

Mark 5: 21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" ' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

SERMON

P. 816 in the pew bible. Where do you find yourself? Who do you relate to? Jairus, the crowd, the unnamed woman, one of the disciples, the mourners at Jairus' home, his wife, his daughter? Take a moment and notice if you find yourself in any of these characters today.

I want to introduce you to Howard Thurman - writer, theologian, pastor and mystic - often called the pastor to the leaders of the civil rights movement. He's someone who had a profound impact on American theology in the 20th century.

Probably his most famous book is *Jesus and the Disinherited*¹, written in 1946 - during the Post WWII years - when African-Americans were beginning to stand up against the power of Jim Crow - the legalized and terrorizing system of segregation, and being met with dehumanizing violence.

He wrote to offer an 'unchained life' for all 'who stand with their backs against the wall - the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed'.

He wanted to give everyone, no matter their circumstance, a way to connect and find freedom through and with Jesus. He portrayed a Jesus who the Blacks in America could identify with - one who lived as they did.

Thurman, born in 1899 in Daytona Beach, FL, knew what it was to stand with your back against the wall. In his early life he was mostly cared for by his maternal grandmother who had come through slavery, as she put it, 'leaning on the Lord'.

She, a formerly enslaved woman, taught him to never doubt the teachings of Jesus, 'that poor Jew' of Nazareth.

In the segregated school system he attended, local schools for Blacks only went through the 8th grade. His family scraped together the money to send him to high school in Jacksonville, a train ride away.

From there, in 1919, he moved to Atlanta to attend Morehouse College, graduating as valedictorian both from Morehouse and then from the nearly all white Rochester theological Seminary in upstate NY.

Early in his career as a pastor and professor, Thurman spent a semester studying with Rufus Jones, a well known Quaker mystic and leader of the pacifist Interracial Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Thurman later described that time as 'the watershed event of his life.'²

In 1935 Thurman, his wife Sue, and another African-American couple embarked on a 6 month "Pilgrimage of Friendship" to India, Burma and Ceylon, interpreting the American Black experience and relating it to their Christian faith. The highlight of that trip for Thurman was meeting Gandhi. Upon returning to the States, Thurman traveled across the country speaking about the relevance of

¹ Thurman, Howard. 1946. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Beacon Press, Boston.

² [This Far by Faith . Howard Thurman | PBS](#)

nonviolent resistance as a means for addressing racial injustices.³ This was back in 1936 - he was bringing this way of living out the Christian faith to America.

Thurman's career was spent teaching and leading at various educational institutions - Morehouse College, Howard University and eventually serving as dean of the chapel at Boston University. Sandwiched in between those university settings, he spent several years helping to establish The Fellowship Church, in San Francisco - the first major interracial, interdenominational church in the United States. It was during those years in San Francisco that he wrote *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

In it, Thurman describes how those with their backs against the wall are tempted to give in to fear and deception, and he argues that Jesus of Nazareth lived in that same kind of situation.

He writes that Jesus came for those with their backs against the wall, reminding the reader that Jesus was a Jew, a poor Jew, living under occupation of an oppressive government. Jesus, too, lived with his back against the wall. He lived in a time when rebellion was crushed by Rome, the occupier, with violence.

Jesus knew the sufferings of the dispossessed, the poor - he lived it. And he offered a different way - a way of freedom.

In our scripture passage today both Jairus and this unnamed woman had their backs against the wall. One a leader with political and social clout, the other an outcast with a chronic illness. They both come to him with a specific ask - healing. Jairus, a man of standing, a person with a title, approaches from the front, falling at his feet, begging for Jesus to come and simply touch his daughter to make her well again. The unnamed woman, seeking to remain anonymous, approaches from the back, believing that if she can just touch his cloak, she will be made well. Just a touch - that's all either of them asks from Jesus.

With their backs against the wall, they come - two different segments of the society - desperate for their lives to be different. Those two - like us at times - were tempted to give in to fear; to give into deception.

Jairus' fear is there for all to see - dropping to the ground in front of Jesus, begging him again and again to come, save his daughter. Barely on the way to his house, Jairus receives the news that his daughter is dead. 'why trouble the teacher any further?' he's asked. And yet they continue - Jesus, Jairus and only a select few - Peter, James, and James' brother, John. They squeeze their way past those laughing at them, ridiculing the hope Jairus is still clinging to. Those standing on the doorstep of his house seem to ask 'Why bother, what do you think you're doing? Those questions can bring any of us down, deceive us into believing we're not worth the trouble; that it's too late, all hope is lost.

This unnamed woman had been living for over a decade - maybe her entire life - with her back against the wall. Fear, desperation, her constant companions. Even when healed, made whole by that slight touch, she trembles with fear when found out.

³ Thurman, Howard. 2006. *Essential Writings of Howard Thurman*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.

In this book, written when he was pastoring a congregation that was more than half White, Thurman says that to know the God who joins with the oppressed, with those whose backs are against the wall, to know this God, is to find freedom. Inner freedom. And that when we taste that inner freedom, we have the ability to deal with the realities of our life so as not to be overcome by them.

Thurman presented the basic goal of Jesus' life as helping the disinherited, those who struggle to find their place in this world, to help the poor in spirit change from within so they would be empowered to survive in the face of oppression. A love rooted in the "deep river of faith," wrote Thurman, will help the oppressed overcome persecution.⁴

Inner work gives us the fortitude, the grounding, to do the outer work.

In our VOC today, Joyce spoke of ways her mom helped her overcome fear - by grounding herself in scripture, by finding freedom in knowing she is not alone, even when she felt like her back was against the wall. Her mother reminded her - Jesus was with her.

For Thurman this inner work comes in many shapes and forms - it's a time of readying oneself, a time of waiting, of opening wide the doors of one's being to the movement of the Spirit, wherever that may happen for you.

Prayer, in all its many forms, allows love to be made manifest.

Central to Thurman's understanding of the teachings of Jesus is love of the enemy.

This love requires us to meet the other where she is, and treat her as if she, too, belongs.

We see that in action in our scripture this morning. Jesus met each person where they were - treating them as if they belonged. He took Jairus' request seriously; he sought out the woman, blessing her publicly; he heard the naysayers in the crowd and said to the one who needed to hear it: 'Do not fear, only believe' and kept walking.

In another one of his writings, Thurman tells a story of when he was very young, and his grandmother, sensing the constant threat under which he was living, told him about the message of one of the slave ministers on her plantation. Whenever he preached, the focal point of his message was the same: "you are not slaves; you are not condemned to forever do your master's will - no, no, no, you are God's children". She told him that every time those words were spoken, a warm glow crept through the very being of the slaves. The sense of being permanently grounded in God gave to the people of that time a way to experience themselves as human beings.⁵

Beloved. Belonging.

⁴ [This Far by Faith . Howard Thurman | PBS](#)

⁵ Thurman, Howard. 2006. *Essential Writings of Howard Thurman*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.

You are God's child - Jesus offered this belonging to the unnamed woman.
You are beloved - Jesus continued on to Jairus' home to finish the work of healing.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you one with your back against the wall? Are you part of the crowd - curious but not fully engaged? One of the disciples - dedicated - maybe on a mission - sure you know where Jesus ought to be putting his priorities? One of the folks mourning at Jairus' house - unable to see the possibility of something new about to happen?

There's no right or wrong place to find yourself. At some point in time we are all these parts, and all of us will some day experience having our back against the wall.

Thurman counsels us to prepare. To ready oneself through spiritual disciplines. And to remember - you're beloved. You belong to the God who cares for us all. With that inner freedom, the outer work of loving and living fully is here.