



## Howard Thurman: Moral Anchor to the Civil Rights Movement Class Two Readings

Excerpts from *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: My People Need Me, June 1918-March 1936*, vol. 1, editor Walter Earl Fluker, 2009.

### **“Barren or Fruitful?”**

**28 August 1932**

**Washington DC**

*This sermon, preached at the Plymouth Congregational Church in Washington DC pastored by his friend, the Reverend Herbert King, is Thurman's first individually published sermon. "Barren or Fruitful?" is based on Jeremiah 17, one of Thurman's favorite sermon texts. Thurman had previously preached on the same subject at United Church in Oberlin, Ohio, on 13 November 1927, and at Vassar College on 12 March 1928.*

*Thurman's message was one of hard-earned affirmation through recognition of human limitation. False pride in family background, worldly success, and failure to recognize the instrumental role of God in one's achievements lead to spiritual undernourishment, like the parched desert shrubs that wither under difficulties. By contrast, those who know that God is near and within and that God is love are "like a tree planted by the waters," growing stronger despite the strains of life.*

There are two remarkable pictures given us by the Prophet Jeremiah. With these two pictures as a background, I want each of you to think seriously about this question: To what do I appeal when I want to convince myself that I am somebody?

I

First—a curse on him who relies on man, who depends upon mere human aid. For he is like a desert scrub that never thrives; set in a salt solitary place in the steppes—a striking picture! A certain kind of man likened unto a desert scrub—undeveloped and underdeveloped, undernourished and emaciated, stubby, and stunted, acting on the theory that to breathe is to live! What a character analysis!

He is thus, says Jeremiah, because he relies on man. He has a false sense of security. When such a man wants to convince himself that he is somebody, his appeal, most often, is to those things that are of temporary and passing significance.

I am putting the question quite personal this morning: In what do you find your security? I shall review, in outline, three of the more commonplace bases of appeal. You may supply others and out of your experience make a fuller rendering of the details of the three which I shall mention.

In the first place, there are those who appeal to family connections and social position. They are quite proud of family background and take keen sweet delight in pointing out the fact that the leaves of their family tree are always green. A friend of mine has written some lines depicting such a man-

He was proud of descent  
For he came from one of The best families.  
But as a man, he was  
Worth exactly forty cents an hour.

It is a very desirable thing to come from a good healthy vigorous family stock. But in the last analysis Life is not interested in the accident of birth. Life does not care who your father was or how far back you can trace your mother's roots! What about you? Every man must stew in his own juice. If your basic security is found in your family connections, you are leaning on a broken stick. A desert scrub that never thrives!

There are others who appeal to their training, their education. Education is very useful and necessary. More often, a good education is a commodity that has a very definite exchange value. For instance, a doctor charges a fee for his services, unique to him because of specialized training. In other words a doctor rents his skill to the public, for which he receives varying degrees of economic security. Superficially viewed, this may seem to be a true basis of security.

Very often when a man's stock begins to go down or the ground is being cut away from beneath his self-respect, the fact that he is educated does give him a certain sense of security. There is something marvelously sustaining about genuine education. But a man who appeals to the fact that he is a college graduate or a professional school graduate in order to convince himself that he is somebody - well, such a man is sailing under false colors. Life does not ask you from what college do you come, or if you have been to college at all. It wants to know basically what you are and in what direction you are going. Very often in the most rigorous and elemental experiences of life the differences between men resulting from training and background melt away. And behold, where are they? He who thinks to the contrary is fooled—a desert scrub that never thrives!

And then there are those who appeal to the peculiar quality of their righteousness. They are "I thank God I am pure" people. Jesus dramatized this quality very effectually in His picture of the two men who went up into the temple to pray. One man said in substance: "O God, I thank Thee I am not as other men. I pay my vows. I attend all temple services. I give of my means to charity. I thank Thee God that it is with me as it is. I pause in my busy life to let thee know how good I am."

