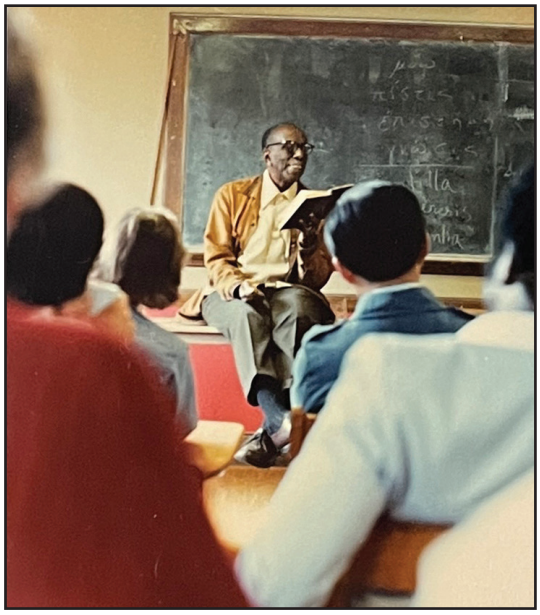
Teacher's Guide

Howard Thurman and the Quest for Community: From Prodigals to Compassionate Samaritans

BY DAVID B. GOWLER



This Teacher's Guide is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Dana Greene, who dedicated her life to the pursuit of knowledge and creative endeavors, social justice and activism, the life of the mind and the spirit. Dr. Greene was a noted educator, historian, and biographer. I was fortunate to be one of the countless people for whom she served as an inspiration, mentor, and Good Samaritan.

Dr. Dana Greene (1942–2023)
Dean of Oxford College of Emory University (1999–2005)
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The eleven chapter guides below will assist teachers to promote discussions about *Howard Thurman and the Quest for Community* that explore how the teachings of Jesus envision the path of discipleship as moving from being prodigals to becoming compassionate Samaritans. The hope is that we, as Thurman did, cannot only more fully understand Jesus's perspective but also apply it more fully in our own lives—whether we are disinherited or inherited—in a multicultural society in which the perspectives of people trying to follow the religion of Jesus can be productive voices in the modern chorus of diversity, all of which deserve to be heard. These guides thus facilitate group reflection by providing additional materials in the following format:

1. **Preparation: Howard Thurman Audios:** This section links audios from The Howard Thurman Digital Archive (in Emory University's Pitts Theology Library) of Thurman's sermons, lectures, and meditations (with transcriptions), which supply further context for Thurman's thinking on aspects addressed in the chapter. I am grateful to Richard "Bo" Manly Adams Jr.; Margaret A. Pitts, Distinguished Director of Pitts Theology Library; and Spencer W. Roberts, head of Digital Initiatives and Technologies, for making these and other materials available to me and for the immense, ongoing project of making all the recordings available to the public with transcriptions.

2. **Visual Art Reflection:** Thurman believed that artistic expression—visual art, music, dance, theater, film—can stimulate heightened spiritual consciousness and bring diverse people together on common ground. Artistic expression can also enrich and deepen our understanding of the subjects it engages, including biblical texts. These sections will promote discussions of how visual art interprets the texts we examine as well as provide opportunities for readers to explore their own imaginations.

3. **Quotes for Reflection and Discussion:** This section includes brief selected texts from the chapter as starting points for group discussions.

4. **Digging Deeper:** This section presents a few tidbits of helpful contexts to aid teachers as they prepare for leading discussions.

If you have questions or comments, feel free to contact the author at dgowler@emory.edu.

HINTS FOR USING THESE GUIDES

Each study guide contains significant resources—too many to use in one session—so that teachers can select what materials they wish to use depending on what they want to accomplish in a particular session. Sometimes they may have the group begin by listening to a relevant Thurman audio (which I highly recommend, because hearing Thurman speak can truly be transformative). In other sessions, teachers may instead wish to begin the discussion with a study of the work of visual art selected for the chapter.

The first five study guides provide analyses of the works of visual art used in each chapter, usually based on essays I wrote for *National Catholic Reporter* (*NCR*), but teachers are encouraged to have the group explore more deeply how, for them, the visual art *works*, what it *means*, and what it *wants*.

Merely describing a work of art is not "interpretation"; a work's "meaning" is a dialogic interaction of an interpreter with a work's subject matter, medium, form, and context, and with other interpreters. Thus, interpretation is not limited to an exploration of what the artist "intended" the work to "mean," and it is not exhausted by one single interpretation. The process should begin with a close examination of details, and, when possible, a work of art should be interpreted in light of its historical, social, artistic, philosophical, religious, and other contexts.

Each person should strive to interpret the work for themselves but also, then, be in dialogue with others. This section of the study guide, for example, was greatly improved and supplemented by discussions with Rev. Nancy Gowler, who has years of experience using visual art with her congregations. She also recommended another helpful resource: the "slow looking" guide by Claire Brown, some details of which are noted below. Start with observations and descriptions by examining the work slowly and carefully. What catches your eye? What do you notice? Does anything surprise you? Take a few minutes and write down everything that you notice in the work. Share those elements with the group (or a partner). Reflect also on the setting—colors, shapes, lines, figures, movements, textures, the foreground and background—and think about how you would describe this work to someone who had never seen it.

What questions does the piece of visual art raise? What emotions and thoughts emerge as you gaze upon the image? If the image includes representations of people, try to place yourself in the situation of the different people portrayed and imagine their perspectives.

After this close examination and description, now consider how you think the image *works*. What are the various parts of the image and their purposes? Do they work together to aid interpretation? How does the visual art engage with, interpret, or add to the story it seeks to represent?

What, for you, does this image *mean*? What details, parts, or overall aspects of the image lead you to this conclusion?

Finally, for you, what does this piece of visual art *want*? What do you think is it trying to convince you to think, believe, or do?

Chapter 1

"WITH THEIR BACKS AGAINST THE WALL"

Janet McKenzie, *Jesus of the People* (left); Rembrandt, *Head of Christ* (*Christuskopf*) (right)

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIOS

Jesus and the Disinherited, Part 5 (February 22, 1959): Jesus was "a poor Jew" and a member of "a marginal community in the Greco-Roman world." Other lectures in this "Jesus and the Disinherited" series are found here.

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

Close your eyes and imagine what Jesus of Nazareth looked like. Why do you picture Jesus that way? Does your envisioned portrait look more like the painting on the left or the right? Rembrandt *may* have used a Jewish man in Amsterdam as a model, but the hint of blue eyes and other features set the standard for centuries of Jesus being portrayed as a white European, with Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* (1941) being a famous twentieth-century example.

In comparison, note what Thurman writes about how we envision God (1989, 60):

> In a religion such as Christianity, the image of God in the mind of many Christians is that of a kindly, benevolent, bewhiskered white man, seated on a white throne, surrounded by blond and brunette angels who stand ready to serve Him in praises or as messengers. The Devil, on the other hand, is the Prince of Darkness while the imps of the Devil are black....Now this is strong medicine even for the pure in heart. What a vote of confidence it must have been to a white person to feel that the Creator of the Universe was made in

his image. Of course, there is nothing unusual about the notion that God is imaged in accordance with the ideal of the beholder. The advantage is obvious.

In contrast, as noted on her website, Janet McKenzie's painting *Jesus of the People*

> was selected winner of the *National Catholic Reporter*'s competition for a new image of Jesus by judge, Sister Wendy Beckett [who wrote]: "This is a haunting image of a peasant Jesus—dark, thick-lipped, looking out on us with ineffable dignity, with sadness but with confidence."
>
> Ms. McKenzie's…goal was to create a work of art in keeping with her beliefs as a person and artist, and inclusive of groups previously uncelebrated in His image especially African Americans and women. She hoped *Jesus of the People* might remind [us] that we all are created in God's likeness.

