

# Rehearsing the Reign of God on Earth: Howard Thurman's Enduring Significance for Middle Collegiate Church and for America's Multiracial Church Movement

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*Editor's Note: This essay is adapted from a presentation given by Matlin Gilman, M.Div., at Middle Collegiate Church on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Matlin Gilman is a graduate of Union Theological Seminary. He served as an intern at Middle Collegiate Church from 2014-2015 and is a member of the church. In the fall, Matlin will attend Harvard's Master of Public Health program, where he plans to study issues of racial justice in relation to public health.*

Although Howard Thurman grew up in Daytona Beach, Florida right in the middle of the Jim Crow era, he spent his life and ministry working for racial unity. He preached about it in sermons, wrote about it in books and essays, and gave thousands of lectures about it in the United States and other parts of the world. And he pastored one of the earliest known multiracial churches in the country, The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, in San Francisco, California. Thurman's struggle to knock down all barriers that divide people in America and the world defined his religious commitment from the beginning of his divinity studies at Rochester Theological Seminary in New York in 1923 to his death 40 years ago at the age of 81. All people were included in his vision of community. "All people belong to each other," he said, "and those who shut others away destroy themselves."

Like Middle Collegiate Church, Fellowship Church, which Thurman pastored from the early 1940s to the early 1950s, was "doing a bold new thing in the world." Yet there were hardly any multiracial church models back then. A small handful of multiracial congregations existed, but they were not committed to racial unity but were instead mostly concerned with the afterlife. And these congregations were small and lacked national recognition. When Fellowship Church was founded, in 1944, most whites saw no contradiction between Christianity and segregation. One could be Christian and a segregationist at the same time. White clergy and laity used the Bible to justify segregation, just as they had used scripture a hundred years earlier to justify slavery. Slave-master Christianity never went away. It merely evolved because after the Civil War it was forced to make compromises.

In 1936, when Thurman was on the other side of the globe in Southeast Asia about to become the first African American to meet with Mahatma Gandhi, he had a spiritual vision. Looking across the mountains of the Khyber Pass that separates Pakistan and Afghanistan, his heart cracked open as he imagined all the wars that had taken place

there throughout history. Then, a clear vision for his own life emerged, and the vision was that when he returned to the United States he would create a multiracial church—a church that would attempt to change the course of history. A church that we at Middle like to say “rehearses the Reign of God on earth.” A church that welcomes all people no matter their race or ethnicity. A church where everyone is welcome just as they are as they come through the door. Because, like Middle Church, Howard Thurman believed that love can be more compelling than the fears, hatred, and prejudices that separate people.

Because of its commitment to welcoming everyone, under Howard Thurman’s leadership the church would soon become not only a multiracial congregation, but a multifaith congregation as well. Like Middle, Fellowship Church identified as Christian yet affirmed religious pluralism. It knew that Christianity did not have a monopoly on truth or access to God. It interpreted Jesus as a revelation of God’s love for the world, but not the only revelation of God’s love. It saw respect for other religious traditions as an important component of Christian discipleship. To publicly express its religious pluralism, Fellowship Church revised its mission statement to include language on seeking God “in Jesus and other religious spirits.” Thurman preached many sermons using the sacred texts of different faith traditions. Guest preachers of different religions were invited to give sermons at the church. And the church had numerous events and programs designed to increase understanding of the diverse cultures, ethnicities, and religions that were represented there.

In addition to pastoring one of the earliest known multiracial and multifaith churches in the country, Howard Thurman provided a revolutionary new way of understanding Jesus. His most well-known book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, influenced the hearts and minds of Martin Luther King, Jr. and many leaders of the civil rights movement. In his book, Howard Thurman shows how Jesus speaks directly to the oppressed and those he called the disinherited. Thurman saw Jesus as human. The spirit of God that lived in Jesus also lived in everyone else, in equal measure. The only thing that made Jesus different from most other people in this regard was that he was fully *aware* of God’s spirit inside of him. Yet all people have the divine spirit inside of them, Thurman says. So Jesus was no more divine than anyone else.

In his book, Thurman asks: Who was this *human* Jesus? Who was this baby-that-Mary-gave-birth-to Jesus? Thurman answers this question by outlining three basic facts. First, Jesus was a Jew. We often forget Jesus was Jewish, but Christianity didn’t come about until after his death. Second, Jesus was poor. This makes him, Thurman observes, like the masses of people throughout the world who are also poor. And third, Jesus was a member of a minority group that was being oppressed by Rome. Thurman says that “if a Roman soldier pushed Jesus into a ditch, Jesus would simply be another Jew in a

ditch.” In other words, Jesus had no rights which the Roman people were bound to respect.

