January Weekly Reflections

Reflection 1: excerpt from *Jesus and the Disinherited*

by Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman

Many Samaritans from that city believed in [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." – John 4:39-42

In *Jesus and the Disinherited* Thurman lifted up the ways in which Jesus lived out genuine, sympathetic fellowship; like the fellowship we see Jesus have with the Samaritans. Although the Samaritans were hated by Jesus’s own people, he had genuine fellowship with them through presence and conversation. Although Thurman’s book is 70 years old it’s advocacy of genuine, sympathetic fellowship remains relevant. With our increased communication over social media and the rise of cyber bullying Thurman’s writing is relevant in ways he never would have imagined. In the passage below Thurman describes how hatred is so often borne out of the absence of genuine, sympathetic fellowship with our neighbors.

In the first place, hatred often begins in a situation in which there is contact without fellowship, contact that is devoid of any of the primary overtures of warmth and fellow-feeling and genuineness… When we give to the concept a wider application, it is clear that much of modern life is so impersonal that there is always opportunity for the seeds of hatred to grow unmolested. Where there are contacts devoid of genuine fellowship, such contacts stand in immediate candidacy for hatred.

In the second place, contacts without fellowship tend to express themselves in the kind of understanding that is strikingly unsympathetic. There is understanding of a kind, but it is without the healing and reinforcement of personality…Understanding that is not the outgrowth of an essential fellow-feeling is likely to be unsympathetic. Of course, there may be pity in it—even compassion, sometimes—but sympathy, almost never. I can sympathize only when I see myself in another’s place.

In the third place, an unsympathetic understanding tends to express itself in the active functioning of ill will. A few years ago I was going from Chicago to Memphis, Tennessee. I found a seat across from an elderly lady, who took immediate cognizance of my presence. When the conductor came along for the tickets, she said to him, pointing in my direction, “What is *that* doing in this car?” The conductor answered, with a touch of creative humor, “*That* has a ticket.” For the next fifty miles this lady talked for five or ten or fifteen minutes with each person who was seated alone in that coach, setting forth her philosophy of human relationships and the basis of her objection to my presence in the car. I was able to see the atmosphere in the entire car shift from common indifference to active resentment of my presence; an ill will spreading its virus by contagion.

Reflection questions:

* When have you experienced an impersonal interaction leading to conflict, dislike, or even hatred? When have you experienced an interaction of warmth, fellow-feeling, and genuineness leading to forgiveness, friendship, or love?
* When have you seen how sympathy can grow out of putting yourself in another’s place?
* When have you seen ill will spread like a contagion? How can the kind of love that Jesus showed us bring an end to the contagion of ill will and hatred?

Reflection 2: excerpt from “Love, Law, Civil Disobedience”

by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” -Matthew 5:43-46

This passage from Matthew is central to the nonviolent movement for justice in which Martin Luther King Jr. was a foundational part. If we take seriously Jesus’ command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, we can no longer justify harming anyone for any reason. If we want to work to bring justice into our world, we must do so through love. We must rise above hatred and retaliation to proclaim the Gospel. The Rev. Dr. King reflects on our call to love our enemies:

Now when the students talk about love, certainly they are not talking about emotional bosh, they are not talking about merely a sentimental outpouring; they’re talking something much deeper, and I always have to stop and try to define the meaning of love in this context. The Greek language comes to our aid in trying to deal with this. There are three words in the Greek language for love; one word is the word *eros.* This is a beautiful type of love, it is an aesthetic love… It has come to us to be a sort of romantic love, and so in a sense we have read about it and experienced it… The Greek language talks about *philia* which was another level of love. It is an intimate affection between personal friends, it is a reciprocal love. On this level you love because you are loved. It is friendship.

Then the Greek language comes out with another word which is call the *agape*. *Agape* is more than romantic love, *agape* is more than friendship. *Agape* is understanding, creative, redemptive, good will to all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. So that when one rises to love on this level, he loves men not because he likes them, not because their ways appeal to him, but he loves every man because God loves him. And he rises to the point of loving the person who does an evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, “love your enemies.” I’m very happy that he didn’t say like your enemies, because it is pretty difficult to like some people. Like is sentimental, and it is pretty difficult to like someone bombing your home; it is pretty difficult to like somebody threatening your children; it is difficult to like congressmen who spend all of their time trying to defeat civil rights. But Jesus says love them, and love is greater than like. Love is understanding, redemptive, creative, good will for all men. And it is this idea, it is this whole ethic of love which is the idea standing at the basis of the student movement.