What does our own image of Jesus say about us?

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"The teachings of Jesus, Thurman argues, provide a creative solution to a disinherited minority struggling to survive, but Christianity became an imperial world religion much different from the religion of Jesus, the Galilean teacher and prophet. As a result, the disinherited minority in the United States of which Thurman was a member should be dedicated to the teachings of Jesus, which are 'on the side of freedom, liberty, and justice for all people.'"

"If a Roman soldier kicked Jesus into a Galilean ravine, he was merely a poor Jew in a ravine. In that context, Jesus offers to other poor disinherited Jews '*a technique of survival for a disinherited minority*.' Jesus's message assures the disinherited that they are children of God and therefore they should believe in their inherent worth and that of all other human beings, who are also children of God."

"Thurman argues that the logic behind Jesus's love-ethic is that hatred 'destroys finally the core of the life of the hater. While it lasts, burning in white heat, its effect seems positive and dynamic. But at last it turns to ash, for it guarantees a final isolation from one's fellows. It blinds the individual to all values of worth, even as they apply to himself and his fellows. Hatred bears deadly and bitter fruit.'"

"The religion of Jesus…centralizes the love-ethic in Jewish law: The love of God and the love of neighbor as oneself are the two greatest commandments. This love-ethic extends to all people by responding 'directly to human need across the barriers of class, race, and condition.' Jesus thus stood firmly within Judaism and envisioned himself a 'creative vehicle' for its 'authentic genius.'"

DIGGING DEEPER

- Thurman continually challenged himself to succeed. While a student at Morehouse College, for example, Thurman claimed that he and his friend James Nabrit Jr. read every book in the Morehouse library.
- When Thurman lived in Rochester, a member of the Ku Klux Klan showed him a notebook in which the man had recorded almost all the places Thurman had spoken, the subjects of his talks, and the number of people who attended.
- Thurman joined Boston University when Martin Luther King Jr. was finishing his doctoral course work. King attended some chapel services that year—his last year at Boston—and was deeply impressed by Thurman's sermons.
- Thurman wrote, "The core of my preaching has always concerned itself with the development of inner resources needed for the creation of a friendly world of friendly

men.…It was my conviction and determination that the church would be a resource for activists.…To me it was important that individuals who were in the thick of the struggle for social change would be able to find renewal and fresh courage in the spiritual resources of the church" (*WHAH*, 160).

- One example of Thurman's experiences with possible violence took place in 1947 at State College in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Thurman arrived late on the day before he was to give the commencement address. For two days the threat of a violent, white mob had caused men with rifles to guard the campus, including Thurman's host in the house in which he stayed. The man asked Thurman to relieve him on the armed vigil, and later that night Thurman, a lifelong pacifist, found himself for the first time since he was a boy holding a gun. He sat at a window, deliberating over what he would do if an armed mob attacked: he would either (a) return their fire or (b) lay down the gun, walk outside, and be willing to sacrifice his life. That moment never came, but, as Thurman noted in 1978, the "ultimate logic of social action may be some form of martyrdom." See "Mysticism and Social Action," HTC Box 8, Folder 39, pp. 22–23.
- Some of Thurman's descriptions of first-century Jewish groups (e.g., Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots; *JATD*, 1–25) are outdated because of advances in scholarship (e.g., the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947), but his study of such works as Louis Finkelstein's *The Pharisees* led him to reject uninformed (Christian) scholarship about Judaism. Note his comments about "the genius of the Pharisaic movement in Israel" and rejecting the "judgmental attitude" and "prejudice" against them in his 1951 sermon, "On Forgiveness" (see chapter 2 below).

Chapter 2

THURMAN'S VISION OF ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY

Max Beckmann, *Christ and the Sinner*

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIOS

Thurman's sermon "On Forgiveness" (September 30, 1951) uses stories about the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2–12) and the "sinful" woman who anointed Jesus's feet (Luke 7:36–50). Thurman also cites John 8:2–12 in the second part of his lecture, "The Search for Meaning in the Experience of Love" (November 5, 1975).

For background on the "Mysticism, Social Change, and Civil Rights" section, see the 1978 "Mysticism and Social Change": Part 1; Part 2.

For context on the "Role of the Fine Arts in Building Community," see Fra Angelico in the 1953 "Men Who've Walked with God" series.

For background on the spirituals, from "We Believe" (1958): "Deep River, My Home is over Jordan"; "Deep River; Nature of Life"; "Balm in Gilead"; "The Blind Man; Heaven, Heaven."

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

David B. Gowler, "Painting Urges Viewers to Speak and Act as Jesus Did in an Inhumane World." Before reading this *NCR* essay, read the biblical text the painting interprets about the "woman caught in adultery" (John 8:2–12), to which Thurman refers many times as a model for how human beings should treat each other in an often-inhumane world.

Many aspects of textual exegesis (interpretation) of narratives and visual exegesis of images are similar. In exegesis, you must ask questions, examine the (narrative or visual) work of art very

closely, describe exactly what you discover, and then interpret what you have found. The smallest of details may be important.

As you read John 8:2–12, ask questions about the story, such as what interesting words, actions, or events you see; the words and actions of characters that appear, as well as their relationships; the presence or comments of the narrator; progressions, plot and character development, repetitions, and other key structural and stylistic elements; and what questions you have about the story. Only then should you move to interpretation, the implications of the story, such as what you believe the narrator/author is trying to convey to the audience; what the text wants you to think, believe, and do.

After interpreting the text, you can begin a similar analysis of the image that seeks to represent the story. Then you can begin exploring how the biblical passage generates aspects of what is portrayed in the painting, how the work of visual art creatively (re)interprets the story, and what the work of visual art wants you to think, believe, and do. These efforts do not replace research about the texts, images, and their contexts, but they give you a foundation for further study.

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"Thurman claims that 'the underlying unity of life seems to be established beyond doubt.'… This sense of Oneness—the underlying unity of reality—is what God desires for all of creation. Human beings should live their lives in accord with such unity, and this unity—true community—is the end purpose of life."

"The child of God realizes others as children of God and seeks to cultivate relatedness with others; out of that sense of relatedness emerges community."

"True integration developed from unifying experiences that were multiplied over extended periods of time. Integration could begin to create a beloved community, defined by 'the quality of the human relations experienced by the people who live within it.…It cannot be brought into being by fiat or by order; it is an achievement of the human spirit as men seek to fulfill their high destiny as children of God.'"

"Luther Smith observes that the aims of Thurman's innovations involving art and meditation were twofold. They were designed (a) to help evoke religious experiences that 'magnified the essence of religion' as opposed to dogma and (b) to affirm and facilitate unity within a religiously, socially, and philosophically diverse congregation."

"Blake's argument that what is not too explicit 'rouzes the faculties to act' is a key component of this book's arguments: parables as works of art function in the same way that Blake envisioned visual art should 'work': They 'rouze the faculties to act.'"

DIGGING DEEPER

- As Luther Smith notes (2007, 50–51), the love-ethic extends to all of God's creation, including plants and animals. All life is related; all exist in an underlying unity. See especially Thurman's discussions of a common consciousness that all humans share and how this consciousness extends to communication between those of different languages as well as with animals and even plants (e.g., Thurman 1986, 56–75).
- In their 1936 meeting, Gandhi requested that the delegation headed by Thurman sing a few spirituals. Led by Sue Bailey Thurman, they sang "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" (which Gandhi's personal secretary Mahadev Desai said represented every disinherited community's hope and aspiration "to climb higher and higher until the goal was won") and "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" (which Gandhi said expressed "the root experience of the entire human race under the spread of the healing wings of suffering"): *AHH*, 7.