In an obscure part of the temple another man prayed. He dared not lift his head above, but with deep contrition cried aloud, "Lord, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

The tragedy of a self-righteous man is that he has an ideal that he can live up to – he has a goal that he has reached already. He who turns to his self-righteousness for security is doomed to fundamental defeat. In utter amazement he will discover one day that his life is barren—a desert scrub that never thrives!

What a revealing experience it is to step aside and see yourself go by. Try it! It will certainly make you humble!

Is your life barren? When you are most yourself do you know yourself to be a "desert scrub," a spiritual undernourished and moral emaciated individual—narrow, selfish, puny-souled, bigoted, living under a false sense of security?

## II

The second picture is most inspiring. The prophet pictures the man who depends on God, who has God for his confidence, as a tree planted beside a stream sending his roots down to the water. He has no fear of scorching heat, his leaves are always green. He goes on bearing fruit when all around him is barren and lives serene. In other words such a man looks out on life with quiet eyes!

Perhaps, in the last analysis the only thing to which a man may appeal for basic security is the high quality of his dedication and the supreme worth of that to which he is dedicated. If a man dedicates his life to the highest that he knows, that dedication at once gives to his life added worth and significance.

A man cannot dedicate himself to that which is outside of the realm of his experience at every point. I cannot conceive of that which does not have its roots within me. If you have no conception of the meaning of the word "fly," I could not explain the aeroplane to you. "If you have no thought of your own, those of other men will find nothing to which they can fasten themselves." So when a man dedicates himself to God, the Highest, the fact and the experience cannot be foreign to him originally but in some genuine sense it must be already present in him.

A man came to Jesus seeking help for his son. (Pathos is revealed in utter rawness when a strong man finds that his strength is powerless to help where his love dictates.) Jesus said to him, "It will be as you desire if you have faith." It was then that the man said, "I have faith - help Thou my lack of faith." The consciousness of a lack of faith springs out of faith itself. If I had no faith in God, I could not know that I had no faith in Him. When a man dedicates himself to God it means that that dedication springs out of a genuine God-consciousness.

Your fundamental security then is not family, training, piety or the like but rather the supreme quality of your dedication to the highest there is in life—God.

To say, "I affirm my faith in God with my total personality" is one of the supreme affirmations of the human spirit.

The real atheist is not necessarily the man who denies the existence of God; but rather the man who, day after day and week after week, subscribes to a faith in God with his lips while acting on the vital assumption that there is no God.

I have deep respect for the man who with great sincerity reaches the conclusion that life has no meaning for him. Full of years he might conclude, no God, no sin, no future life – nothing but the survival of the fittest and every man for himself. To him I can only say, "Such is not my experience." Such a man, however, is not an atheist in the sense that many church-goers are. "They honor Me with their lips but their hearts are far from Me." Acting every day as if there were no God while doing lip service to God.

Suppose we dare start today believing in God to the extent that wherever we went the Kingdom of God would be at hand. In a very short time the entire complexion of our city would be transformed!

There are three things that my faith in God teaches me about God. I shall mention these almost in outline. In the first place it teaches me that God is. Bear in mind ever, my friends, that faith is a way of knowing.

When Jesus prayed, all who heard Him were conscious that He was not talking to the air. When Jesus prayed He met Somebody. And when I am most myself and sigh my soul in prayer, I too meet Somebody – I know Jesus was right!

Have you ever tried to pray and could not connect up? So many details of living, so many carking cares loomed large before you that your words fell back dead.

"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below,  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

And then, sometimes, as if by chance, there is kindled in the heart an upmounting desire on the wings of which one mounts to the very presence of God!

To one who has a living, leaping faith, God is. There are no ordinary proof—one has worked one's way through all such preliminary stages. It is like growing in love. At first there are many "tokens of testing," little ways of checking, but gradually there is an awareness that proofs are unnecessary—one knows and is relaxed! My faith *teaches* me that God is!

Again, my faith teaches me that God is near. Not away off, up above the sky, on a great white throne – an aged white man with blonde angels standing in mid-air to obey his command! Not that.

