

# “Howard Thurman: Restoration and Community” by Deryl Davis

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## Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

I. Common Theme in today's scripture lessons and in theology of Howard Thurman: Restoration to Fellowship and Community (Israel from exile, Bartimaeus' sight, Howard Thurman's theology)

A. Idea of community major theme of Thurman's theology of hope: We are created for community, and any obstacle to that has to be removed.

1. It was his life's work (Quote 1)

*[A] strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide and would achieve in literal fact that which is experienced*

*as literal truth: human life is one and all [people] are members of one another" (The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope, 1965. Emphasis mine).*

## 2. Community was the end goal of all life (Quote 2)

*In human society, the experience of community, or realized potential, is rooted in life itself because the intuitive human urge for community reflects a characteristic of all life. (The Search for Common Ground, 5; Essential Writings, 90-91)*

## 3. The experience of God ("religious experience") necessitates the creation of community and the removal of all that stands in the way of it.

Thurman got at this in his most famous book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in which he indicts the racism in America and in America's churches which marginalizes black persons like himself, destroys any real sense of Christian community, and leaves the marginalized with their "backs against the wall." (Quote 3: the "love-ethic")

*The profoundest disclosure in the religious experience is the awareness that the individual is not alone. What he discovers as being true and valid for himself must at last be a universal experience. . . . What is disclosed in his religious experience he must define in community. That which God shareth with him, he must inspire his fellows to seek for themselves. He is dedicated therefore to the removing of all barriers which block or frustrate this possibility in the world. He is under judgment to make a highway for the Lord in the hearts and in the market place of his fellows. Through his living men must find it a reasonable thing to trust Him and to trust one another and therefore to be brought nearer to the great sacramental moment when they too are exposed to*

*the love of God at a point in them beyond the evil and the good. . . . (The Creative Encounter 123-24, 129-30; Essential Writings 96-7)*

For Thurman, the deeper meaning of Jesus' healing miracles was that they brought marginalized people back into community and fellowship with others. This is the case with the healing of Bartimaeus in Mark 10:

1) He is only a "blind man" whom others attempt to silence when he calls to Jesus

2) Bartimaeus himself points out his marginalization or "otherness" when he cries out for mercy

3) Jesus does not assume that physical blindness defines either Bartimaeus or his needs/desires ("What do you want me to do?")

4) Bartimaeus' healing is a "restoration" in several senses which enables him to immediately follow Jesus "on the way," building community as they go

II. For Thurman, the restoration of community was a universal goal. We have a hint of that idea in Psalm 126, in which the people of Israel, returned from exile, praise God for their restoration; they shout with joy and laugh; they are besides themselves with happiness, "like those who dream." Significantly, even "the nations," those who are or were sometimes Israel's enemies, recognize the good that God has done in restoring Israel to its home. They are witness to a joyous celebration of community in which it appears they are a part.

III. Each of these readings presents us with a moment of jubilation—of Jubilee—the theme of this season in your church life.

A. For the people of Israel, Jubilee was a time of

celebration when the trumpet would sound throughout the land, liberty was proclaimed to all inhabitants (slaves were freed), and land was returned to its original owners. It was a time of Restoration.

B. Following the end of the American Civil War, former slaves took up the biblical language, as they had in their spirituals, referring to their day of emancipation as Jubilee Day. For some, that was January 1st 1863 (Emancipation Proclamation); for others, it was December 6, 1865 (ratification of Thirteenth Amendment); for others it was Juneteenth – the day in June 1865 when slaves in Texas were freed.

IV. As in exile the people of Israel had long looked forward to their day of restoration, so the enslaved African Americans had looked forward to and hoped for the day of their freedom, their restoration.

A. They “confessed” this hope, sometimes secretly, in their spirituals; Howard Thurman one of the first to recognize the theological significance of the slave spirituals—testimonies to the slaves’ suffering and the terrible injustice of their condition, but also of their hope for redemption and restoration. They knew that they were more than “Slaves,” just as Bartimaeus appeared to know that he was more than “a blind man.”

