

3 Easter
May 1, 2022

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The late Howard Thurman was the dean of the chapel at Howard University in Washington, D.C, and later at Boston University. He was a mystic, philosopher, theologian, educator, civil rights leader, and author. In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he tells the story about his grandmother, a former slave who, because she could not read, made him read the Bible to her in the evenings. He was free to choose any portion of the Bible, except for Paul's epistles.

One day he timidly asked his grandmother why she disapproved of Paul's writings. She told him that for years the overseer on her slave master's plantation would read to the slaves how Paul enjoined slaves to be obedient to their master, and she decided that if she lived to be freed from slavery she would never again read or have read in her hearing anything from Paul. For her the overwhelming evidence from the Gospels, the first five books of the Torah, and the Psalms was that it was God's compassionate desire that all people be free. God was a God of love, Thurman's grandmother insisted, and love does not enslave the beloved ... rather, love frees the enslaved to be loved and to love.

In today's first reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles we heard the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Paul ... known before his conversion as Saul ... was a Pharisaic Jew who persecuted the followers of the new Jesus movement. Then his dramatic conversion. Afterwards, Paul was, and would become, the greatest evangelist for Jesus. Yet, even then, Paul told slaves to be obedient to their masters.

The Church ... that is, the institution of the Christian faith ... the Church has used Paul's words to justify slavery. The Church has used Paul's words to oppress women. And some expressions of the Christian faith continue to use Paul's words to oppress people who love people of their same gender. Legal slavery is gone in most of the world ... although echoes of past slavery in this country alone are still bouncing off the walls of our society. In some expressions of the greater Christian Church women are still working for gender equality. Yet, there is progress. In the Episcopal Church at least ... women are being ordained as deacons, priests, and bishops ... and Katherine Jefferts Schori served as our Presiding Bishop. However, the Church is still lagging on the issue of the inclusion of people who happen to love others of their same gender ... and they use Paul's words as their justification ... at least in part.

Episcopalians are taught that the Authority of the Church ... that is the way the Church decides major issues ... is based upon three things in equal proportion. The image of a three legged stool is often invoked. If the legs aren't the same length the stool does not function very well. Anyhow, the three legs of the stool for the Episcopal Church are Holy Scripture, Tradition, and

Human Reasoning. And, what is meant by Tradition is the way the Church has acted over its two-thousand-year history.

One problem with this three legged stool approach is that the Bible often contradicts itself, so people can be rather selective in choosing parts of the Bible to defend a particular position. Another problem is that throughout the Church's history there have been times when the Church has been flat-out wrong ... the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Doctrine of Discovery which allowed the killing of native people while conquering the New World. And finally, I think we all know that Human Reasoning is not infallible. We have only to look at the missteps we have made in our own personal lives to know that Human Reasoning can be flawed.

So what might the conversion of Saul/Paul on the Damascus Road tell us about all this ... it is, after all, included in our Holy Scriptures and therefore is part of the Church's Authority. Simply put, Paul had an encounter with Jesus.

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. (Acts 9:3-7)

Saul had been a devout Jew. He thought that what he was doing was the "right" thing to do. We may think of the pre-conversion Paul ... Saul ... as being evil. But he was only following his Holy Scriptures and his Tradition in protection of the way he ... with Human Reasoning ... understood his faith.

However, there was another Jew who understood that same faith in a different way. His name was Jesus. Saul's encounter with Jesus changed him. I believe that the same can and will happen to the Church ... including the Episcopal Church ... in due time.

This is where Paul's story intersects with the one we heard read from John's gospel. Jesus told Simon Peter to throw the net out on the other side of the boat ... the other side. Metaphorically, Jesus was telling Simon Peter to stop doing the usual and customary, and try something new. Give up the normal way you do things ... the normal way you look at things ... and try a new and different approach ... you just might find abundance.

Saul, hearing the words of Jesus on the road to Damascus was not that much different from Simon Peter hearing the words from Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. Essentially, the old way of doing things and seeing things may seem safe and secure, but it isn't working. Try something new and different. To Simon Peter ... try the other side of the boat. To Saul ... try taking seriously what Jesus took seriously.