Isaiah says that in the year that King Uzziah died he saw the Lord on a great white throne, high and lifted up. But Jesus funded the religious experience of all the prophets of Israel, erected a vast

experimental pyramid, scaled the heights of it and brought God down out of the clouds and discovered Him preeminently as the main spring in the heart of man. An amazing insight it was that exclaimed, The Rule of God—it is within you!

"Speak to Him, Thou, for He heareth  
And spirit with spirit may meet—"

Do you remember the words on the Railway Station: He who seeks the wealth of the Indies must take the wealth of the Indies with him?

God is here. In the midst of life, breaking through the commonplace, glorifying the ordinary, the Great, High God is near. One should tread the earth with a deeply lying awe and reverence – God is in this place!

Do not wait to hear His spirit winging near in moments of great crisis, do not expect Him riding on the crest of a wave of deep emotional excitement – do not look to see Him at the dramatic moment when something abnormal or spectacular is at hand. Rather find Him in the simple experiences of daily living, in the normal ebb and flow of life as you live it.

The final thing that my faith teaches me is that God is love. Not only that He is; not only that He is near; but that He is love; Fully do I realize how difficult this is. There is so much anguish in life, so much misery unmerited, so much pain, so much downright reflective hell everywhere that sometimes it seems to me that it is an illusion to say that God is love. When one comes into close grips with the perversities of personality, with studied evil- it might be forgiven one who cried aloud to the Power over Life- human life is stain--blot it out! I know all that. I know that this world is messed up and confused. I know that much of society stretches out like a gaping sore that refuses to be healed. I know that life is often heartless, as hard as pig iron. And yet, in the midst of all this I affirm my faith that God is love--whatever else He may be.

Why do I? The reason is not far to seek. When I love someone I seem to be at the center of all meanings and values. Life takes on a new significance and I seem to have a quality of experience which is or was the guarantor of all experience. Again, under the compulsion of love, I send my life forth to do and be things that nothing else is capable of inspiring. I do gladly for Love's sake, what no power in heaven or hell could make me do without it. Therefore, whatever else Ultimate Reality God is, He must be love.

When a man dedicates his life to God he begins at once to fulfill in his own experience the practical logic of that dedication. It is here that he finds a true basis for security. The measure of my dedication is the measure of my own stature. He who dedicates his life to God is like a tree planted beside a stream sending its roots down to the water. Its leaves are always green. It has no fear of scorching heat. It goes on bearing fruit when all around it is barren and it lives serene.

Which shall it be for you –a scrawny scrub in a desert-barren or a fruitful tree that looks on life with quiet eyes? Which?



## Howard Thurman: Moral Anchor to the Civil Rights Movement Class Two Readings

Excerpts from *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?*, April 1936-August 1943, vol. 2, editor Walter Earl Fluker, 2012.

### **“Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?”**

**30 December 1937 - 2 January 1938**

**Oxford, Ohio**

*"Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?" was Thurman's second lecture delivered at the National Assembly of Student Christian Associations, most probably on 1 January 1938. It stands as one of his most powerful and pointed statements of the period. With resonances of "The Cross of Jesus," the fifth lecture of the 1937 "Significance of Jesus" series, as well as "Sources of Power for Christian Action," Thurman argues that to bring about needed social change, at times one must select "a method of shock" so that "the oppressor or the instrument of evil in society...may temporarily be dislodged from his security." This, Thurman argues, always carries with it the implicit possibility of offering one's life as "the sacrifice supreme," and he concludes that "it is a great creative spiritual act to know when the moment for martyrdom has arrived." These tasks are best accomplished "as a result of a sustained relationship with an inner group of like-minded, like-dedicated people." All of this is predicated on hearing, in moments of quiet reflection and prayer, the soft but unmistakable voice of God. "In moments of profound meditation I become sometimes for one transcendent moment only," writes Thurman, "a central part of the purpose of life." Thurman's argument here, as in several other of his writings of the 1930s, links elements of Gandhian pacifism, his mystical appreciation of nature, and the progressive Social Gospel into a unique amalgam that pointed the way toward a generation of social protest.*

