

On this 18th Sunday in ordinary time, this Sunday when various members of the body of Christ, members called Emory, members called Adults in Action, members called Trinity, come together to worship and praise our Holy Triune God, I greet you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – who is the same yesterday today and forevermore.

This is such a special day, such a joyous occasion, a day when all of God's children can gather together in this one place to praise, adore, and bless our awesome God. For you see, my brothers and sisters, that is what worship is all about, taking the time to give of ourselves, our very best selves to our creator, our sustainer and our friend – our Sovereign God.

Church, when Rev. Jill Oglesby-Evans and I began to talk about this joint worship, as we spoke of the possibilities and the probabilities, we centered our thoughts on the saints of the church. Our forebears in the faith that make up the immediate and the extended cloud of witnesses that surround and support us as we make this journey. Yes, the saints of the church.

Rev. Oglesby-Evans talked about the series of sermons that she does during the summer months on saints, and as we focused on who would be an appropriate saint for this joint worship, we kind of looked at each other and about said in unison Howard Thurman.

Howard Thurman, the great mystic, preacher, teacher and public theologian. Then, Rev. Oglesby-Evans said that since she preached the last time we did a joint worship (Ash Wednesday), it was my turn.

As I began to meditate on the message, my thoughts, as they are prone to do, immediately turned to music, then to this choir that is so dear to my heart,

this AIA choir. We bonded some 16 years ago, and we love to come together to worship God. We have such a joyous time together praising God that it is simply crazy- stupid – unexplainable.

You also need to know that every since I've been at Trinity church they have been asking and we have been talking about them coming here to worship with you and sing for you. So for the next little while through message and music, sermon and song, this Adults in Action choir, Howard Thurman, and I will continue worship by lifting up to God *A Spiritual Offering* .

Would you pray with me?

Merciful God, loving God. Hear our prayer and graciously bless our time here together. In your mercy and kindness please clear our vision, open our minds, hearts, and spirits, so your Holy Spirit might move freely among us and in our lives. Now for the sake of this preaching moment collectively and individually we pray

Spirit of the living God

Fall fresh on me

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me

Spirit of the living God

Fall fresh on me

Loving God- Kindly let your Word be heard in your own way.

In Jesus' name—we pray

Amen

Howard Thurman lived an incredible life. He was born in Daytona Beach Florida in 1900. As he grew up he endured all of the hardships that a black

man born in the South had to deal with at the turn of the 20th century. His father died when he was 7 years old. He was raised by his mother and his maternal grandmother. His family had to sacrifice for him to be educated. He received his primary education in Daytona but had to move to Jacksonville – on his own – to go to high school because there were only three high schools in the state of Florida for African-Americans and Jacksonville was the closest one to Daytona Beach.

He finished high school in Jacksonville and came immediately to Atlanta where he attended Morehouse College – coincidentally Martin King Sr., was a classmate – then on in 1923 to Rochester Theological Seminary in New York state. You see, during this time in our history African-Americans could not attend graduate school in most southern states. So you had to look north to further your education. After seminary he took his first call as a pastor of **Mt. Zion Baptist Church** in Oberlin Ohio.

Howard Thurman's family had taught him something about a faithful God, a God that never gives up on you, a God who is ever present – no matter what life offers, and it was his openness to this faithful God that led Thurman to spend time at Haverford College in Pennsylvania with the Quaker mystic ***Rufus Jones***.

After time spent with Jones, Thurman accepted a call to teach at Howard University in Washington DC and be the dean of the Rankin Chapel Church. As soon as he, his wife Kate and their newborn daughter arrived in Washington, DC, Kate died.

Ever open to the will of God, even in the midst of pain and uncertainty Thurman deduced from this experience ***that difficulty and growth were always in creative tension*** or as we say it today, ***“If God brought you to it***

then God will bring you through it”.

Even as a young man barely into his 30s, life and living had taught Howard Thurman something about a God who is faithful, faithful through every pain and every tear. A God whose love and mercy knows no bounds. A God who is everywhere yet right here. A God who is faithful to all yet is faithful to you and me.