- Amanda Brown cites the pragmatist John Dewey's ideas about art as influencing Thurman in the sense of art being able to dislodge people from old habits of thought and feeling and connect them on a new level: "Art intensifies the feeling of living, and the process of experiencing art can have a lasting effect on one's life.…Artistic expression, performance, and observation were means to attain new and elevated consciousness—a sensibility in accord with mystical experience" (2021, 149–50).
- Thurman argues that "the genius of the slave songs is their unyielding affirmation of life defying the judgment of the denigrating environment that spawned them" (*WHAH*, 216–17). The spirituals are works of art of great depth that can comfort and inspire others who are oppressed and disinherited. They are realistic about that which is not under their control but insist on their common humanity with their enslavers as equal children of God. Cf. Eisenstadt 2023, 149, 155.
- The Khyber Pass is significant historically because of its vital role as part of the trade route between central Asia and the Indian subcontinent (e.g., the Silk Road) and as a gateway for military invasions (e.g., Alexander the Great). For Thurman, however, his "vision" experience at Khyber Pass confirmed the possibility of true human community.
- The program for the April 11–15, 1956, Festival of Religion and the Arts at Marsh Chapel at Boston University noted that religion is a "total response" to our Creator that "finds unique expression through the arts." Whenever art reflects the ultimate concern of human beings, it is religious art, whether or not it appears as what is deemed "traditionally religious." Humans need the witness of religion in art as a declaration of human worth and dignity, since humans are created in God's image, as a response to the "contemporary culture of alienation, anonymity, and materialism": HTC: Box 62, Folder 51, xxi.

Chapter 3

HOW DO PARABLES WORK?

Rembrandt, *The Money Changer* (*Der Geldwechsler*) or *The Rich Fool*

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIO

The sermon "Possessions" on the rich fool parable (October 28, 1951) outlines the negative effects wealth, property, and greed have on human beings and their relationships.

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

"Rembrandt's Technique Sheds Light on How Parables Work" summarizes the arguments in chapter 3 and connects them to how Rembrandt's painting "works." See also David B. Gowler, "The Enthymematic Nature of Parables: A Dialogic Reading of the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16–20)," for more information about Rembrandt's painting and the parable's first-century context.

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"Jesus was a pious first-century Jew who led a renewal movement within Judaism and debated with other first-century Jews how best to follow God, determine God's will, and observe God's Law.…Parables were part of his teaching repertoire, and to understand better their use and function as well as the creative understanding involved in their construction, we must look at first-century cultural contexts in which these parables were spoken and heard."

"One meaning of *mashal* can be 'riddle'—which means that the response of the hearer/reader is essential to the process of creating understanding about the possibly inferred meanings and implications of the *mashal*."

"Despite the presence of a moral before or after a fable/*mashal*/parable, the parable itself does not seek to impose a singular response but instead creates a dialogue and invites or challenges its hearers/readers to participate. *Parables, in fact, can be created with and have inherent in their transmission the possibility of having multiple morals, meanings, and applications*."

"Parables and visual images can omit premises of one kind or another, thus leading to ambiguity and multiple meanings. In many instances, such gaps are intentional.…That aspect of parables can give them tremendous power to affect their hearers and readers in many ways—challenging them to change their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The process provokes divergent responses as interpreters endeavor to understand them, since not every audience member envisions the missing premise in the same way."

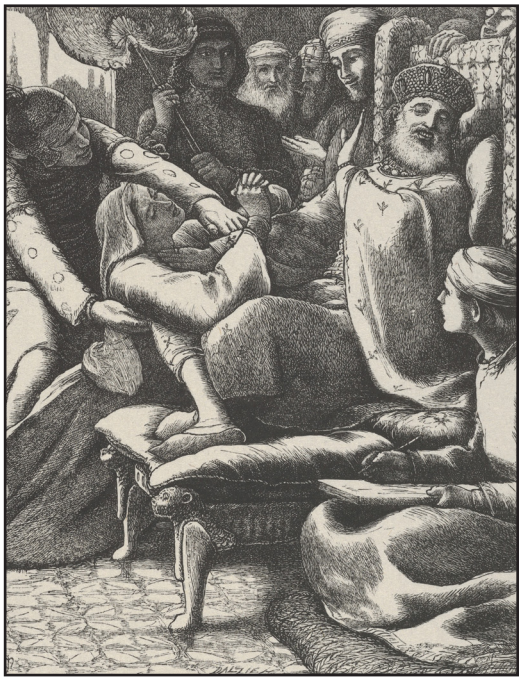
"Thus, a key role for interpreters seeking to make the parables relevant for today is to attempt whenever possible to fill in missing premises or gaps with historical, social, and cultural information, such as Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* did. One's interpretive task does not end there, however. Because Jesus's parables *want* something from their hearers or readers, interpreters should then attempt, as Thurman's book also did, to contextualize the parables of Jesus authentically, making them relevant for contemporary society without anachronizing or domesticating Jesus's message."

DIGGING DEEPER

- In fable collections, morals could be included in a *promythium* before the fable (cf. Luke 12:15) or in an *epimythium* after the fable (cf. Luke 12:21). The emphasis is on inculcating ethics. Quintilian argues, for example, that a critical aspect of education was "the formation of a child's moral character," which he believed was more important than "any excellence as a speaker." Fables played a role (e.g., in primary education) to help students learn "what is right and what is wrong" (Strong 2021, 137–38).
- Rembrandt's painting resembles an earlier Gerard van Honthorst painting, *An Old Woman Inspecting a Coin* (~1623/4), which personifies greed. Rembrandt substitutes an old man for Honthorst's elderly woman, but the similarities are striking—an elderly person in a dark room, wearing a pince-nez, holding a coin with the right hand, and examining it in the light of a single candle.
- Rembrandt uses *chiaroscuro*—contrasting light and shade—as a dramatic means of portraying a scene and suggesting inner character but with a sense of mystery. Rays of light are reflected in sundry ways and places, just as parables are reflected in different ways in different contexts and heard in numerous ways by various hearers. Rembrandt illuminates some objects clearly, while other aspects remain obscure, placed in the shadows, creating uncertainties and provoking debates. In a similar way, Jesus's parables illuminate some things as clear as day. Other aspects become clearer as we learn more about the first-century contexts in which Jesus created and his followers preserved, transmitted, and transformed his words. However, still other elements—because of the nature of the parabolic word—remain in shadows, provoking our responses as we endeavor to understand Jesus's parables more clearly in his context and ours and seek to change our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors accordingly.

Chapter 4

WHAT DO PARABLES WANT?



John Everett Millais, *The Unjust Judge and the Importunate Widow*

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIO

In "Resistance to the Social Order" (April 20, 1962), Thurman asks, "For what do you stand, really? And are you willing to back the thing for which you stand with your mind, with your heart, with your resources, with your life?" The answer he gives is "If you are, you join the great army of those who stand as the pathfinders and in the ranks of those who are the redeemers of the world."

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

See David B. Gowler, "Making 'Good Trouble': What We See in Jesus' Parable of the Persistent Widow," where the conclusion states,

> The parable of the persistent widow unrelentingly pursuing justice from an unjust judge is best seen as an example of not how our prayers for justice should be continuous—although they should be—but instead as a paradigm for how we should unrelentingly pursue justice for those denied justice in our society, with a reminder that justice should not only be fair and equitable; it should be compassionate and restorative.
>
> Recovering the radical message of Jesus's parable means that we should both recognize the widow as causing "good trouble" and realize that she should not be acting alone.

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"People living on a bare subsistence level thus viewed patronage—where the elites distribute goods to the nonelites—as a moral obligation; people who had resources were expected to help in difficult circumstances."

"Jesus was an impoverished first-century Jewish artisan who was a member of a politically, militarily, and economically oppressed minority and who spoke prophetic words of judgment against the oppressors of his people. His parables and other teachings focus extensively on issues of money and power, including condemnations of the wealthy elite because of their oppression of the poor. Such socioeconomic contexts thus are essential for understanding numerous aspects of the parables of Jesus."