*Thurman's two addresses before the National Assembly of Student Christian Associations were very well received. His old friend, George "Shorty" Collins, who had not seen Thurman in a number of years, wrote him after hearing him at Oxford, "I had wondered, as we all do, what might have happened to your ideas and to your spirit, in view of all the situations through which we have gone. It meant much to me that you have gone on growing in the direction which I had thought and hoped you would. You are one of the prophets of the day." Similarly a 1941 article about Thurman contained the following reminiscence of his*

appearance: "Oxford—the 1937 National Assembly of Student Christian Associations. Thirteen hundred of us from all over the map in hushed silence as we reached out for his words and sought contact with his soul. 'Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?' was the topic, and many of us went away wondering just why anyone should call us Christian."

"Life does not grow more simple with the passing years, but its deeper needs are unchanging. The secret of peace is not to be sought at the end of the road, but in the spirit in which we journey. It is to be sought in the consciousness of the sustaining love of a God who is committed to a real participation in all our strife; who does not release us from the battle, but who shares the fight; who does not set us free from the possibility of pain and tears, but who feels the hurt of our wounds, the salt bitterness of our sorrow; who spends himself not only with us but for us, and in the travail of redemptive passion anticipates the victories of the spirit. And, finally, whatever pilgrimage we undertake must be undertaken, in spite of the interior loneliness of all great spiritual processes, in the comradeship of our kind and all wellbeing must always be our goal. We are never to forget that we are all so tied up in one bundle that peace and reconciliations in which others are not involved are quite impossible. The note of service must be deepened and in our care for those who lie wounded or broken along the road we shall forget our own wounds and our own weariness. So conceived, so reinforced, life is never impossible, but does indeed become, so these books and leaders teach us, an adventure whose greatness is its own best justification and whose difficulties may become for the faithful and discerning but stairs of ascent to radiant and triumphant regions."<sup>1</sup>

Christian, who calls me Christian? May each of us raise that question with himself tonight.  
Christian, who calls me Christian?

What I have to say is divided into two sections; it is my faith that the two sections are related to each other.

In the first place I want you to think with me for a little while about the steps involved in action for Christians, or for those who live in anticipation of becoming Christians tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. In the first place, as a Christian I must not permit to grow and flower in my own heart and life what I condemn in society or in my fellow man. I must be rigorously honest with myself there. I must not permit my mind to do clever tricks with me so that I shall give to my own sin and my own weaknesses high and holy names as I pour out invectives and condemnations upon those same things in society and in other people around me. It may be that I cannot take the handcuffs from one single prisoner; it may be that I cannot stop a single man who is going out to kill his brother; it may be that I cannot dry up the springs of the tendency toward evil in my own heart. But in that intimate, primary, solitary world in which my will is as the will of God, I must see to it that all the things for which I hunger most are real. And as I look out upon the world, if there is something, some one, weaker than I, must say, "Here I am, limited, weak, perhaps confused, but I give my hand to you. It is the best that at I can do and I must do it"

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<sup>1</sup> Gaius Glenn Atkins, *Pilgrims of the Lonely Road* (New York: Revell, 1913), 338-39. This is the concluding paragraph of the book. Thurman used the same passage in his 1938 sermon "Kingdom of God."

If I let flower in my own heart what I condemn in society and in my fellow man, Christian, who calls me Christian? But that isn't enough. With reference to society, I stand under certain obligations. I must devise methods and techniques and ways, personal and group, by which it will be possible for an increasingly large number of people to live the good life in time and space without external limitations; and the techniques and the methodologies available to me as a Christian fall into two or three general categories. I shall mention them.

The first one, of course, is moral appeal. I shall try to make articulate in my fellow man a sense of the significance of his own actions. I shall brood over him as the spirit of the hive broods over the apiary. I shall try by moral suasion to woo him into a sense of sinfulness and into a sense of sonship. But I must be very conscious that moral suasion has one rather important limitation, and that is the amount of moral atrophy that there is in the life of the individual who is to be persuaded to the good life.

