

The Real Jesus

Luke 4:14-21

November 19, 2023

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

¹⁴ Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because God has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus is so mysterious. He’s not always easy to figure out. I sometimes describe my pursuit of Jesus as looking for someone who has just left the room. You sense them, but there’s nothing to hold onto. Sometimes, in church, we talk about Jesus like he’s this obvious reality. Like you should just know and accept Jesus as “Lord” and “Savior” or “give your life” to Jesus. But the truth is, it’s hard to know who Jesus is or what Jesus means. It’s not easy to figure out what it means to live your life in the way of Jesus.

I’ve been working with our middle school Sunday School class this fall on what we know, for sure, about Jesus of Nazareth—the truth is, it’s not much. We’re pretty sure he was a real Jewish man who lived near the Sea of Galilee in the late 20s/early 30s CE. A few historians attest that there was a Jesus, who had many followers, who was crucified by Roman authorities. Our middle schoolers concluded from that fact that Jesus did something threatening to Rome. Was it walking around, talking to people about God? Was it inviting people to love God and love their neighbors? That doesn’t seem likely to warrant the death penalty. Was Rome mad that Jesus promised people eternal life when we die? Or, more likely, did he make them mad by telling the leaders of his religion they were getting God wrong? Calling Roman power illegitimate and saying that wealth belonged to the people? Jesus was likely killed for saying that God wants a world in which all people are free—and people who believed that followed him. But the historical record doesn’t tell us exactly why Jesus was killed. The truth about Jesus doesn’t just present itself. Each of us has to do our own exploration.

Howard Thurman did, too. Thurman was born in 1899 in Daytona Beach, Florida. He was raised in a Baptist family, but Thurman had an uneasy relationship to the church. A pivotal moment

was the death of his father when Howard was 7. His father, loved by Howard, wasn't a regular church attender. The Baptists hosted his funeral reluctantly but the pastor hired a traveling evangelist to officiate, and the evangelist condemned Saul Thurman to hell. Howard was wounded and he vowed to have nothing to do with that religion, or the church. Instead of walking away, Thurman began a long process of deep theological exploration to prove that the church was wrong about both his father and about Jesus.

One reason I think Thurman is helpful as a guide for Christians today is that his faith was shaped not by the authority of the church, but by the authority of deep personal spiritual experience. Because of this experience with his father, he was forced to admit that there is a difference—sometimes a big one—between the religion of the church and the religion of Jesus. You can't trust the church to always bear religious truth; sometimes you have to go find it on your own. Thurman found it. He found it first in nature: in the deep rhythms of the ocean near his home, and in the way communion with nature dissolves the boundaries between self and world—a mystical oneness. Thurman's faith was shaped, by the practice of silence--his discovery that there was inside himself a deep reservoir of peace, of communion with God.

Thurman's faith was also deeply shaped by his relationship with Jesus. Jesus shows what it looks like when a human being trusts God. Jesus, in particular, showed Thurman how a human being can live with dignity in the face of hardship and injustice, and still remain true to what is good. Jesus' ability to love *even* his enemies was evidence for Thurman of Jesus' unshakable trust in God. Thurman found he needed this Jesus, because his experience of being Black in America created an intolerable dissonance between who he knew himself to be in God's eyes, and how he was treated by white Christians. For Thurman, a Jesus who holds true to love in the face of that hatred—that was a Jesus who could save him.

I want to share with you something that my theology professor Jim Cone would say, which I have come to believe is true: Black people rescued Christianity in America. Black Christians preserved the core of our faith—that Jesus came to rescue and free living human beings. He didn't live only so that we can be “born again” or be given “eternal life.” Jesus' salvation is also about dignifying human lives—it is a movement of people called to live together in freedom from exploitation and oppression. Thurman played a huge part of the rescuing of Christianity. But even for someone as gifted as Thurman, coming to know Jesus wasn't easy. Thurman's understanding of Jesus didn't come to him all at once. He had to struggle, and work for it.