"Jesus's message affirmed the inherent worth of the disinherited as children of God, the necessity of the love-ethic to pervade all relationships, and the power of love to create community in the midst of and even over against the forces of evil."

"How should wealthy elites live…? Jesus demands that they operate with vertical generalized reciprocity—a redistribution from the advantaged to the disadvantaged that expects nothing in return. Since God showers humankind with vertical generalized reciprocity, humankind should follow God's lead in their relationships with each other (e.g., 11:11–14).…The elites' concern for money is linked to their lack of concern for human beings, and this connection between riches and unrighteousness can only be broken through vertical generalized reciprocity (14:12–14; cf. 16:9, 19–31)."

DIGGING DEEPER

- The Gospel of Luke was written by someone in a higher socioeconomic position than Jesus. Although Jesus's perspective as being "disinherited" is clear in his parables, the author of Luke in many respects interprets the parables for those who like him, economically at least, could be included among the "inherited." The focus thus shifts slightly from Jesus's greater emphasis on the condemnation of the elite—which Luke still includes—to Luke's greater emphasis on Jesus's teachings serving as a warning to such elites (which Jesus also still includes).
- Parables include Jesus's prophetic critique "from below" of the wealthy elite. The rich fool parable (Luke 12:16–20), for example, illustrates Jesus's admonition about rapacity (Luke 12:15; cf. 12:21). Jesus then elaborates the point when he enjoins his disciples not to worry about material possessions but to strive for the kingdom of God instead (12:22–31). The section concludes with an exhortation to sell their possessions "and give alms" (12:32–34; cf. 14:12–14; 18:18–23). For Luke, then, the rich farmer exemplifies what to avoid: someone who does not strive for the kingdom, who does not care for those around him (especially those with their backs against the wall), whose treasure is material goods not the "unfailing treasure in heaven" (12:33), and whose life consists "in the abundance of possessions" (12:15).
- Recent scholarship has increased our understanding of the "weapons of the weak" and "hidden transcripts"—sometimes used by Jesus to give ambiguous (and subversive) answers in threatening situations (see page 50 in the text)—so Thurman's arguments in *Jesus and the Disinherited* could be reevaluated considering these insights.

Chapter 5

LISTENING FOR THE WHISPER OF GOD

"Thou Hast to Churn the Milk"

Albrecht Dürer, *The Prodigal Son amid the Swine*

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIO

In "The Prodigal Son" (September 23, 1951) Thurman notes that God is like the loving father, and anyone could be one of the two brothers, estranged from their father. But God always welcomes us back, and when the prodigal "comes to himself," he comes to his very center and comes face-to-face with God within him.

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

David B. Gowler, "What Can Renaissance Art and Howard Thurman Tell Us about the Prodigal Son?": In this striking engraving, the urgency of the pigs' scramble for food matches the urgency of the prodigal's physical and spiritual hunger, and the prodigal's pose portrays the moment when he "came to himself." Similarly, Thurman believes that the famine in the land reflects the prodigal's physical hunger and internal spiritual famine, and the parable illustrates how human beings can move from such isolation to an assurance of community: When people "come to themselves," it is in response to "a seeking and beseeching God," and Thurman muses about how the degradation of the prodigal's spirit led to "a stirring down at the bottom of his

being" that said, "You are lost. You are out of contact with your family. You are out of community. Why don't you go home?" Thurman thus argues for a deeper spiritual meaning of when the son "came to himself" and envisions it as an exemplar for one's spiritual journey: human beings can discover God within themselves, realize who they really are, and return "home."

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"We have forgotten that the only true basis for a sense of security…is the awareness that you are precious in the sight of God, that you are of worth, and that your worth is not derived from anything that you do, anything that you have, anything that you know; it is a part of the given-ness of God in His children.…Now this is the contribution that the religion of Jesus makes."

"Thurman captures the essential element of the parable: the father (God) loves the son (the sinner) even before he repents.…The good news is that God and God's love are relentlessly seeking us, and in response to God, 'something deep within you will begin to move,' and you will begin to open doors deep within you until at last you will find 'that which you have had all along.'"

"'When [the prodigal] came to himself,' he came to his father.…When I…come to the very center, the very core of myself, then I come face to face with God. That God is, God is within me. That he is the very point of my being and existence.…That there is that of man which is God. Not a reflection of God. Not some staggering accent of God, but that which *is* God."

"One of the ways that Thurman explained the presence of God within 'the inward parts of the human spirit and the human heart' was to borrow an image from Hinduism: 'the butter is in the milk,' and 'thou hast to churn the milk…if thou desirest to taste the butter.' God is found within human beings who have to cultivate awareness of God within them, and one necessary path was to 'limit one's intake,' to slow down and focus on important things amid the multitude of distractions in our hectic and harried lives, since there can be a 'striking relationship between the inner and the outer' aspects of our lives. Instead, we must churn the milk of our inner selves so we may taste the butter."

"When we listen for and respond to the sound of the genuine in another human being, we are ascribing to them the same sense of infinite worth that we (should) believe that we have. This sound of the genuine is another aspect of our common consciousness, and here the power of imagination takes root and gives us the ability to put ourselves truly in the place of another human being."

DIGGING DEEPER

- The Prodigal Son parable's relative complexity leads to greater depth of reader engagement: it has several scene changes, a more extensive plot, a number of conflicts, three major characters, and more developed (mostly indirect) characterization—including dialogue, one of the few interior monologues among the parables, and a speech. (See David B. Gowler, "The Characterization of the Two Brothers in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32): Their Function and Afterlives.")
- The quote from Petronius (*Satyricon* 80.9) is, "Friendship endures only to the last coin."
- The prodigal son was hungry enough to "gladly eat" (15:16) the food he was assigned to give the pigs, wording similar to the rich man and Lazarus parable where the destitute Lazarus—at the gate of a rich man who, to his later detriment, ignores Lazarus—"longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table" (Luke 16:21).
- In "Sing Your Own Song" (March 6, 1964) Thurman uses examples from Catherine Coblentz's *Blue Cat of Castle Town* to encourage his listeners to "sing their own song,"

to find their own authentic voice, and "then God, who is the creator of life and all the living substances, will be able to sing his song through you."

- The sermon "The Sound of the Genuine" (May 1, 1977) further explains what the Sound of the Genuine means, and it includes a description of the "Good Samaritan" who helped Thurman at the Daytona train station.

Chapter 6

THERE MUST BE COMMUNITY, OR, A FATHER'S LOVE, A BROTHER'S ANGER

Frank Wesley, *Forgiving Father*

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIO

In "Salvation: What Is God Like?" (September 16, 1951), Thurman observes that the lost sheep and lost coin parables have profound implications about the nature of God, human beings, and the relationship between human beings and God. The lost sheep parable, for example, portrays God as a shepherd who loves and seeks out the lost sheep, those who are out of touch "with the group that sustained" them. In reality, Thurman says, "everyone in some sense is lost," and so God takes the initiative, actively searches for the lost, and seeks to restore them to the community in which they belong.

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

Frank Wesley was born in Azamgarh, India, on December 12, 1923. Wesley became the best-known Christian Indian artist of his day (e.g., his 1947 *Blue Madonna* was selected for the UNICEF Christmas card, several other works won awards and honors, and his design was selected for the urn that held Mahatma Gandhi's ashes before they were immersed at the confluence of the Ganges and Jumna rivers). Wesley painted *Forgiving Father* while at Kyoto Art University in Japan (1954–1958), but the painting retains the cultural symbolism of Indian and Hindu social practice. The Brahmin father, dressed in white, welcomes his son home, his left hand holding his

son's back, his loving right hand caressing his son's head, and his head bowed into his son's neck (Wesley was influenced by Rembrandt; cf. the etching by Rembrandt and his famous painting in the Hermitage Museum). The emaciated son is too weak to stand on his own and depends on the father to hold him up, his right hand responding to his father's love by clasping his father's arm. Note the color contrasts—the people, clothes, and background—especially how the color of the clothes of the son and his loving father begin to merge as our eyes move downward (see Wray 1993).