For moral suasion to be effective there must be hooks on which to hang it; and if the individuals have constantly violated their sense of values, their sense of the right, their sense of the worthfulness in their daily actions, then this sense of right, this sense of worthfulness, this sense of the ethical meaning of life becomes weak, and even weaker. If I am making a moral appeal to men who have destroyed, in part at least, the ground of their moral values, I am driven perhaps either to desperation or to profound frustration; but if I am not willing to exercise to the limit of my power moral suasion upon men in the interest of the redemption of themselves and of society—Christian, who calls me Christian?

The second category has to do with the conflict of loyalties. The oppressor, the strong, the powerful, are my brothers, even as the weak and the cast down are my brothers. Perhaps under the circumstances I must choose between brothers; but I must be clear as to the significance of what I am doing. Or I may decide that I cannot wait for a sense of kinship and a sense of brotherliness to arise in the hearts of men as a result of the overmastering expression of kinship and brotherliness and love that arise in my own heart. I may decide that I must resort to something drastic in order that things may become movable in the situation, that good might work its work, and that suffering may be relieved and oppression may be done away.

It is then that I select—if this is possible—a method of shock that falls within the limitation of my Christian ideal; some form of pressure more drastic and more immediately devastating than moral pressure. And what is the purpose of this? That the oppressor or the instrument of evil in society toward whom I direct my pressure may temporarily be dislodged from his security so that for one breathless moment or for one breathless week he becomes the brother in experience with the insecure and the weak; and while he is in that condition it may be that the spirit of God can take advantage of the looseness of his situation and effect another combination before he settles down again.

But when I have exhausted all means available to me, when I have exhausted everything, and it becomes necessary for me to register, with all of my passionate endeavor, my complete



disapproval of an evil world, by offering my life as the sacrifice supreme because it is the logic of all that I have been doing; when that moment comes it is very necessary, I think, for me to be sensitive to the difference between merely dying and martyrdom. It is a great creative spiritual act to know when the moment for martyrdom has arrived.

You know that passage in John Brown's Body—the striking lines about a man at Pigeon Creek who earned his living by selling hounds. There was an old dog who enjoyed "lying in a piece of sunlight at the kitchen door." People would come around and say, "Why don't you sell this old dog? Why do you keep the old dog and sell all the puppies?" And the man's reply was this:

No—he ain't much on looks or much on speed,  
A young dog can outrun him anytime—  
Outlook him and outeat him and outleap him.  
But, Mister, that dog's hell on a cold scent  
And once he gets his teeth in what he's after,  
He don't let go until he knows he's dead.  
Then Abraham Lincoln says:  
"Therefore I utterly lift up my hands  
To You, and here and now beseech Your aid.  
I have held back when others tugged me on,  
I have gone on when others pulled me back,  
Striving to read Your will, striving to find  
The justice and expedience of this case,  
Hunting an arrow down the chilly airs  
Until my eyes are blind with the great wind  
And my heart sick with running after peace.  
And now, I stand and tremble on the last  
Edge of the last blue cliff, a hound beat out,  
Tail down and belly flattened to the ground,  
My lungs are breathless and my legs are whipped  
Everything in me's whipped except my will.  
I can't go on. And yet, I must go on."<sup>2</sup>

If I am not willing to do that--Christian, who calls me Christian?

Now what are the sources available for that kind of qualitative living? First, there is the strength that comes from a great cause, and a man's loyalty to it; even our most ordinary task becomes profoundly significant under the clear light of a great and creative commitment. There is the freedom of mind that comes with a great commitment. It causes an orderly recklessness of action and it robs a man of the fear of death. I think sometimes it is difficult for an intellectual to experience this thing. I feel rather often – perhaps I feel rather than think it – that the kingdom of evil must be held by fanatics; the gains that the fanatics make can be held by the intellectuals.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown's Body* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), 219-20. The same passage was also cited in "The Significance of Jesus V: The Cross of Jesus."

There is the power that comes from fellowship with Jesus Christ. He becomes for us not the product of any age or any race or any school of thought, but a great benediction to all the races of men. There is also, of course, the power that comes from fellowship, and a primary contact with God. There are some tasks to which our hands are set that can be done under the aegis of a great commitment. There are some tasks to which our hands are set that can be accomplished as a result of a consciousness of fellowship with Jesus. There are some tasks that can be accomplished as a result of a sustained relationship with an inner group of like-minded, like-dedicated people.

