

"Righteousness and the Wisdom of God"

“Righteousness and the Wisdom of God”

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Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Second Sunday in Black History Month

February 8, 2026

Texts:

1 Corinthians 2:1–8

Matthew 5:13–20

Theological Lens:

Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*

I. Introduction: Two Kinds of Wisdom

- After worship last week, we were blessed with the presence of Maya Angelou, who died almost sixteen years ago. She was brought into our midst through her thoughts and words, preserved in her poetry and presented by the actress, Debra Rose. We are all in the debt of Cynthia Lehman and others who worked to bring Ms. Rose to us as part of our celebration of Black History Month. That celebration continues after worship today with story telling and drumming, both in Fellowship Hall. Everyone is welcome.
- If any of you have read Angelou's first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, you are familiar with the story of Angelou's abuse as a child and the murder of her attacker, which rendered her mute for the next five years of her young life. As children often do, Angelou connected her acts – specifically, her

revealing what her attacker had done to her – with the acts of adults around her, which brought about her attacker’s death. In her child’s logic, her speaking had caused the man’s death. And so, fearful that her speaking might bring harm to others, she stopped speaking.

- One can see the reasoning, one can understand why a child might think as Angelou did, and one can also see the flaw in the reasoning. There was indeed a connection between the man’s murder and Angelou’s speaking of what he had done to her, but that connection was not causal; it was the man’s act and not the child’s that brought about the man’s death.
- The confusion, understandable as it is, brought to my mind last week Paul’s words from elsewhere in this letter of his to Corinth, “When I was a child, I talked

like a child, I thought like a child, and I reasoned like a child” (1 Cor. 13:11). There is a talking, a thinking, a reasoning, and a feeling appropriate to a child’s stage in life. “But when I grew up,” Paul continued, “I put behind me the ways of childhood.”

- That’s the Paul whose voice comes to us in this morning’s reading, a voice that confesses: *“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”*
- It’s rhetorical exaggeration, of course – Paul had to know a few things among the Corinthian Christians or his visit there would have been pretty pointless – but the exaggeration is to draw the contrast between **human wisdom** (rhetoric, status, domination) and **God’s wisdom** (revealed in vulnerability and self-giving love).

- It is the latter – God’s wisdom – that shapes the lives of those referenced in the words of Howard Thurman that I’ve used as this morning’s centering words:
“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”
- That’s obvious nonsense to minds trapped in rank literalism. People are already alive – what does Thurman mean by saying that the world needs people who have come alive? Is the world just full of zombies, the walking dead?
- Spiritually speaking, yes, the world is full of zombies. Or, if you prefer language less shaped by horror films, the world is full of people sleepwalking through history. The world is full of people whose only life is the physical world at their fingertips that shapes them

and determines their reality. You're born, you go off to first grade, you play field hockey if you go to that kind of school, you date, you experiment with sex and drugs, you go to college – maybe – you get a job, you get a spouse, you get a house, you get kids to put in the house with the spouse, you work for thirty years, you get old and then you die. That's life, literally speaking.

- And for a few, there comes a moment – may more than once – when the question forces itself through the miasma of all of that literal daily living: *Is this all there is?*
- Howard Thurman's insight, that Jesus speaks *first and most clearly* to those “with their backs against the wall”—the poor, the disinherited, the despised – is fundamentally an insight about *spirituality* and not

materiality. Jesus did not come to raise the poor into the middle class. Jesus came, in his own words, “that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

- That’s what it means to come alive. That’s what Thurman was talking about in the centering words. The life and teachings of Jesus – including his death to this life and resurrection to new life – are meant to bring to life the spiritually dead – good people just like us who remain trapped inside systems of our own making which we are unwilling to change.
- Before we turn to the wisdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ, let me tell you a bit more of the story of Howard Thurman, who learned divine wisdom from the **underside of history**.
- Howard Thurman was born in 1899 in Daytona, Florida, the grandson of an enslaved woman. His

grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, could not read—but she could remember. She remembered the scriptures read aloud to enslaved people, and she remembered which parts of the Bible were used to justify their suffering. When she asked her grandson to read the Bible aloud to her, Thurman says, “she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians.”

- We all know why. It was Paul, the Roman citizen as well as the oppressed Jew, who told slaves to be obedient to their masters; and it was Paul, an oppressed person with an oppressor’s privileges, who said that all government is ordained of God. Nancy

Ambrose knew first-hand the brutality and cruelty that could flow from texts like those held in the wrong hands, and she told her grandson that the religion of Jesus had to mean something different for people whose backs were against the wall. That early testimony shaped Thurman's entire life.

- Howard Thurman became one of the most important theologians and spiritual teachers of the twentieth century, though he never sought the spotlight of political leadership. Instead, he pursued the deeper wisdom beneath the noise of power. He was a Baptist minister, a mystic, a scholar, a teacher, and an early environmentalist. He served as dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University, mentored a generation of Black leaders—including Martin Luther King Jr.—and later became the first Black dean of a major

American university chapel, Marsh Chapel at Boston University.