The simplicity but profoundness of this painting makes it fertile ground for "slow looking" explorations of how this painting works, what it means, and what it wants. For Wesley, the father symbolizes God and the son humanity: God is present unconditionally seeking to reconcile with sinful humanity. The son, like humankind, is unable to stand on his own without the loving support of his father (Wray 1993, 44). Other interpreters argue that the son looks and dresses like a Dalit, the lowest and most oppressed social level in India, in contrast to his father's appearance as a Brahmin, the highest caste. Some interpreters also argue that the father resembles Mahatma Gandhi.

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"As we have seen, Jesus in Luke argues that vertical generalized reciprocity—the advantaged giving to the disadvantaged without expecting anything in return—is the means by which wealthy people can enter heaven (e.g., Luke 14:12–14; cf. 16:14, 19–31). This parable, then, may offer a similar message: assistance to those in need should be given even to those who may be—or appear to be—undeserving."

"Understood by God, accepted at the core of our being, we thus have a radical confirmation of community.…Therefore, the foundation of community is built on the loving actions of God. But a human response to the whisper of God in our hearts is also required. Even though the parable itself is ambiguous about whether the younger son truly repents and whether the older son ultimately reconciles with his father and brother, the desired outcomes are clear for both, and the restoration of community is dependent on those responses of repentance."

"One cannot truly love 'the hungry' or 'the homeless' without loving and caring for in some concrete ways individuals who are hungry or homeless. Part of caring for other human beings involves serious attempts to understand their context and situation. Understanding other people's contexts involves more than just acknowledging their predicament at a particular point in time; this effort also seeks to become aware of their potential. To truly love people involves, as Thurman liked to put it, meeting people where they are and dealing with them as if they were where they should be."

"For better or for worse, God and I, God and you, are bound together, and I cannot be what it is that I must be if between you and me, between you and God, there is no community.…God cannot be happy in his heaven if any man is in hell. Therefore, I must work out my salvation by seeking in every way to further communion between myself and all living things and myself and God."

"Answering the question of 'What is God like?' inherently leads to Jesus's call to act like God our loving parent does (e.g., 'to be merciful, just as [God] your father is merciful'; Luke 6:36). In that way, human beings can act to restore and preserve *community*, a fundamental issue of 'salvation' for Thurman."

"Becoming a repentant child is but one step on the path to becoming the welcoming father."

DIGGING DEEPER

- This parable was told and heard in a patriarchal society, so the absence of the mother and no mention of daughters are not surprising. It is not just the compressed nature of parables that could influence why they do not appear. Some interpreters attempt to include the mother by arguing that the parable incorporates maternal metaphors—the mother is the "unspoken binary of the father"—by linking the son's starvation to the need for (motherly) nourishment or the father's affectionate (motherly) kisses of the returning son (Scott 1989, 115, 117, 122). As Barbara Reid states, however, such "feminizing" of the father does not insert women into the story. Instead, by normalizing the image of father for God and rarely using female images such as mother, interpreters "divinize" patriarchy, allowing it to reign not just on earth but also in heaven: "When our foundational stories about God exclude female images, then believers are left with the message that being male is more God-like." The best course is for interpreters to include women—like the woman finding the lost coin—in their images for God and language about God (Reid 2001, 66).

Chapter 7

TRAUMA ON THE ROAD TO JERICHO

James B. Janknegt, *Portrait of YOU as the Good Samaritan*

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIO

In "We Are All Indebted" (March 26, 1965), Thurman reflects on the "stranger" to whom he dedicates his autobiography, the paradigmatic Good Samaritan who, in Thurman's view, totally changed his life. We are all indebted to a host of Good Samaritans—known and unknown—and we are all connected one *to* another and responsible one *for* another.

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

A more focused "slow looking" approach would be to consider the title of the painting, then focus on the figures in the painting from left to right, and, after discussing those representations, come back to the meaning of the title. What do YOU think it means? If it helps, here is how the artist describes it (also found here).

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"Our best evidence suggests that the consensus among first-century Jews, including priests and Levites, was that saving a life is much more important than any potential issues of purity."

"We are all indebted to people whose names we do not know, whose faces sometimes we are not able to see.…I am not myself alone, but I am a part of all the life that breathes through me and through which I breathe. We are all of us indebted to a vast host by which we are surrounded."

"To love one's neighbor as oneself by necessity means that you should love yourself, and an essential foundation of truly loving oneself is the recognition that you are a child of God and that God loves you. Loving oneself leads to what appears to be selfless love, but it is instead loving one's neighbor as if the neighbor were you."

"A critical part of being an apostle of sensitiveness/eccentric apostle is…'meeting people where they are, *and treating them from there* as if they were where they ought to be. By doing so, one places a crown over their heads that for the rest of their lives they are trying to grow tall enough to wear.'"

"Loving one's neighbors does not just include loving one's perceived enemies; it also includes loving everyone around us, people that we see and may not see because of our lack of attentiveness and mindfulness and an inability to escape a tunnel vision about ourselves, our own situations, lives, problems, or everyday affairs. Portraying the priest and Levite as villains, for example, distances us from them and thus can reduce the story's realism and weaken its impact on modern readers. More importantly, however, modern interpretations that are too negative often descend as drastically as the road from Jerusalem to Jericho into misrepresentations of Judaism and even anti-Semitism."

DIGGING DEEPER

- In defense of his honor and authority, Jesus uses the Socratic method, a rhetorical strategy named after Socrates because of the way he forced his interlocutors to answer their own questions, sometimes leading to a result the interlocutor did not like but had to affirm explicitly. The same fourfold pattern occurs twice in the two sections (or "rounds") of this encounter. The lawyer asks a question (10:25, 29); Jesus responds with a counterquestion (10:26, 36); the lawyer answers (10:27, 37); Jesus responds with an answer demanding action: "do this and you will live" (10:28) and "go and do likewise" (10:37).
- Jews were required to assist a neglected corpse, or, "for most Jews," to save a life (Snodgrass 2018, 355, 738 n.129): "Laws were suspended when life was endangered." Similar sentiments about the necessity of burying a neglected corpse are found in Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.211; *Antiquities* 5.317; *Jewish War* 3.377; 4.317) and Philo (*Hypothetica* 7.7). Compare how Tobit, who "walked in the ways of truth and righteousness" all his life (Tobit 1:3) retrieved, cared for, and buried the corpse of a murdered man during Pentecost (Tobit 2:1–8). The priest and Levite fail to live up to Tobit's example. "Half dead" also could involve the principle that saving a life supersedes almost any other requirement (e.g., m. Yoma 8:6: "Whenever there is doubt whether life is in danger this overrides the Sabbath").

Chapter 8

COMPASSION, MERCY, AND HOSPITALITY

The Samaritan Attends to the Traumatized Man (Luke 10:33–34a)

Hanna Cheriyan Varghese, *The Good Samaritan*

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIO

In "The Good Samaritan" (October 7, 1951) Thurman argues that the parable breaks down barriers that divide us, the lines that every culture draws between those who belong and who do not belong. Being a neighbor means to love one another by being "involved in an encounter that leads from the core of me to the core of you," to relate to one another as God relates to us. Thurman closes by pondering how different our world would be if we all tried to follow the far too lonely path trod by the Good Samaritan.

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

Just a few details for a "slow looking" exploration: Hanna Cheriyan Varghese was born in Malaysia in 1938, and after a two-year teacher-training course in England, where she earned a distinction in art, she returned to Malaysia in 1958. This image exhibits some of the distinctive elements of her art, such as the dramatic use of bold colors—including blue, green, and yellow—that highlight the primary characters, content, and meaning of the work.