But in the great task which involves the transformation of the world, and the redemption of the individual human spirit from evil, only primary releases from God may apply. For the task is infinite, and only an infinite power can address itself to an infinite need. We get this in the life of meditation and prayer and discipline; in moments of quiet I hold, at the center of my spiritual focus, the cause to which I am dedicated. This gives an abundance of freedom and joy because it destroys fear – fear of failure, fear of death, fear of being misunderstood, fear that I am mistaken in the thing that I am undertaking, fear that all my life long I might live for a cause only to find at the end that the cause is wrong. *In moments of profound meditation I become sometimes for one transcendent moment only a central part of the purpose of life.*

Finally, this kind of discipline clarifies the conflicting issues that naturally arise out of any form of action, so that against the darkness of the age I can see the illumined finger of God guiding me in the way that I should go, so that high above the clash of arms and the conflict for position, for rights, for status, for privilege, for place, for priority, I can hear speaking distinctly and clearly to my own spirit the still, small voice of God without which nothing has meaning, quite: with which all the rest of the journey, with its joy, with its pain, with its devastating brutality, all the journey will be filled with a music of its own, and even the stars in their courses and all the wooded world of nature will participate in the triumphant music of my heart.

If I do not know what that means, in terms of power necessary for the transformation of life and of systems – Christian, who calls me Christian?

I would like to close, then, by reading this to you:

But, God, it won't come right! It won't come right!  
I've worked it over till my brain is numb.  
The first flash came so bright,  
Then more ideas after it—flash! flash!  
I thought it some  
New constellation men would wonder at.  
Perhaps it's just a firework—flash! fizz! spat!  
Then darker darkness and sour smoke

"But, God, the thought was great,  
The scheme, the dream—why, till the last charm broke  
The thing just built itself while I, elate,  
Laughed and admired it. Then it stuck,

Half done—the lesser half, worse luck!  
You see, it's dead as yet - a frame, a body - and the heart,  
The soul, the fiery vital part  
To give it life is what I cannot get.  
I've tried—  
You know it! – tried to snatch live fire  
And pawed cold ashes! Every spark has died.  
It won't come right. I'd drop the thing entire—  
Only I can't! I love my job.  
You who ride the thunder—  
Do you know what it is to dream and drudge and throb?  
I wonder.

"Did it come at you with a rush, your dream, your plan?  
If so, I know how you began.  
Yes, with rapt face and sparkling eyes.  
Swinging the hot globe out between the skies,  
Marking the new seas with their white beach lines,  
Sketching in sun and moon, the lightning and the rains,  
Sowing the hills with pines,  
Wreathing a rim of purple round the plains!  
I know you laughed then, as you caught and wrought  
The first swift, rapturous outlines of your thought.  
And then—  
Men!

"I see it now,  
O God, forgive my pettish row!  
I see your job. While ages crawl  
Your lips take laboring lines, your eyes a sadder light.  
For man the fire and flower and centre of it all—  
Man won't come right!  
After your patient centuries,  
Fresh starts, or castings, tired Gethsemanes  
And tense Golgothas, he, your central theme,  
Is just a jangling echo of your dream.  
Grand as the rest may be, he ruins it.  
"Why don't you quit?  
Crumble it all and dream again! But no;  
Flaw after flaw you work out revise, refine—  
Bondage, brutality, and war and woe,  
The sot, the fool, the tyrant and the mob—

Dear God, how you must love your job!

Help me, as I love mine."<sup>3</sup>

"Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?"  
in *New Directions for Campus Christian Action* (New  
York: National Intercollegiate Christian Council,  
1938), 71-77.

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<sup>3</sup> In Badger Clark, *Sky Lines and Wood Smoke* (Custer, S.D.: Chronicle Shop, 1935). This same passage is also cited, with minor textual differences, in "The Significance of Jesus II: The Temptations of Jesus."