The religion of Jesus, Thurman says, was a technique of survival for his people and, by extension, for African Americans and all people whose backs were against the wall. It was a way for people who were oppressed to survive their oppression with liberated minds and spirits, even if their physical bodies were bruised and broken—like Jesus’s body during and after his crucifixion. Or like John Lewis’s body on Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama. Thurman says that the essence of Jesus’s religion for his people was: *The Reign of God is within you, so everywhere you go you ought to leave a little heaven behind. Don’t hate or fear anyone. Love others. Love. Period. But beginning with yourselves, beginning with your people.* For Thurman, Jesus didn’t just stand in solidarity with the oppressed; Jesus was one of them. He could speak directly to them because he knew their pain and longing for freedom intimately. No one influenced Thurman’s understanding of Jesus’s religion more than his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, a slave the first 20 years of her life. “I learned more,” Thurman said, “about the genius of the religion of Jesus from my grandmother than from anyone else, including my seminary professors, because she moved inside the experience of Jesus’s religion and lived out of that center.”

Howard Thurman’s interpretation of Jesus was new and revolutionary. It gave strength and courage to many in the civil rights movement, including Dr. King, who quoted Thurman often and was known to carry a copy of Thurman’s book with him as he traveled to marches and protests. Although Thurman published *Jesus and the Disinherited* in 1949, he had already developed most of his ideas in essays he had published as early as 15 years prior to the book’s publication. We often think of Dr. King as the first to interpret Jesus in such a new and revolutionary way, yet it was Thurman who through his book provided so much of the theology for the civil rights movement. And his interpretation of Jesus continues to shape and inspire many people, including me. More than anything, it was Howard Thurman who inspired me to attend Union Theological Seminary in New York and intern at Middle Church, a church whose dedication to inclusive community and justice for the disinherited would bring a big smile to Thurman’s face.

Although Thurman espoused the concept of a new kind of church that was multiracial and multifaith, he understood the need to preserve individual racial, ethnic, and religious identities. “A person has to be intimately at home somewhere,” he said, “before they can be comfortably at home everywhere.” Thurman, for example, was intimately at home in his black Christian identity. It made him proud to know that he came from a people who not only survived slavery, but who were also a people of vastly creative religious insight that explains the development of the black church’s spirituals. To Thurman, the creation of the spirituals placed his ancestors among the

greatest religious thinkers in history. The genius of their achievement, he said, was that through their freedom songs “they made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, *worth living!*” The spirituals gave inner strength to the slaves, enabling them to survive and resist centuries of captivity, and these songs continue to give strength and courage to many people fighting for justice in this country and throughout the world.

Oh, freedom!  
Oh, freedom!  
Oh, freedom over me!  
And before I’d be a slave,  
I’ll be buried in my grave,  
And go home to my Lord and be free.

Another dimension of the spiritual genius of Thurman’s ancestors was that, without formal education or training, they managed to save Christianity from itself. The slaves didn’t convert to slave-master Christianity; they converted the faith itself. They created a true version of the faith that was different from what their masters had provided. Howard Thurman says: “By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slaves undertook the redemption of a religion that their masters had profaned in their midst.” As Raphael Warnock, the current pastor of Dr. King’s home church, says: “They gave us scraps and we made soul food. They gave us the Bible and pointed to Ephesians: ‘Slaves obey your masters.’ We took the Bible and said, ‘God told Moses to tell Pharaoh to let my people go.’” That’s why Thurman’s ancestors sang:

Have you got good religion?  
Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!  
Do you love everybody?  
Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!

Then, while looking in the direction of their master’s house, they’d sing:

Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’ there.

So personal identity was important to Thurman. He didn’t want it getting swept away in the vast sea of diversity that was his church. At Middle, we know personal identity and an expansive love ethic must go together. They’re not “either/ors”; they’re “both/ands.” They’re like two peas in a pod that must remain together if inclusive community is to mean anything. Because Thurman understood this, he had a deep appreciation for the black church as an institution. Fellowship Church wasn’t trying to replace or compete with the black church. It was simply serving as an alternative church model that some people might be interested in. Yet, Howard Thurman knew that most people, black and white, wouldn’t want to attend his multiracial church. As it

was back then, we know that 11 o' clock on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America.