Reflection Questions

* Look back on the three types of love. When in life have you experienced these kinds of love?
* How would you describe what it looks like to love your enemies?
* How does MLK’s understanding of love influence the way he led the civil rights movement?

Reflection 3: excerpt from *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the*

*Justice of God* by Kelly Brown Douglas

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating…The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox…They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.” – Isaiah 65:17-18, 25.

It is worth reading all of Isaiah 65:17-25 if you have a Bible or can look it up online. In this passage, Isaiah presents God’s vision for a “new creation.” It is a beautiful vision of a place and time when no one will weep, no one will die before they grow old, no one shall be forced to work all their lives while another person reaps the benefits.

The theologian Kelly Brown Douglas talks about this passage in her book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. She writes, “A moral imagination is grounded in the absolute belief that the world can be better. A moral imagination envisions Isaiah’s ‘new heaven and new earth,’ where the ‘wolf and the lamb shall feed together,’ and it trusts that it will be made real. What is certain, a moral imagination disrupts the notion that the world as it is reflects God’s intentions.”

Douglas believes that we are called by God to have a “moral imagination” and that that kind of an imagination is NOT unrealistic idealizing. It is faith that God’s promises will someday be realized. It is faith that drives us to action—so that we can be a part of making the world look more and more like God’s vision. This faithful vision is the vision that was clung to by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he strove to make the world a place where everyone could be respected and valued. This faithful vision continues to focus the work of those who work for justice today, and this faithful vision inspires US to work for God’s justice too. Certainly, during this past year, we have experienced many things that remind us the world is not as it should be. The prophet Isaiah, Dr. King, and authors and theologians like Kelly Brown Douglas remind us that God has a vision for the world that is better than what it is now, and that by showing God’s love to all human beings as children of God, we can begin to make that vision real.

Reflection Questions:

* What kinds of things do you think need to be changed in our world? What do you notice that you wish could be different?
* How can you do small things in your own life to help the world be a better place where everyone is loved, valued, and has everything they need to thrive?
* What is your favorite part of Isaiah’s vision? How does it inspire you to work for justice?
* Say a prayer asking God to remind you of God’s vision for the world and show you ways that you can make the world a better place.

Reflection 4: excerpt from “Living in the New Jerusalem”

by the Rev. Dr. Emilie M. Townes

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” – Jeremiah 31:31-34

This passage from Jeremiah reminds us that God chooses to be in relationship with us again and again. Even though humanity continues to break the covenant, God continues to form new ones with us, calling us back to resurrection and working to bring the kingdom of God into the world. The Rev. Dr. Emilie M. Townes reflects on what this covenant means for the Black church, and for us all:

Living in the new Jerusalem means knowing God firsthand. When we feel God’s presence and warmth, then the Black church is able to witness out of God’s grace-filled forgiveness. Even in the midst of our iniquity, we can reach out to the poor, the dispossessed, the lonely, the rejected as brothers and sisters and not as a mission project. We must never forget that the covenant God makes with us in the testament of Jeremiah is one to be lived from the inside out- to be lived from our center, our soul, our hearts.

The new Jerusalem, and our lives there, means that if we err in our witness as a community of faith, it is to be on the side of trying to reach beyond what we thought possible and not because we settled for less than what we are capable. We attempt an ornery discipleship with the knowledge that God holds us together, gives us the [essence] of our community, and graces us with relentless love. This love is so total that all are invited to the welcome table, all are challenged to accept the eternal promise, all are called to service, all affirmed. God’s covenant with us overwhelms [somber] faith operating on tiny motives, meager objectives, belittling goals, silly prejudices, and partial successes.

Our witness is framed in our willingness to name injustice and rejoice in the joy of new life and the resilience found in a true community of hope built not on the sands of suffering, but on the bedrock of the cross. This witness is one of prayer and action. It holds the spiritual and the active witness in dynamic relationship.

Reflection Questions:

* What do you find compelling about the Rev. Dr. Townes’ reflection, what do you find challenging?
* If you were asked what living in the new Jerusalem meant, how would you describe it?
* What is one way you can put your prayer into action today?