

These weekly discussion guides aim to summarize major themes of the book, to offer guidance for small group discussion in the mode of “wondering together,” and suggest companion scriptures and resources for further study and reflection. —Michelle Harrington and John McLees

Thematic Summary & Reflections

I. This compact book has one controlling question, and it is this: “*What does the religion of Jesus have to offer those who stand, at a moment in history, with their backs against the wall?*”

Within a few centuries of its inception, the faith that began with Jesus—a poor Jew under political domination—became allied with political power and conquest. Some might call it the “Constantinian compromise,” but Thurman asserts that it is a matter of tremendous significance that “a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless people” (p. 2).

Thurman illuminates powerful similarities between the plight of Jesus and the experiences of African Americans who have not enjoyed the full rights and protections of citizenship; still, the phrase “at a moment in history” acknowledges that those who stand with their backs against the wall at any particular moment—those whose lot is “despair without consolation,” those who are hounded by fear, deception, and hate—are not necessarily the same groups and individuals throughout history.¹ We must not lose sight of these genuine questions—*what does the religion of Jesus offer to the disinherited, dispossessed, and underprivileged? What does our religion say to them, and offer to meet their needs?* And yet, as we read, we cannot help but “be read” by the text and invited to consider the relationship between the faith founded by Jesus and its expression in institutional Christianity (“church”) today. As Vincent Harding observes in the forward, “*wall-bruised people find no space for their presence in the places where the official followers [of Jesus] are comfortably at worship*” (xiv).²

Thurman asks his readers to consider the conditions under which survival is possible for “those who live with their backs against the wall.” We can consider the kinds of life strategies, familial and social networks that make physical survival possible for the disinherited, but Thurman is primarily concerned with the postures that allow the underprivileged to preserve a sense of dignity and vitality. With respect to the rulers and controllers of political, social, and economic life, the disinherited may adopt postures of:

¹ The disinherited may also be more ubiquitous than we at first imagine—see p. 3.

² In the U.S., at least, this is perhaps even truer today than when Harding wrote those words in 1996; since then, sociological studies have shown marked declines in church attendance along with steep increases in social isolation among the socioeconomically worst-off. Bessel Van der Kolk’s trauma theory notes that social support and being able to feel safe with other people is “the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma.” The critical factor in social support is “*reciprocity*: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone’s mind and heart” (*The Body Keeps the Score*, 79).

1. Assimilation: Thurman observes that upper class Sadducees assimilated to the Romans (and came to rely on the relative stability and security this arrangement offered them, to the detriment of their fellow Jews).
2. Cultural isolation: You can reduce contact with the “enemy” to a minimum.
3. Resistance—the physical, overt expression of an inner attitude. Zealots exemplified this alternative—and Jesus had one (Simon) among his disciples (15).
4. Jesus’ profound alternative: Preaching and manifesting the conviction that The Kingdom of Heaven is in us—which includes the liberating claim that the dispossessed are in fact children of God and the deep truth that “humility cannot be humiliated” (17).

In Thurman’s estimation, it is a [person’s] reaction to things that determines another’s ability to exercise power over them. The religion of Jesus offers an ego-stabilizing identity—child of God—that empowers disinherited and privileged persons alike to live out of their “inner centers” with a more detached, objective, and appropriately humble estimation of themselves that they might be “unchained” in order to participate in transforming the world into the beloved community/ Kingdom of God.

II. “The task is not becoming more moral but more free...” (xvii).

Thurman suggests that this task (of becoming more free) is the same, both for those who live with their backs against the wall and those for whom the world operates pretty comfortably—persons whose bodies, dignity, and property are secured by the legal order, by custom, etc. This book invites us to pay attention to our “inner centers” where the ultimate questions of life are determined. Thurman indicates that “becoming more free” is a task of *profound integration* exemplified in the spiritual genius of Jesus, emerging from the particular socio-historical location of his life: a poor Jew under the political domination of Rome, without recourse to the dignifying protections of citizenship:

“Here is one who was so conditioned and organized within himself that he became a perfect instrument for the embodiment of a set of ideals—ideals of such dramatic potency that they were capable of changing the calendar, rechanneling the thought of the world, and placing a new sense of the rhythm of life in a weary, nerve-snapped civilization” (6).

