



Howard Thurman: Civil Rights Era Sage

Bentley deBardelaben-Phillips
Executive Associate, JLCM

“There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born.” ~Howard Thurman, “The Sound of the Genuine”

The powerful opening words of the Rev. Dr. Howard Washington Thurman’s 1980 Spelman College commencement address, cited above, have been stirring within me for a few weeks. Their grasp upon my soul has been sobering and intimidating—a powerful spiritual gift verbally handed to the Spelman women in attendance, now extended to me ... to all of humanity.

Having read a few of Thurman’s writings while in seminary, I was familiar with his biblical insight and theological genius. Yet after hearing a recording of his commencement address, I understood better his influence on many leaders of the civil rights era, black and white alike, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited*, published in 1949, became seminal reading for many leaders as they were at the vanguard of essential change in America’s history, the birth of civil rights movement. Christian Collins Winn wrote in *Christianity Today*, June 11, 2020, “In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman insists that to fight and struggle against oppressive powers and principalities requires a spiritual reservoir that can only be filled through the practice of spiritual disciplines like silence, contemplation, meditation, and prayer.”

More than seventy years later, its significance has not diminished. While listening to Thurman’s carefully crafted commencement speech, given more than seventy years after *Jesus and the Disinherited*, I could hear his earlier work as part of the speech’s foundation.

In the address to Spelman graduates, he continued: “The sound of the genuine is flowing through you. Don’t be deceived and thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams, your ambitions, so that you don’t hear the sound of the genuine in you, because that is the only true guide that you will ever have, and if you don’t have that you don’t have a thing.” The practice of spiritual disciplines, cited in Winn’s quotation above, undergird the speech.

Let us not forget that in 1980 America was still grappling with the ever-growing demands from women, blacks, and gays, to give equal rights to them. Sadly, we are still seeking equity and inclusion—a clarion call that is just.

As we forge ahead in the long fight for equity., Thurman’s spiritual tools can be of significant value, no matter one’s religious proclivity. His conclusion in the address makes this clear, “Now if I hear the sound of the genuine in me, and if you hear the sound of the genuine in you, it is possible for me to go down in me and come up in you. So that when I look at myself through your eyes having made that pilgrimage, I see in me what you see in me and the wall that separates and divides will disappear and we will become one because the sound of the genuine makes the same music.”

As we draw closer to Black History Month, the acts of (s) heroes, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Ruby Bridges, may be retold. Rightfully so! We are encouraged and strengthened by their acts of courage and sacrifice. Theirs are the shoulders upon which we stand. Still, there is also spiritual work for us to do.

While we may not yet be able to fully live into Thurman’s 1980 invitation to the class of graduating young women, we are moving in that direction. During Black History Month, and beyond, it is my hope that we revisit the works of Howard Thurman. The spiritual warfare we are up against—and the wellbeing of future generations—mandates such deep theological work as Thurman sought to provoke.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bentley deBardelaben-Phillips is Executive Associate and Team Leader of the Education for Faithful Action Plus (EFA+) Team in Justice and Local Church Ministries for the United Church of Christ.

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