Like Middle, Howard Thurman saw multiracial congregations as a way to dismantle racism and segregation in America and around the world. At Fellowship Church, the approach was transforming hearts one person at a time, one church member at a time. Political demands for justice, however, were *not* central to the church's identity. Thurman believed that transforming hearts was a key first step for achieving justice in society. When he pastored Fellowship Church from the early 1940s to the early 1950s, the concept of taking to the streets and demanding justice didn't seem like an effective strategy to him. Churches and the society were so thoroughly segregated that demands for justice, he felt, would likely fall on deaf ears. So he focused on transforming hearts, believing that in time there would be a snowball effect—a chain reaction—that could lead to a new social atmosphere where demands for justice could be effective. And he was criticized for this. Many felt he cared too much about racial reconciliation and was concerned too little about racial justice. One critic said: "Racial reconciliation means one side gets the power and the other side gets reconciled to it." Black liberation theologian James Cone said more bluntly: "I refuse to reconcile with anyone when their foot is on my neck!"

Howard Thurman understood the truth of these claims. He knew true racial unity requires more than love and kindness. It requires justice and an even distribution of power. These things were very important to him. Yet, he believed strongly that loving people in ways that open their hearts and liberate them to become their best selves was crucial for achieving justice in a totally segregated society. Furthermore, he knew that racism damages both blacks and whites although in different ways. It damages blacks because it requires that so much time and energy be spent on merely trying to survive. That's why James Baldwin said: "To be black in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time." Yet racism also damages whites because it requires that so much time and energy be spent on merely protecting and expanding their power and privileges in society, to the grave detriment of others. We know that's not the lifestyle of a morally responsible people. In a racist society, no one reaches their fullest potential as human beings. By opening hearts, Thurman and Fellowship Church understood themselves to be working for the liberation of everyone. Experiences of love among people, he says, can be more compelling than all that divides, thus creating new possibilities for a just society and world. And Thurman believed everyone needs love to grow into the best version of themselves. "Love places a crown over our heads," he says, "that each day of our lives we try to grow tall enough to wear." And "there's only one place of refuge for any person," he said, "and that's in another person's heart."

As a pastor and theologian, Thurman rejected completely the evangelical impulse to treat others, as he put it, as “objects of missionary endeavor” and not human beings. He saw Christian supremacy as inextricably linked to white supremacy, male supremacy, and all other ideologies that oppress and damage people. He knew that when people believe God loves them but not others, they will feel that their cruelty toward others is justified. Thurman knew this intimately both as a black man and from being spiritually wounded at a young age by the church he grew up in. When he was seven years old, his father died. His father wasn’t Christian and didn’t attend church with his family. Because his father had died “out of Christ,” the church’s pastor refused to preach his funeral service. The service was instead preached by a traveling minister whom the Thurmans did not know. On the day of the funeral, young Howard Thurman watched in horror as this so-called “minister” preached his father into hell, so everyone would know what would happen to them if they didn’t convert to Christianity. Traumatized, young Thurman tells his mother and grandmother that when he grows up he wants nothing to do with church. Yet, these two amazing women model for him an alternative faith that he accepts—a faith that says: “If it isn’t love, then it isn’t of God.” A Nina Simone kind of faith that says: “If love isn’t being served, then you leave the table.”

Thurman had no interest in converting people to Christianity. He wanted people to experience love—love so deep that we would become the greatest version of ourselves. Love. Period. That’s what Fellowship Church was all about. And Thurman was so skilled at multifaith community building that one of his Jewish friends said that it was Thurman, more than anyone else, who inspired him to become a rabbi. And this rabbi said that he never met anyone who understood Judaism as deeply as Thurman. And one of Howard Thurman’s parishioners who was Buddhist told Thurman that when Thurman prayed, the experience for him was like being back at home in China in his Buddhist temple, experiencing the renewing of his spirit.