Another painting that is helpful for comparison is Kelly Latimore's *The Good Neighbor*, which is set in Flint, Michigan, and reflects the Flint water crisis (the water system was contaminated with lead and poisoned people who drank the water).

Thurman (correctly) argues that it is impossible to love "humanity"; you must love individuals. How does that understanding inform your interpretations of the Varghese and Latimore images, what they *mean* and what they *want*?

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"The Samaritan thus fulfills the compassionate role that the priest and Levite should have fulfilled as the Law and nature of God demand. The father of the returning prodigal son shows the same compassion (15:20), another crucial link between these two parables. In other words, the Samaritan, like the father of the prodigal son, acts exactly as God would act. He seeks to make the man whole, establishing/restoring community in the process."

"A prerequisite for loving one's neighbor is recognizing that they actually are a neighbor, including seeing them as a fellow human being and not as an 'other.' The priest, Levite, and Samaritan all *see* the wounded man by the side of the road. The Samaritan is the only one to see him as a human being of equal worth, a fellow child of God who should receive compassion-in-action."

"The love-ethic—and therefore compassion—of Jesus is rooted in 'perhaps the most daring and revolutionary concept' known to human beings. God is not just the creative mind and spirit at the core of the universe; God is love: 'This is the great disclosure: that there is at the heart of life a Heart.' The knowledge and experience of this love of God gives human beings a 'vast and awe-inspiring tranquility' that supplies them strength to 'move confidently out into choppy seas.'"

"Societies, for example, tend to make 'radical distinctions' between those who 'belong' and those who 'do not belong,' which includes attempting to build positions of security, power, and domination. In this sense, the goals of society and the goals of the religion of Jesus are mutually exclusive. Jesus insists that we are related to other people directly, not to any groups, creeds, or race to which they or we belong. We are related *to them*, one-on-one, as human beings."

"As Luther Smith observes, for Thurman true community only exists when transformed individuals act in transformed relationships with one another and upon social structures. The impetus comes from the mystical consciousness of the divine within oneself and the realization that the divine dwells in each human being; that requires a fellowship of mutual caring and serving and is the basis for social transformation. As readers engage with the surprising elements of the Good Samaritan parable, they are provided an opportunity—if not challenged—to transform themselves or be transformed in deep and significant ways."

DIGGING DEEPER

- Samaritans saw themselves as descendants of people in the Northern Kingdom (called Israel or Ephraim) who survived the destruction of Israel in 722 BCE by the Assyrians. Assyria then brought in people from other nations to settle in Samaria (see 2 Kings 17:24). When Jews of the Southern Kingdom of Judah returned from exile in Babylonia (which conquered Judah in 587 BCE), hostilities broke out between the two groups (cf. Ezra 4:1–24; Neh 2:19; 4:1–14), and the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim (John 4:9). Jews/Judeans conquered Samaria during the Maccabean War (128 BCE) and destroyed the Mount Gerizim temple, but it was rebuilt by Herod the Great. Relations between the two groups were generally poor in

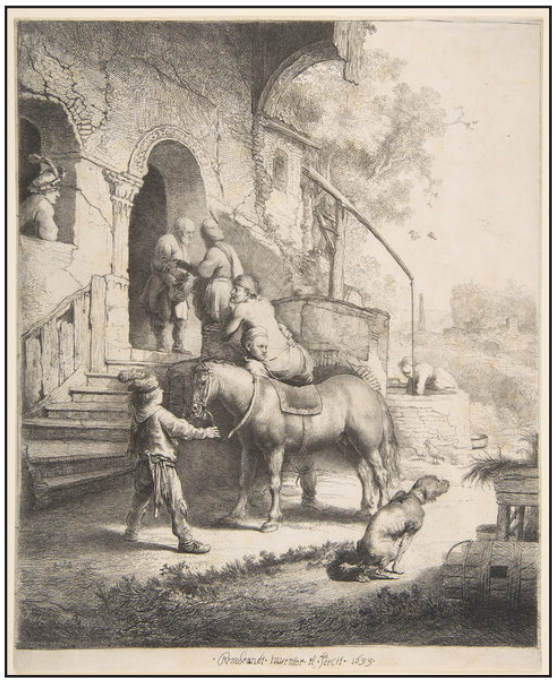
Jesus's era (e.g., Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.29–30). Snodgrass notes that evidence from later rabbinic sources is mixed, with some rabbis considering Samaritans as true proselytes "under the Jewish umbrella" (e.g., b. Qiddushin 75b), but others considered them *minim*, "heretics," especially after the Bar Kochba revolt, 132–35 CE (Snodgrass 2018, 342). Cf. Chalmers 2020, who argues that "Samaritans often counted, in Jewish texts of the ancient world, as members of a broader community of 'Israel.'" I agree that enmity has been overstressed in some scholarship, but the evidence makes the assumption of enmity likely in this instance. The parable, however, makes the case for regarding the Samaritan—like the resident alien/stranger—with loving compassion-in-action and as a full member of the community.

- The Samaritan most likely applied wine as a mild antiseptic and oil to soften the wounds (cf. Isa 1:6). The use of both oil and wine for such purposes is noted, for example, in Theophrastus (*Enquiry into Plants* 9.11.1) and rabbinic traditions (e.g., m. Shabbath 19.2). Since oil and wine were commonly used in sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple (e.g., Lev 23:13), some readers may find that reference to be another implicit criticism of the priest and Levite. The Samaritan performs his duties under the law with oil and wine, whereas the guardians of the temple, who use oil and wine in their duties, refuse to do so.
- Thurman argues (e.g., "Justice and Mercy," January 22, 1956) that when we relate to other human beings as the Samaritan did, we can begin to participate in a way of life that lifts us into being an "authentic child" of God. And when we establish such relationships with one another, when we are merciful to one another, "the strength of God becomes available to [us] in terms of insight, in terms of endurance, in terms of a benediction of [God's] grace. Justice. Mercy. Mercy. Justice" (Thurman 2018, 128, 130–31).

Chapter 9

COMPASSION, MERCY, AND EXTENDED HOSPITALITY

The Samaritan Brings the Traumatized Man to the Inn (Luke 10:34b–37)



Rembrandt, *The Good Samaritan*

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIO

The sermon "Commitment" (October 21, 1951) on the building a tower and king going to war parables (Luke 14:26–35) explores what it means to be a follower of Jesus, the costs involved, and the all-encompassing commitment it requires. Thurman urges us to respond with "Here I am."

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

A "slow reading" of the Rembrandt etching could be supplemented by David B. Gowler, "Hope and Despair in Rembrandt's *The Good Samaritan*." Some thoughts from the essay:

> Why do we only see the back of the good Samaritan at a distance but see the back of the defecating dog so prominently? The provocative image of the dog partly seems designed to shock a polite audience, just as Jesus's compassionate Samaritan would have shocked his audience. In a previous study, I concluded that the "dog most likely

functions primarily as a playful aspect of verisimilitude, yet it illustrates that life inherently includes the sublime and the everyday, the unusual and the banal, the sacred and the profane, with the latter—in each of these polarities—often more prevalent than the former."

Another way to approach this image and parable, however, is that this act of mercy takes place not just in the midst of evil or even in spite of evil, but as a radical and in some ways redemptive act against evil. The parable illustrates how one should treat victims of injustices, no matter who they are.

The command at the end of the parable, to go and do likewise, to show compassion and mercy to those who suffer injustices, focuses our attention on the need to transform ourselves into people who work actively on the behalf of other human beings who suffer similar injustices, doing our part to try to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

The parable of the Good Samaritan and Rembrandt's response to it accurately portray the injustices in their worlds and ours. They also do not downplay the fact that the results of one's actions to assist other human beings may be seen as foolhardy or even fruitless. Yet we will never know, unless, as Jesus urged at the end of the parable, and as Thurman himself suggested, that we "try it and see."

