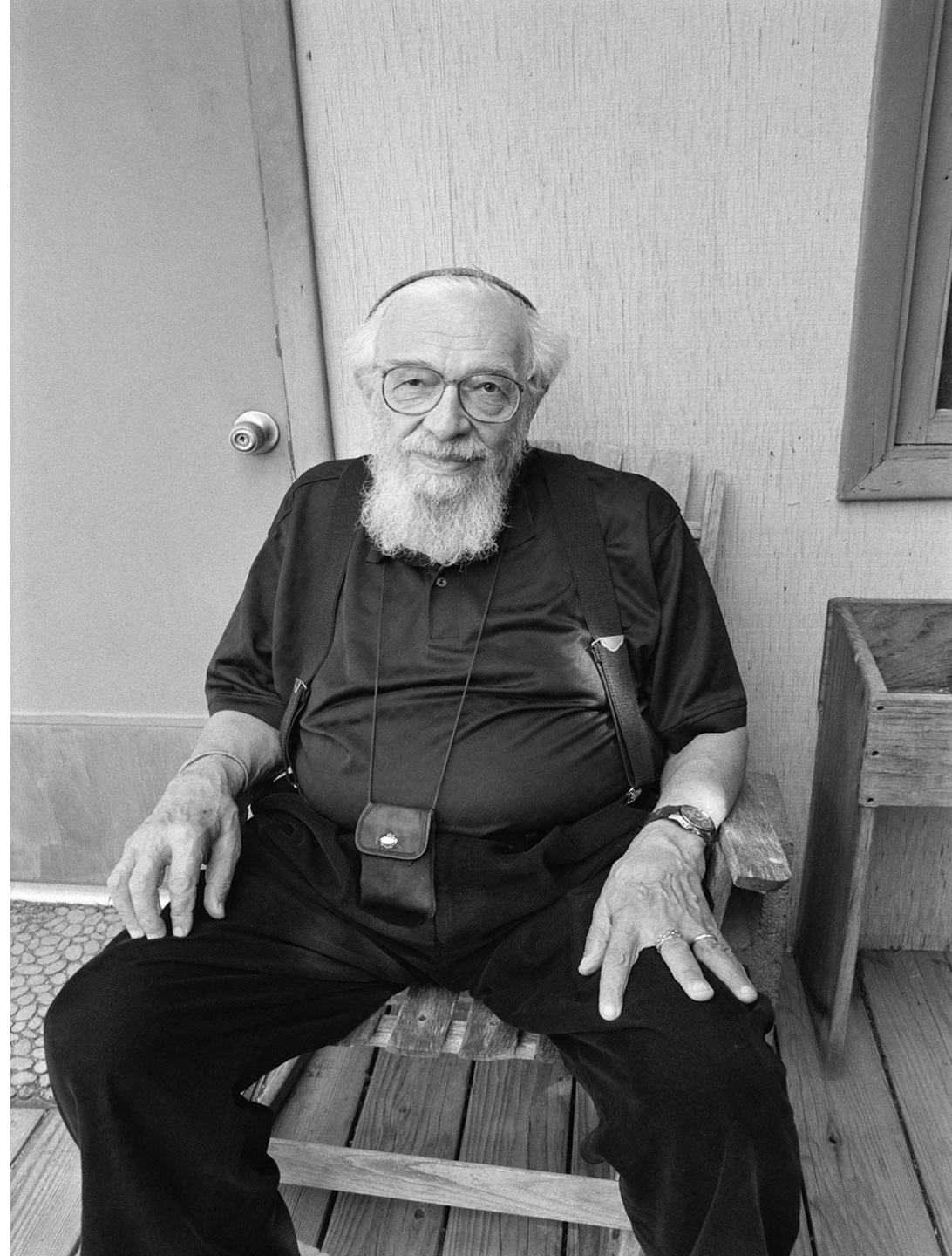
Thurman introduced a generation of students and colleagues and friends to his unique brand of spiritually and mysticism during his years at BU.



# Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

1924-2014

- The founder of the Jewish renewal “haavurah” movement
- “Innovator in ecumenical dialogue”
- prominent interreligious advocate in post World War II American society





# Walter Pahnke

1931-1971

- The Good Friday Experiment
- Psychiatric and ethical issues in caring for dying patients
- Psychology of religion



*“In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.  
Long before I was born God was at work.  
Creating life, nature and the world of men and things.  
The worlds were ideas in the mind of God  
That have been realizing themselves through the ages.  
God is not through with creation—  
God is not through with me.*

-Howard Thurman, 1951.

Epilogue: Thurman's Response to  
Post Civil Rights America

# THE HOWARD THURMAN EDUCATIONAL TRUST



What, then, is the word of the religion of Jesus to those who stand with their backs against the wall? There must be the clearest possible anatomy of the issues facing them. They must recognize fear, deception, hatred, each for what it is. Once having done this, they must learn how to destroy these or to render themselves immune to their domination. In so great an undertaking it will become increasingly clear that the contradictions of life are not ultimate. The disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of men which is committed to overcoming the world. It is universal, knowing no age, no race, no culture, and no condition of men. For the privileged and underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline, he can live effectively in the chaos of the present the high density of a son of God.

*Jesus and the Disinherited*

# Upcoming Events at ICJS:

## Interreligious Lessons from Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* **MANEKIN-CLARK**

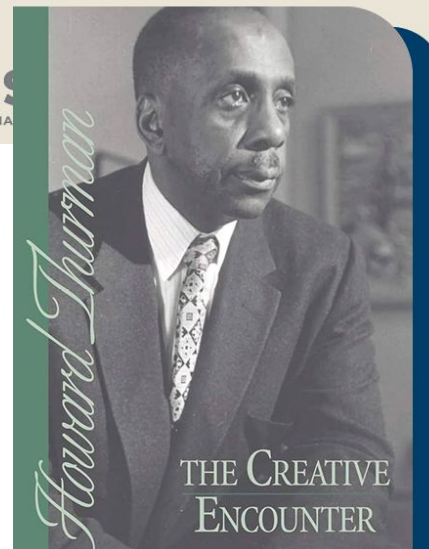


NOVEMBER 1, 8, AND 15  
WEDNESDAYS  
5:30 TO 6:30 PM ET  
AT THE ICJS LIBRARY

Free—Regi.

**Thurman's Creative Encounter**  
A clergy book club

**MANEKIN-CLARK**



TUESDAY, OCTOBER 10 & 17  
NOON-1:00 PM ET  
ONLINE VIA ZOOM  
AND MONDAY, OCTOBER 23  
NOON-1:30 PM  
AT THE ICJS LIBRARY

Free—Register Today!



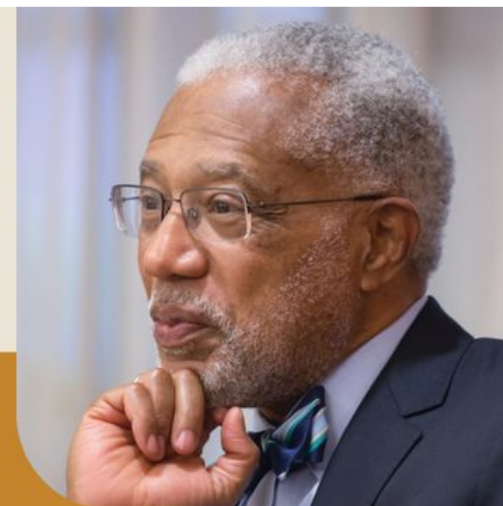
**NEXT WEEK!**

# MANEKIN- CLARK ANNUAL LECTURE

MONDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2023  
7:00 TO 8:30 PM ET  
NORTHSIDE BAPTIST CHURCH &  
LIVE STREAMED



Free—Register Today!



**Wake Up Running**  
A vision for connection and  
transformation

**PRESENTED BY:**  
Walter Earl Fluker, Ph.D.