- Yet Thurman's significance lies not in his résumé but in his searching question: *What does the gospel sound like to those who live under constant threat?* In ***Jesus and the Disinherited***, Thurman insisted that Jesus was not a figure of domination but a poor Jew living under Roman occupation. Jesus, Thurman argued, speaks first to the disinherited—to those rendered invisible, disposable, or expendable by the world's systems of power.
- This is where Thurman helps us hear the wisdom of God that Paul describes in First Corinthians—a wisdom not recognized by the rulers of this age, a wisdom hidden from those who equate power with truth. Thurman understood that God's righteousness

is not the logic of empire, respectability, or brute force. God's wisdom is a wisdom

- **formed in suffering,**
 - **disciplined by love,**
 - **and expressed through nonviolent resistance to evil.**
- For Thurman, as for Paul, righteousness was not moral superiority; it was spiritual integrity. Wisdom was not cleverness; it was faithfulness under pressure. He believed that hatred corrodes the soul of the oppressed before it ever touches the oppressor, and that fear—if left unchecked—becomes the enemy within. In this way, Thurman called people not merely to resist injustice, but to refuse the internalization of injustice's lies.

- During Black History Month, we often remember the visible victories of the movement. Thurman reminds us of the invisible work that makes those victories possible: the formation of the soul. He teaches us that without spiritual grounding, even righteous causes can lose their way. **And without divine wisdom, human power will always crucify what it cannot control.**
- As we listen today for God's word, Howard Thurman stands with us—not as a substitute for scripture, but as a faithful interpreter of it. He helps us see that the wisdom of God is not loud, not coercive, and not aligned with the rulers of this age—but it is strong enough to sustain those who choose righteousness when the cost is high.

- And challenging systems always comes with a high cost. It will not do to tweak a system that rewards a few with obscene wealth and power while keeping many, many others struggling simply to survive. You can put lipstick on a pig, the saying goes, but it's still a pig. Or, if you prefer to smarten that sentiment up a bit, hear the words of Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, who says that the answer to poverty is not wealth; the answer to poverty is justice.
- We in the church have been told to stay in the church and mind our own business, and our system rewards us for doing so. How? By using the power of taxation to incentivize charity.
- But charity—even so great an act of charity as eliminating the educational debt of a Black woman from Cleveland Heights—is not going to fix our broken

system. Yes, God be praised that Forest Hill Church has taken that step, but changing one person's life is not going to change the system of not being able to afford higher education without going into educational debt that you can never earn your way out of.

- When Jesus told his followers, at the end of our reading from Matthew, that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees, he was not telling them to work harder at being good. He was telling them, rather, to change what being good meant and means. Being good, for Jesus, did not mean staying within the system of the do's and don't's of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees; it meant going down to the root – *radix*, in Latin, which made Jesus a radical – going down to the root of their Mosaic-prophetic system and rebuilding it from the root up.

- And how do you do that? By building according to the blueprint Jesus called the realm of God. Not the realm of Caesar. Not the realm that the Zealots and the Hasmonaeans and the Sicarii and all the other violent revolt-leaders wanted to put in place of violent Rome. And not the system of the scribes and the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Essenes of keeping one's pious head down and not disturbing Caesar's peace.
- No, the new system, the new world order that Jesus preached was neither the flame-throwing of the violent revolutionaries nor the accommodationism of the religious establishment, but rather the radical righteousness of those twin commands on which his entire system hung: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all

your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.

- And so, the framing question for our thoughts this morning and for our lives out there is: *What does righteousness look like when wisdom is measured not by power, but by love?*

II. The Hidden Wisdom of God: Power Revealed in Weakness (1 Corinthians 2:1–8)

- God's wisdom is **hidden** because it does not align with systems of domination, intimidation, and control – the systems of this world, in other words.
- The irony of verse 8: *“None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”*

- Thurman comments on this by saying that the cross unmasks the moral bankruptcy of oppressive power.
 - Hatred, fear, and deception are exposed as ultimately self-defeating, whether they are practiced by the oppressors or by the oppressed.
- God's righteousness is never proved by fighting fire with fire; "Darkness cannot drive out darkness," King said, "only light can do that," an insight that came from King's spiritual foundation in the Black church, a church where he would have heard Jesus' words to his followers, again and again: "You are the light of the world."
- In God's realm – in that system of divine logic – righteousness does not come through conquest but by faithfulness especially in the face of suffering.

- Thurman: Jesus gives dignity and vocation to those society renders invisible.
 - Disinherited people are not called to escape the world, but to **transform it**.
- The righteousness of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves is not private virtue but public witness.
- Thurman: Jesus calls oppressed people away from hatred and fear—not because oppression is acceptable, but because hatred corrodes the soul.
- True righteousness resists injustice **without becoming what it opposes**.

III. Conclusion: Living and Leaning into God's Wisdom

- God's wisdom, where the church is called to live, still confounds the world:
 - Strength shown in vulnerability.

- Victory revealed through the empty cross and the empty tomb.
- The church is called to be:
 - Salt that preserves human dignity.
 - Light that exposes injustice.
 - A community shaped by the wisdom of God, not the fear of what may come.
- “The wisdom of God does not make us respectable. It makes us faithful—to God and to our neighbors wherever they are, wherever they came from, and however they got here—and that is righteousness enough.”