Choir sings: “He’s been faithful to me” written by Carol Cymbala

Thurman led an incredible blessed life. While at Howard University he gained a reputation as a creative teacher, preacher, and worship leader. From the fall of 1935 through the summer of 1936, he and his wife Sue travelled to India, Burma and Sri Lanka. Can you imagine what it must have been like to African-Americans traveling outside of the USA in the 1930’s? There he met and studied with the likes of Gandhi and Tagore. Thurman described this as a watershed experience because in the presence of these mystics and spiritual leaders of the Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic faiths, he was constantly asked to explain his connection – as an African-American male – to the Christianity of the slaveholders, lynch mobs and white supremacists in the USA. Thurman said that experience put him on a pathway that he never abandoned. He always made a distinction between the religion of Jesus and the culture of Christianity. **“A distinction between the religion of Jesus and the culture of Christianity”**

Now church, if you do not see the difference – then just keep on living in this world. Soon, you will see the difference in the gospel Jesus preached and lived and what we sometimes call Christianity

Yes, because Thurman was open to the prodding of the Holy Spirit, because he never seemed to hesitate to go where God sent him, because he never let life's adversities stop him from loving all of humankind, because he always looked for God in the presence of everyone he met, I guess if Thurman were with us today he would use the words of the songwriter *Isaiah Jones*:

And proclaimed that: God has smiled on me. God has set me free

God has smiled on me. God has been good to me.

Choir sings "God has smiled on me" written by Isaiah Jones

Thurman finished his tenure at Howard University and in 1944 he and his family moved to San Francisco where he founded *The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* – a fellowship that opened its life to all seekers of all colors and creed. There he developed a worship experience that drew people together across all lines. When you look at the theology and the polity of the *Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples*, you could see that the spiritual journey of the pastor had led him to a place where the God in him embraced the God in any and everyone he met. Thurman saw all of humankind as children of God. He saw our eternal connectedness and he chose to actively look beyond our brokenness and pain then ask the Holy Spirit to come into our midst and make us one.

Choir Sings : "Make Us One" written by Carol Cymbala

Howard Thurman led an incredible blessed life. He was a teacher, a preacher, a mystic. A mystic being someone who knows God through spiritual insight. A mystic someone who is gifted to work daily to align their spirit with that of our creator our Sovereign God.

As a mystic Thurman chose to share his lessons—his learning with anyone who was willing to listen.

One of Thurman's books titled Meditations of the Heart has these words recorded therein

I seek a gracious spirit in dealing with my own conflicts

It is often easy for me to be extremely hard on myself

Often I tend to give myself the disadvantage and to wallow in blame and condemnation — as distinguished from self-pity.

It is a part of my pretense to be gracious in my spirit in dealing with conflicts at the point in which others are involved — but not with myself.

Is this really true, or is it just the reverse?

Do I dare expose all my intent to the scrutiny of God?

Dare I seek the understanding of God and God's wisdom in facing my own conflict?

Again and again, I am aware that the Light not only illumines but it also burns.

I seek a gracious spirit in dealing with the injustices of the world. This I do not confuse with softness, or fear, or cowardice or sentimentality.

I must know clearly the evilness of evil and recognize it for what it is — stark, brutal, terrifying.

I must oppose it — place the full weight of whatever forces I have thoroughly against it.

At the same time, I cannot escape the fact that every judgment is a self-judgment — that even as I resist evil I share the guilt of evil. It is this sense of sharing the guilt of evil that should inspire the gracious spirit in dealing with injustice.

I do not want to admit even before God the necessity for this spirit. I fear that it will make me soft and weak. It is out of the depths of my own imperfections that I dare seek the gracious spirit as I wait in the presence of God this day. I seek this day a gracious spirit.

The clarity, the unvarnished truth of his words, makes it clear to a sojourner such as myself that Thurman did not begin his day – end his day – or do anything of meaning during his day without first asking the Holy Spirit to speak to his heart.

Choir Sings : “Speak to My Heart “ written by Donnie McClurkin

On this Lord’s day, when we come together as children of God to worship God by giving our very best selves to our creator, our sustainer and our friend – our Sovereign God, it is my hope and my prayer that the music of Carol Cymbala, Donnie McClurkin and Isaiah Jones as presented by this AIA choir will feed and nourish you as you continue to make your spiritual journey.

It also my hope and my prayer that life and the words of a dear saint of the

church, Howard Thurman, will inspire you to have a closer walk with God
And as Thurman translates the Hindu poet

Love not the world nor yet forsake

Its gifts in fear and hate.

Thy life to God an offering make

And to God Dedicate

Finally it is my hope and my prayer that you will on this day and all the days
to come, let your lives be a spiritual offering – a supreme spiritual offering
to God