Paul, while he was Saul and a Pharisee, was very concerned with who was in and who was out ... who was ritually clean and acceptable or, on the other hand, who was ritually unclean and therefore unacceptable. But he had an encounter with Jesus, and the fact is that the life of Jesus revealed the heart of God. Pharisees like Saul criticized Jesus saying, "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." And yet Saul was the recipient of radical hospitality in this divine welcome ... this encounter with Jesus ... this unconditional love shown to one who was persecuting those who were taking seriously what Jesus took seriously.

Remember, the "sinners" that Jesus welcomed in radical hospitality were those who were ritually unclean in his world. The tax collector who handled money with the Emperor's image on it ... an idol. The prostitute who was ritually unclean because of the laws dealing with feminine hygiene. The persons with skin sores because of the prohibition against open wounds. The blind, or deaf, or lame because they must be sinners otherwise God would not have let this happen to them. However, Jesus ate with them ... all of them. He accepted them in radical hospitality ... that is what Jesus took seriously.

People felt safe with Jesus. He exuded compassion. Jesus welcomed all the people we ignore and despise ... the sexually suspicious ... the religiously impure ... the ethnic outsiders ... the rich tax collectors ... the chronically sick and the mentally deranged ... women, widows and children. Jesus welcomed all of them. And they all felt safe with Jesus ... they knew his compassion.

The only people who didn't feel safe with Jesus were the religious experts who appointed themselves as gatekeepers of God's love. And they had good reasons to feel unsafe. When Jesus welcomed the unwelcome ... when he accepted the unacceptable without any preconditions ... he angered the religious experts. Whether then or now, there's a bitter irony in how the simple act of offering a welcome and accepting a person can anger some people.

How is it that some churches today ... Episcopal churches, Catholic churches, Presbyterian churches, Baptist churches, Lutheran churches, and many more ... how is it that some churches today, in the name of this same Jesus, refuse to share the holy meal with those deemed by them to be unacceptable? If Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners ... those who were "unclean" by the standards of the religious purity system of the day ... then surely those gathered in his name ... who claim to take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... can and should share the meal prepared in his name with all who come to the table.

Maybe it is time to throw the net out on the other side of the boat.

Throughout his writings Paul uses himself as an example of God's "unlimited patience." Throughout the New Testament, Paul describes himself as a former religious zealot who tried to exterminate the early Christian movement. In the epistle to Timothy, as an old man, Paul was still haunted by his past. He describes himself as "formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor."

But God welcomed Paul. And his conversion moved him from violent, hostile aggression to indiscriminate love and hospitality. You don't need to do anything to receive God's welcome, because there's nothing to do. God welcomes us just like we are ... and right where we are.

At times the Church today still uses Paul's words to justify marginalizing those they consider "sinners." Perhaps instead of arguing with them we need to demonstrate the same radical hospitality ... the same unconditional love ... that was shown to Paul. Maybe ... just maybe ... that kind of encounter with Jesus ... and taking seriously what Jesus took seriously ... might make a difference. Maybe throwing the net out on the other side of the boat will yield the abundance that Simon Peter found in his nets.

The only thing to do is to accept that we are accepted. In the words of Paul Tillich, "You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you don't know... Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens, we experience grace."

I can sympathize with Howard Thurman's grandmother. She lived a life of slavery justified by the same Holy Scripture she adored. Paul's writings, as inspirational as they are, can be used in ways that limit people's lives. That was the case with slavery. That still is the case with regard to the role of women in many expressions of the Christian Church. And it is still the case in how we include ... or don't include ... people who love others of their same gender ... our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

Saul encountered Jesus and it transformed his life ... and it transformed his faith. He did not see Jesus. But he heard his voice. Saul received an unconditional welcome ... radical hospitality. If it can happen for him, then it can happen for us, and it can happen for the Church as well.

Remember that you are a blessed child of God. You were born into blessing to be a blessing. You were born in goodness ... for goodness. The only thing to do is to accept that we are accepted. Remember the words of Paul Tillich, "You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you don't know ... simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens, you will experience grace."

Amen.