In Thurman's most famous book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he recounts a pivotal conversation he had in India, when Thurman was travelling as a Christian peacemaker. He met a young lawyer, who said to Thurman:

What are you doing here? ... More than three hundred years ago your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were *Christians*. ... The men who bought the slaves were *Christians*. *Christian* ministers, quoting the *Christian* apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery. ... During all the period since [emancipation] you have lived in a Christian nation in which you are segregated, lynched, and burned. Even in the church there is

segregation. ... I do not wish to seem rude to you. But sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position.

Thurman knew the man was right. Thurman went back to the gospels, to the stories about Jesus, to his own experience of Jesus, to try and understand why he knew the religion of Jesus was different than the religion of the white church. He lays out his vision in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, one of the books every Christian should read. Thurman saw that Jesus was poor. He didn't own land. He had few, if any, legal protections. Jesus was an oppressed minority living under state-sponsored terrorism. Jesus was like most every Black American in the mid 20th century. Thurman knew that to survive in that kind of harsh reality, you learn to be afraid, to be deceitful, and you learn to hate your enemy—because hatred fuels your energy to survive.

When Jesus appeared, he spoke to people who were going through that same experience. And Jesus told them they had to let go of their fear, cynicism, and hatred because those qualities degrade you, little by little. When we live with fear, and cynicism, and hatred, Thurman said, we are being controlled by the one who provokes those feelings in us. Our liberation demands we abandon these responses so that we can take up the creative power of love and nonviolence. Thurman said that Jesus proclaimed a universal belovedness of all people. Only the embrace our enemies finally “defeats” them. Jesus, centered on the God that was alive within him—never lost sight of that same image of God that he knew was in every other person.

There are two things that I find so unique and powerful about Thurman's understanding of Jesus that I want you to hear as you continue on your journey to discover Jesus. The first is that Jesus loves both the oppressed and the oppressor. And because Jesus loves both the oppressed and the oppressor, he challenges both. To the oppressor, Jesus says you must give up your love of power to grasp the power of love. Oppressors must repent of their sin and must give up wealth and privilege. There is nothing easy about that. We are enmeshed in systems of oppression that are hard to extricate ourselves from, but we must try.

To the oppressed, Jesus says you, too, must change—you have to give up your justified enmity and embrace the humanity of your oppressor. No matter what someone does to you, says about you, they are still God's beloved.

I don't know which of these challenges is harder. But in both cases, he says, our relationship with Jesus is so full of love—that love is so powerful—that our transformation must follow.

The second thing about Thurman's view of Jesus that I want you to hear is that Thurman kept insisting what while Jesus' message is always political, we cannot lose its spiritual dimension. Thurman knew we are spiritual beings, and our spiritual liberation is essential to our political liberation. Thurman resisted call after call for him to go to the front lines of the Civil Rights movement—to be a Gandhi for Black Americans. Thurman said no. That was not, he said, “the way the grain of my wood moves.” Instead, he modeled the life of contemplation. He showed us the power of “centering down,” of finding quiet Communion with God.

Here was the radical risk Thurman took in his own life and that he commends to you: In the silence, each of us has access to *the immediate power of the Spirit*—the same Spirit that fills Jesus when he stands in the synagogue at Nazareth can be in you.

This scripture so clearly establishes a liberating mission for Jesus' life. But if you read it closely, you'll notice that the nature of the liberation is not quite specific.

There is good news for the poor—but is this the jubilee year, the forgiveness of debts, the restoration of economic justice? Is the good news the dignity of being seen and loved by God?

Jesus declares that captives are to be set free. Does he mean those who languish in prison under a rotten criminal justice system will find freedom? Yes, but so will those held captive to anxiety, and fear, false ideologies.

Yes, the blind will see—those whose eyes are healed by Jesus' touch, and those whose eyes are opened to God's vision for a truly just society.

Jesus announces liberation. But it's not clear... is it political? Economic? Spiritual?

Howard Thurman might say that you need to find the answer yourself. Sit in the quiet, focus your mind and the heart, as Jesus did, upon God. It is in that place of intimate, interior communion that you discover that the truth of what Jesus said in the synagogue: "Today, this word is fulfilled in your hearing. Today, in Jesus, we are free. Today."