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"The greatest aspect of the 'imagination' working to understand the contexts of other human beings is its function as the *angelos*, the messenger of God, where one authentically works to put oneself in the place of another human being, and then, as a result, shares the necessary resources to attempt to meet those needs. This struggle to identify with another is often glibly conveyed by such sayings as 'walking in another's shoes,' but instead, this experience should include being 'rocked to one's foundations' in ways that force us out of our customary preoccupation with ourselves. Although we can never fully know others' situations, Thurman argues that empathy is an inherent part of creating community: 'To be to another human being what is needed at the time that the need is most urgent and most acutely felt, this is to participate in the precise act of redemption.' In the process, when our imagination acts as God's *angelos*, we, like the Good Samaritan, may indeed become God's *instruments*."

"It is a matter of the profoundest kind of spiritual sensitivity to be able to help, to rescue, a human being in a manner that will enable that human being to forgive you for being able to help him.…It is a spiritual quality to feed a hungry person so that the hungry person knows that *he* is being addressed, not merely his hunger.…The way my life is conditioned and projected I have to feel that the person who is helping me knows that I am there. Not just my hunger is there; or my nakedness is there. But *I* am there."

"An essential element of Thurman's interpretations of the love commands in Judaism—the ones emphasized by Jesus and illustrated in the Good Samaritan parable—is that deeds of loving kindness must occur both individually and communally. These love commands do not merely involve individual acts of mercy and lovingkindness; they involve the transformation of institutions of society. In fact, Thurman calls the understanding that Jesus speaks merely of individual acts 'one of the most potent fallacies of the Orthodox religion.'"

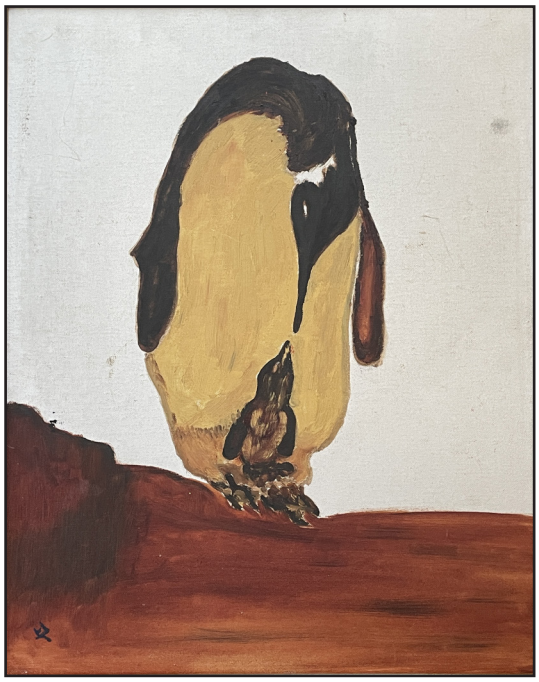
"We aren't supposed to identify with the priest or Levite, but how many times have we acted like them? Their failures are our own, which explains in part why Christians over the centuries have read this story in anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic ways—ignoring their own complicity, misplacing the blame on Jews or Judaism, becoming self-righteous, not admitting that the parable holds a mirror up to all its readers."

DIGGING DEEPER

- In his story about the desert dweller and the lighted lantern, Thurman adds these words: "In your own way, do you keep a lantern burning by the roadside with a note saying where you may be found, 'just in case'? Do you place a jar of cool water and a bit of fruit under a tree at road's turning, to help the needy traveler? God knows the answer and so do you!"
- The Greek in Jesus's command to the lawyer (Luke 10:37) could be better translated as "Go, and *you make a habit of doing likewise*." That is how life is supposed to work in the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus (e.g., Luke 4:18–19), the twelve (e.g., 9:1–6), the seventy-two (10:1–20), and any disciple of Jesus in this imperfect, often hostile world.
- Compare this story with the one about a "certain ruler" who asks Jesus, as the lawyer did, what he had to do to "inherit eternal life" (Luke 18:18). Jesus responds, "Sell all that you own and distribute [the money] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (18:22). Unlike the Samaritan, this rich young ruler was unable to follow this "frighteningly idealistic" command and thus to follow Jesus.
- Thurman spoke of the "Gothic principle" in the context of reaching our ideals, using a Gothic cathedral's upward reach to the heavens as an example of how human beings are "earth-bound" but have something within them that is always trying to reach, to fly, toward harmony and significance, from the time-bound to the eternal (e.g., "The Gothic Principle," *PHWT* 4:179).

Chapter 10

"WE'RE CONNECTED"



Painting of Penguins by Howard Thurman

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIOS

In "Community and Prophets, Part 1" (May 14, 1961, in the series, "Community and the Will of God") Thurman argues that "community is a sense of wholeness. It is the experience of inward togetherness. It is a sense of increasing fulfillment." And a key aspect of community is that every single person, as a child of God, is of equal worth.

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

Some context for a "slow looking" exploration of this painting: Thurman began painting penguins after being inspired by visiting them in the Vancouver city zoo. Eisenstadt adds the explanatory note about this interest: penguins "carried their distinctive white-and-black coloration with dignity" (*AHH*, 232).

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

"Unfortunately, Thurman observes, many people who appear devout in their worship of God belong to some of the 'most terrifying hate organizations,' but, as Plotinus reminds us, the test of whether we are in unity with the Spirit of God is whether we are in unity with one another. We can never be at peace with God if we are not at peace with other human beings: 'For the sake of my unity with God, I keep working on my relations with my fellows. This is ever the insistence of all ethical religions.'"

"So hatred becomes an 'internal rallying center' for one's personality—giving energy and strength like a form of neurosis—which supports and helps one implement a 'position' from which to attack perceived enemies and which even wills their 'nonexistence' as human beings. Yet, on the other hand, if human beings accept the idea that all life is one, hate becomes a form of annihilation not only of others but also of oneself. The love-ethic of Jesus, in contrast, is 'the intelligent, kindly but stern expression of kinship of one individual for another, having as its purpose the maintenance and furtherance of one's life at its highest level.'"

"Social action is also resistance against whatever tends to separate us from the experience of God: 'Therefore, the mystic's concern with the imperative of social action is not merely to improve the condition of society. [Author's note: the full quote includes, "It is not merely to feed the hungry, not merely to relieve human suffering and human misery. If this were all, in and of itself, it would be important surely. But this is not all."] The basic consideration has to do with the removal of all that prevents God from *coming to himself in the life of the individual* [emphasis mine]. Whatever there is that blocks this, calls for action.'"

"Here is where loving one's enemy can be misunderstood, because 'one of the radical functions of social action' is to make offenders aware of the consequences of their offenses.…Moral persuasion is usually not enough to make people aware of what is at stake. Therefore, offenders must be jolted into 'an acute sense of the same kind of insecurity' that their actions are causing for other people in society.…This 'shock treatment' holds up a mirror to oppressors that reflects to them images of those who suffer at their hands and allows them to have a sympathetic understanding of others, with a central concern of removing any obstacle preventing them access to the altar in their hearts.

In other words, people should not just act like the compassionate Samaritan; they should also work to make sure that the priest and the Levite are able to identify and sympathize with the traumatized man and 'go and do likewise.'"

"In the Prodigal Son parable, *both* sons must respond in ways that reestablish community with their father and with each other; the responsibility lies on their shoulders to respond to the love and compassion of their father. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the innkeeper *must* respond and build community by extending the compassion and mercy of the Samaritan. The open-ended characterizations of the two sons and the innkeeper stand as challenges to the readers and hearers of the parables to act in ways that repair and build community with concrete actions, just as much as the compassion-in-action of the father and the Samaritan does."