In many ways Fellowship Church and Middle are very similar. Both are multiracial congregations with a national reputation. Both identify as Christian yet welcome people of different religions and people who don’t claim any faith. Both are regarded as leaders in America’s multiracial church movement. That’s why each year in April faith leaders from around the country come to our church’s race conference to learn how they too can cultivate strong multiracial congregations. Both churches see multiracial congregations as a powerful way to dismantle racism and discrimination. Both rehearse the Reign of God on earth, believing that love is more compelling than all that separates people. At Middle, we know that by building inclusive community, by rehearsing God’s Reign in congregational life, we participate in our own liberation. I, Matlin Gilman, can’t help but live differently because of being in community here. Because of learning with and from members of this church who are different from me. Because of the deep love I’ve received from you. Everyone who is a member of this church or who

attends regularly has stories about how this space has shaped them. When we get to know each other and have what Thurman calls “meaningful shared experiences” with each other, it increases our capacity to love others. How we live changes because we’re no longer thinking about only ourselves. The doors of our hearts swing open to others, and this heart-opening approach was central to Fellowship Church’s identity.

Yet, I like that we at Middle take things a step further: I like that we make political demands for justice. Especially in today’s age, I think that’s so important. It makes me proud to know that we at Middle take political stands to end mass incarceration; that we partner with the Poor People’s Campaign; that we fight for justice for queer and trans people; and travel to DC to participate in the Women’s Marches. It makes me proud to know that our pastor, Jacqui Lewis, helped organize this year’s Women’s March. It makes me proud that we travel to El Paso, Texas demanding justice for immigrants at our southern border, and that we fight for justice for our Muslim sisters and brothers in the city and around the world. It makes me proud that this church is so politically active. I know that if Howard Thurman were alive today, he too would be proud of this church. I think he’d agree that in today’s age, we have to change hearts *and* demand justice.

Although Thurman held strong beliefs, he didn’t want to create carbon copies of himself. He didn’t want others to be just an “ear” in their relationship with him. He wanted people to find their own voice and then use it. That’s why he said: “There’s something in each of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. And if you can’t hear it, you’ll never find whatever it is for which you’re searching. You are the only you that has ever lived. And if you can’t hear the sound of the genuine in yourself, you will spend your days on the ends of strings that someone else pulls.” Many wanted Thurman to be the on-the-frontlines leader that Dr. King would become. They’d say: “We thought we had found our Moses, but we ended up with a mystic.” But Thurman wasn’t interested in being Moses. That’s not who he was. He was interested in being Howard Thurman because that’s who God created him to be. And he believed everyone has their own calling. It takes great spiritual discipline to discern our calling, but Thurman taught that the clue to our calling comes from within. “Don’t ask what the world needs,” he said. “Ask what makes you come alive. And then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Howard Thurman, through pastoring Fellowship Church from the early 1940s to the early 1950s, paved the way for our church and all multiracial congregations fighting for justice in America and the world. We need his voice today to speak to us about our common humanity and how love is more compelling than all that divides people. There once was a time when Middle Church wouldn’t have extended an enthusiastic welcome to our beloved pastor, Jacqui Lewis. Howard Thurman transformed the religious

landscape in this country. We are indebted to him because of his revolutionary theological insight and extraordinary leadership in pioneering the multiracial church movement in this society.

So what can we do to honor Howard Thurman? I'd say that in many respects we should keep doing what we're doing: Keep welcoming people just as they are as they come through the door. Keep learning with and from each other. Keep having courageous conversations about race and differences with each other. Keep going deeper in these conversations. Keep fighting for justice in this city, the United States, and the world. In addition, I think we all should be having more conversations about justice with people outside our church, people whose hearts can be expanded. It would make Thurman proud to know that Middle is part of a coalition of progressive churches that travels to purple states to talk with moderate Christians there about what the faith means, and share our understanding of how it's connected to justice, and ask if they might consider our perspective on what the faith requires. Howard Thurman was super nonjudgmental. I know that being nonjudgmental is hard for many of us, but changing policy requires changing hearts. Society only changes when people change. And when we show kindness to people, I think we can push them to care about justice.

Finally, we can honor Thurman by continually asking ourselves: Who might *not* feel welcome at our church? Who might feel out of place here? And how can we as a church and individuals be more welcoming toward them? How can we understand them more? Thurman would want us thinking about these questions with a keen eye toward those who are most marginalized in society, those who are most disinherited. How can we better understand, and therefore better love, those who are oppressed and may feel that multiracial spaces aren't too friendly to them, that these spaces don't understand them? So let's honor Howard Thurman by celebrating who we are *and* having cultural humility. Building inclusive community is hard, ongoing work. Fighting for justice for the disinherited is hard, ongoing work. Yet when we become involved in the work, we rehearse *and expand* the Reign of God on earth—because everywhere we go we leave a little heaven behind.