III. In a real sense, the Christian life is learning to see clearly by focusing on Jesus

From Aristotle on, ideas about “the good life” have presupposed adequate external conditions (like money and social status). Thurman reminds us that Jesus—a spiritual and ethical genius—was a poor Jew and had neither of these, nor even the basic protections of Roman citizenship that (St.) Paul was able to take for granted (pp. 21-22). Thurman’s books suggests that we must:

- attune ourselves both to the exhausting and *nerve-sapping* trauma of those who live precarious lives of insecurity, especially those whose lives and bodies the state expends with impunity -and-

- tune our capacities of perception to appreciate the virtues: the courage, resilience, love, generosity, struggle for dignity and creativity that those with their backs against the wall manifest in their lives.³

Writing on Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, M. Therese Lysaught and Cory D. Mitchell observe that, apart from Martin Luther King, Jr., “the names and witness of [Black] women and men who powerfully embodied virtue from a theological and lived perspective rarely (never?) cross over into the White space of contemporary virtue theory.”⁴ The religion of Jesus invites us to consider our faith in the light of marginalized persons rather than those at the top of human hierarchies.

Introductory Questions:

1. When you hear the phrase “those with their backs against the wall,” whom do you envision?
2. How does Thurman characterize Jesus? How does his description match the Jesus you know? (Page 5 might be illuminating here).

Wondering Questions:

1. What is it like to sit with the sobering thought that those who most need succor and strength to live in the present with dignity and creativity are not finding it in the church?
2. Thurman suggests that Jesus' poverty was very significant, and perhaps even constitutive for his identity as the Son of God—an important part of his spiritual genius which allied him with the great masses of people who are poor (p. 7). He nevertheless asserts “the thing which makes [Jesus] most significant is not the way in which he resembled his fellows but the way in which he differed from all the rest of them” (p. 9). Start to take inventory of your own place in the world. What might “becoming more free” look like, feel like, be like, for you? What might you want to do with that greater freedom?
3. Who are your role models of genuine freedom and deep integrity? Perhaps someone has struck you as “Jesus-like” from a place of having their back against the wall? Has someone you know worn their privilege lightly, exemplified an irresistible humility, demonstrated profound grace and truth, or loved really well...(?) Who are the “saints” who encourage you on your way?

³ See, for example, Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us About Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength*.

⁴ M. Therese Lysaught and Cory D. Mitchell, “Vicious Trauma: Race, Bodies and the Confounding of Virtue,” *The Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 42:1 (Spring/Summer 2022): 75-100, 84.

Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949)
Week 1: Forward and Chapter 1: Jesus—An Interpretation

4. A thought experiment: Imagine that you are the structural and social architects for the “church for the fellowship of all peoples.” Build it together (imaginatively) in your small group. Would you want to attend—why or why not? What barriers to authentic encounter can you imagine, and which would you like to see broken down?
5. What could the “simple practice of brotherhood [sisterhood] look like for us?

Questions for Critical Thought and Action:

1. Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin”? (How does Thurman think that Jesus deals with these issues?)
2. How are racial minorities in our society in the situation of literally being disinherited? Discuss:
 - The impact of the deprivation of family wealth for generations, up to the present day:
 - from continuing the equivalent of slavery well into the 20th century through share cropping in the South and widespread incarceration for broadly defined petty offenses,
 - from widespread use of restrictive covenants in real estate ownership and red lining and discrimination in real estate lending in most areas of the country throughout the 20th century
 - from the systematic denial of even the most basic education to large portion of the black population prior to the decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* and up to the present day.
3. Focus on Thurman’s statement on page 19 that: “I belong to a generation that finds very little that is meaningful or intelligent in the Church concerning Jesus Christ. It is a generation largely in revolt because of the general impression that Christianity is largely an other-worldly religion, having as its motto: “Take all the world, but give me Jesus””
 - To what extent does his characterization apply to Christianity today? To St. Chrysostom’s?
4. How and to what extent, with as much detail as possible, do racial minorities still face the climate of deep insecurity that Thurman describes on pages 23 and 24?

Companion Scriptures

Proverbs 4:23 Keep your heart with all vigilance for from it flows the springs of life.

Luke 4:16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” ²³ He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ ” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

John 1:46 Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”