

Sermon
January 16, 2022

As we are coming up on the day celebrating the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I have been reflecting on the images of the white people in the crowd counter protesting his actions and those of other civil rights activists of his time. As I look at the photos of people jeering him and his fellow activists, and I look at archival photos of bitter and angry faces yelling at the black children trying to integrate schools, I wonder what I might have done? I think many of us would like to think we would have been the people throughout history who fought the good fight and stood up for racial justice in defiance of the norms of the day, and I am sure many of you did.

However, I also try to reckon with an understanding of myself that, while I might not have been one of the angry faces in the crowd, I might have been one of the silent ones or one of the people who simply didn't show up. I might have worried about the impact it would have had on me, my job, or my family, and turned away.

That is a hard truth to face, but I also think it is important truth to examine. We cannot work for racial justice without look headlong into our own

internal fears and misapprehensions, or acknowledging the ways we thought we were helping but actually were falling short.

In my most recent job before coming here, I had a colleague who was biracial and who had no compunction with telling me when I had misstepped or said something offensive to him. I would often get all up in my back about it, as people like to say, and if you were driving past the Capitol complex in Oklahoma City, you probably would have seen me storming around the campus walking up and down the sidewalk sputtering like Donald Duck had just had water poured all over him. But then, after I had a chance to calm down, and examine what I said, and it's impact on my colleague. I realized he was right. I am so grateful for this friend as he was the only person who was willing to deliver an important wake-up call to me. I had been working as a civil rights attorney or investigator for over ten years, and I am embarrassed to say that all too often I had considered myself "one of the good ones." But I'm not, and it's likely there is no such thing as one of "the good ones." White supremacy culture, and its elevation of the values, preferences, and experiences of white people above all others¹, has been ingrained in me, and, because of that, I still

¹ <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/white-supremacy-culture-resources>

make mistakes all the time. And while it hurts to have someone point it out to me, I have now come to appreciate my growing edges as was referenced in the reading by Rev. Thurman that Jill read earlier. And while I could look at those growing edges as something to feel sad or overwhelmed by, instead, I am choosing to view them as a source of hope as Thurman says in the passage. He says our growing edges are, “the basis of hope in moments of despair” and he tells us to “Look well to the growing edge!” as though these moments of growth, while sometimes painful, are also something to be celebrated. They are a moment of victory over our usual impulses to maintain the status quo, and important keys into the valuable internal work we still need to do.

The works of Reverend Howard Thurman and his work inspire me to think deeper about the connection between spirituality and a passion for social justice. His work has pointed me to the importance of being reflective and examining ourselves and our internal motivations before necessarily rushing headlong into advocacy work. But, he also speaks to the importance of building community with people different from yourself and that the internal work you do *must* be followed by working toward the

liberation of marginalized communities. The internal work alone is not enough nor is the advocacy piece. They must go hand in hand.

Reverend Thurman spent his life approaching Jesus' teachings from the perspective of, as he calls them, people "with their backs against the wall" and he inspired generations of activists for civil rights in the process.

Thurman is often referred to as the minister to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's & 60's, and it is Thurman's trip to visit Mahatma Gandhi in India in 1935 that is often viewed as a "key moment in the translation of the Indian nonviolent struggle for independence to the African American struggle for freedom."

In a biography of Rev. Thurman,² Paul Harvey recounts a story in which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was stabbed and almost killed at one of his book signings in 1958. Rev. Thurman visited Dr. King in the hospital and encouraged him, as he encouraged many people, to look at this as an opportunity to take a brief step away from the everyday, focus on his life and meditate on its purpose, and then move forward. This was at the core of Thurman's teachings – to take time to contemplate your inner life so that you may commune with God and later act with purpose. Rev.

² *Howard Thurman & The Disinherited: A Religious Biography*

Thurman recognized people have a duty to step back into life, pursue community, and take responsibility for the nature of the social order.

At his core, Rev. Thurman was a mystic, author Luther Smith notes³, that for Thurman's brand of "prophetic mysticism" the formation of community is done through a "liberation process that includes inner freedom." Smith says, "Inward liberation is not only a prerequisite for social transformation, it preserves the revolutionary sense of purpose after social transformation." In other words, one's inward liberation keeps the struggle itself from being confused with the ultimate objective. The means are not the same thing as the ends. Therefore, we have to do the important internal work of determining what those ends should be so that we do not lose sight of them in the midst of social change—especially when the social change we have garnered may not ultimately be enough.

Thurman says that during our quest for social justice, we must ensure that, "one's vision of society never conforms to some external pattern, but is

³ Smith, Jr., Luther E. *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*, 2007, as excerpted in Rankow, Liza J. 2020. "Mysticism and Social Action: The Ethical Demands of Oneness." In *Anchored in the Current: Discovering Howard Thurman as Educator, Activist, Guide, and Prophet*, edited by Gregory C. Ellison II, 55-70. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

‘modeled and shaped in accordance to the innermost transformation that is going on in [a person’s] spirit.’”

Rev. Thurman asserted that those of us who are engaged in seeking acts of liberation must examine our motivations and determine if the relationship between our own spiritual journeys are related to the changes we are seeking within our communities. We have to do the internal work of liberation so that we are not swayed by external notions of what liberation for people with marginalized identities should be, but that our search for social justice reflects the internal transformation we have experienced.

In his book, *Ethical Leadership*,⁴ Thurman scholar Walter Fluker writes, “If one is unable to name for oneself the defining values of one’s own life, then he or she will not be able to authentically speak about change anywhere else.” Consequently, we are called by Rev. Thurman to examine our internal values with integrity and ensure the actions we take are based upon that foundational piece both spiritually and morally.

As many of us spend tomorrow celebrating the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I would challenge us all to celebrate his legacy by examining our

⁴ *Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility, and Community* by Walter Earl Fluker

values and holding ourselves accountable for instances in which we did not live into those values. Let us look not just to his famous “I Have a Dream” speech but also remember and reflect upon his disappointment in “white moderates” as depicted in the *Letter From Birmingham Jail* Dr. King wrote in August of 1963 that he was becoming more and more disappointed in the white moderate and that they were more of a stumbling block toward freedom than the Ku Klux Klan. He says,

...the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time...

How many of us have said in the past few years, “I can’t agree with their methods of direct action?” when speaking of the Black Lives Matter movement? Or have felt the people of color within our own faith advocating for the 8th Principal,⁵ a Principal that articulates our faith’s commitment to dismantling white supremacy, or who speak out about how unwelcome they have felt in UU spaces are going too far or that it is not the right time? How many of us have thought people of color or other people with marginalized identities are too loud or too angry when they are advocating for their own

⁵ <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org/>

liberation? And how many of us have become angry or defensive when confronted with our own complicity with shoring up white supremacy culture or when we have been told what we said is offensive or hurtful?

If we want to truly live into our own values and act with integrity, it is important that we look with courage and honesty to our growing edges, but then once we have discovered the center of our own internal liberation, it's even more important that we do not stop there.

Rev. Thurman said, "There is no alternative to the insistence that we cannot escape from personal responsibility for the social order in which we live. We are a part of the society in which we function."⁶ What is your personal responsibility with respect to racial justice? Can you be honest with yourself about what that means for your life and if you have lived up to the values you hold? This weekend let's take the time to ask ourselves: Are we still projecting that it is those people in another part of the country or on another part of the political spectrum who are the problem or are we doing the hard yet important work of examining your own integrity and values and grappling with our growing edges?

⁶ Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*