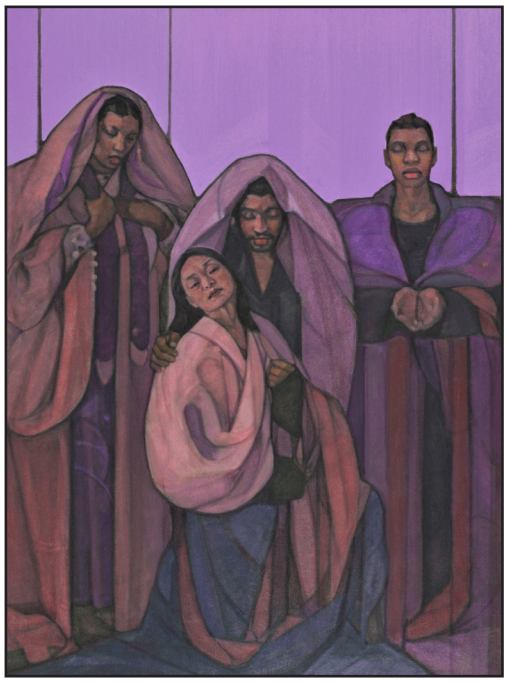
DIGGING DEEPER

- In "Our Underlying Spiritual Unities" (*PHWT* 2:286–88) Thurman argues that the intellectual and other advances of modern humanity had, in effect, "reduced the world to a neighborhood without being able to achieve neighborliness." To respond effectively, those who have a common desire to make the world a better place must include a singleness of purpose that is shared by all and the belief in "the basic dependability of the Spirit of the living God" to give them the power to do God's will so that "the ultimate end of man is good." In other words, we can begin by building community where we are by what we do as prodigal—and elder—sons and daughters by being transformed into Samaritans who have compassion-in-action.
- Thurman knows there will be disagreements and conflicts aplenty in the beloved community. Yet those conflicts will not consist of "hard or critical lines of conformity yielding a glow of sameness over the private or collective landscape submerging the possibility of real individual and group expression" (*PHWT* 5:157). As Eisenstadt observes, "This is Thurman's utopia, one in which coercion of all types has been replaced with a blending and merging of various forms of individual and collective creativity" (*AHH*, 343; cf. Thurman, "The Significance of Jesus: Love": *PHWT* 2:60–67).

Chapter 11

GOING FORWARD

"We All Do Better When We All Do Better"



Janet McKenzie, *The Good Samaritan with the Merciful Armies of Love*

PREPARATION: HOWARD THURMAN AUDIOS

In "What Shall I Do with My Life? (Part 3): The Experience of Community" (March 21, 1971), Thurman states that the experience of community is the self-awareness of the "unity of life," and how that self-awareness brings us "resources" to overcome the walls we erect to separate us, to work toward the harmony that comes from the common ground of experienced community: "And it cannot be done without the active work of imagination," of "self-projection."

For the "No Sane Man in Hell" story, see "The Dilemma of Love and Hate, Part 1" (April 1, 1973).

VISUAL ART REFLECTION

A "slow looking" exploration of this painting could conclude by comparing it to the challenge to viewers in chapter 7's *Portrait of YOU as the Good Samaritan*.

Janet McKenzie wrote (in private correspondence) that it was often people who have experienced prejudice and violence who also become Good Samaritans—"the merciful armies of love"—who stand alongside the Good Samaritan to confront injustice and violence. In this work, the Good Samaritan leans over to assist the traumatized person, an Asian woman who

represents recipients of ongoing anti-Asian hate, racism, and violence. As the "voice" of the painting, the woman gazes at the viewers to urge them to acknowledge and respond to her suffering and the suffering of all recipients of such oppression. The standing woman on the left symbolizes the "enduring feminine spirit," who like the parable's innkeeper, will care for the stranger. The standing figure on the right, for McKenzie, represents other recipients of hate, prejudice, and violence, the LGBTQIA+ community, who stand in solidarity, offer empathy, and share the hope that in the face of injustice, viewers will join the Samaritan in his compassion-in-action so that love can prevail.

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Luther Smith: "What is required of us now is to live into that prophetic vision of common ground and to embrace its radical consequences. To repeat Thurman's conviction that each of us has the responsibility and the ability to fulfill our prophetic calling: we have no valid excuses to withdraw from committing ourselves to the realization of common ground. None!"

"Another relevant aspect of de Waal's work is the incorporation of decades of research that shows that animals can learn to cooperate, a cooperation that involves reciprocity and empathy. Numerous studies, of course, show that human beings, religious and nonreligious, also can develop empathy and compassion in ways that change people, relationships, organizations, and cultures. One key aspect of research specific to the topic of this book is that *storytelling*—another positive aspect of parables—can increase understanding of and empathy for another."

"There is no sane [person] in hell."

"Heather McGhee in her book *The Sum of Us* also shows how fear, deception, and hate—elements of racism, for example—demonstrably harm almost everyone, not just their intended targets.…What most people do not realize is that the oppression of the 'other,' of the disinherited in society, usually is a 'canary in a coal mine.' In other words, the systems exploiting those with their backs against the wall usually expand to exploit other groups as well. Those people who support oppression because it only hurts the 'other'—and falsely believe it helps them—ultimately find themselves similarly oppressed by the powerful."

"Marshall sees the parable of the Prodigal Son as a narrative of restorative justice, but such restoration requires contrition, confession, change of life, and atonement or reconciliation. The Good Samaritan parable serves to complement the restoration of the prodigal, because it demonstrates the restoration of an innocent victim, and, for Marshall, the Samaritan not only serves as an exemplar of individual altruism, but 'there are also intimations…of the need for structural and systematic transformation.'"

"The ambiguities of the responses of the two sons in the Prodigal Son and the innkeeper in the Good Samaritan serve an important purpose.…The responsibility for restoring community, in response to their father, rests upon the shoulders of both sons, just as responsibility for extending community, in response to the Samaritan, rests on the shoulders of the innkeeper. In this way, both parables extend these responsibilities to the shoulders of all interpreters of the parable."

"Similar to the situation that Thurman acknowledged in his final sermon at Fellowship Church in 1980, our current landscape appears bleak, and the hounds of hell seemingly are (again) winning. Thurman offers the religion of Jesus as an example of how to respond, an approach of love that could overcome fear, deception, and hate. The prescriptions of both the Prodigal Son and Good Samaritan parables are idealistic if not unrealistic, but Jesus says the father's and the Samaritan's compassion-in-action should be the goal if not the norm for how human beings should treat all other human beings."

DIGGING DEEPER

- Paul Harvey (2023, 159) writes that "Thurman was indeed an optimist, but one with a keen sense of human evil.…His was an optimism acutely aware of the psychic wounds of American history." Harvey also notes concerning our modern context, "In fact, [Thurman] had seen much worse" and

  > he knew better than we do the rigors involved in looking for common ground. I think he might have told us to stop doomscrolling, pick up a clarinet (or whatever) and play a while, paint a penguin, walk up and down escalators, pray, meditate, memorize some beautiful poetry. Listen to one of Beethoven's later quartets, take a nap, and then reenter the struggle with a fresh frame of mind, always conscious of evil but never giving in to hating the haters, since if we do so we simply become one of them. And surely, he would put a crown [over] our heads, hoping against hope that eventually we would grow to the point that we would be capable of wearing that crown together with others living together under a friendly sky.

ABBREVIATIONS

AHH	Peter Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021.
HTC	Howard Thurman Center
JATD	Howard Thurman. *Jesus and the Disinherited.* Boston: Beacon, 1996 [1949].
PHWT	Walter Earl Fluker, ed. *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*. 5 vols. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009–2019.
WHAH	Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.

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