B. Thurman wrote one of the first books on the spirituals, *Deep River*, in the late 1930s in which he celebrates the spiritual insights of the slave singers:

*“What are these songs trying to say?” Thurman asks. “They express the profound conviction that God was not done with them, the God was not done with life. The consciousness that God had not exhausted His resources or better still that the vicissitudes of life could not exhaust God’s resources.”*

And elsewhere: “. . . this is the miracle of their achievement causing them to take their place alongside the great creative religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, worth living!” (The Negro Spiritual 56)

V. For Thurman, the miracle of the slave singers was that, despite their pain, humiliation, and suffering, they had grasped something fundamental: That they were more than slaves, despite what the world might tell them. Thurman liked to recall a story his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, often shared with him as a boy. [SLAVE PREACHER: “YOU AREN’T N—, YOU AREN’T SLAVES! YOU AREN’T CHATTEL! YOU ARE THE CHILDREN OF GOD! YOU ARE SOMEBODY!]

VI. This is another major idea for Thurman: We can’t really be part of a community, or help to form community, unless we understand who we really are as a child of God, a person of infinite worth. What he called the authentic self. Once we come to that realization, we understand it is true for everyone we encounter. We are able to see not just what a person presents to us on any given day or what society tells us about a person, but what that person truly is in the eyes of God. We see the potential in the other person and in all things created by God, and that, for Thurman, is the real hope we must confess:

“The greatest source of hope,” Thurman writes, “for both the present and the future, is the awareness of potential in me, in other people, in life itself.”

VII. So let’s return to those with their backs against the wall, like the young Howard Thurman, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, who inspired them both, Grandma Nancy and the slave preacher, or blind Bartimaeus in our story from the Gospel of Mark. What is common to them all is that, like the restored people of Israel in Psalm 126,

1) they are capable of dreaming; they see the God-given potential in themselves and in all others;

2) Also, by practicing the "Love Ethic," they work to remove the barriers to community within themselves, between themselves and those who would deny their full humanity, and within their oppressors themselves. This is the foundation for real community:

QUOTE #4 – how Jesus embodies the "love-ethic":

*The central emphasis of the teaching of Jesus centers upon the relationship of individual to individual, and of all individuals to God. So profound has been the conviction of Christians as to the ultimate significance of his teaching about love that they have rested their case, both for the validity and the supremacy of the Christian religion, at this point. . . . Jesus rests his case for the ultimate significance of life on the love ethic. Love is the intelligent, kindly but stern expression of kinship of one individual for another, having as its purpose the maintenance and furtherance of life at its highest level. . . . If we accept the basic proposition that all life is one, arising out of a common center – God – all expressions of love are acts of God. Hate, then, becomes a form of annihilation of self and others; in short – suicide. (Deep is the Hunger 108-9; Essential Writings 119)*

3) We are, in the end, only fully ourselves—only fully realizing our potential as individuals created by God—when we are in community. Ironically, perhaps, we need each other to be ourselves.

a) It may be that in Psalm 126, the children of Israel need the nations to affirm God's faithfulness to them and their hope that restoration is not just a one-time thing; should they find themselves in exile again—as they will after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE—God will be there;

b) It may be that those who scolded Bartimaeus when he called out to Jesus, telling him to be silent, needed Bartimaeus to bear witness to them of his full humanity, and Jesus to confirm it, raise him up, and restore him to community; perhaps Bartimaeus was the instrument of the naysayers' liberation from their small-mindedness, their inability to dream of what community in God really is;

c) It may be that the migrant men, women, and children making their way north across the rough terrain of southern Mexico today will be the instruments of God's liberation for those in power in America who cannot see their full humanity, their full potential as children of God, and in that blindness, the powerful do not realize their own potential—all that they might do and be in the world that God has placed them in.

We all need to confess our hope; we all need to dream, so that the great Day of Jubilee will come for everyone, regardless of who, where, or how they are.

I want to close with another meditation from Howard Thurman that speaks to this idea. It's called Keep Alive the Dream in the Heart (see scan attached).

[Keep Alive a Dream in the Heart – Howard Thurman – from Meditations of the Heart](#)

[How Good to Center Down – Howard Thurman – from Meditations of](#)