

Proper 24, Year C
Luke 18:1-8 NRSV
October 21, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California --

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Francis Geddes

It is a real pleasure for me to be with you today to articulate Jesus' "Good News" of God and to share some of my memories and reflections on Howard Thurman later this afternoon.

Some of my memories of World War II were stirred up recently when my wife Virginia and I watched Ken Burns' very fine PBS documentary on World War II. During that series I was also reflecting on the Gospel lesson this morning which begins with the words, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray and not to lose heart."

During some periods of our journey we sail easily along over the seas of life for months, maybe years without a storm cloud on the horizon. However, during other periods there are storms where we are buffeted by trauma, despair, and suffering. These come when we least expect them. The log books of our life journey record periods of smooth sailing but also periods of tumult and storm when we do lose heart. We are pushed out to the edges of our endurance where we experience suffering and despair. In such times Jesus urges us to pray, to "pray always and not lose heart." He urges us, like the woman who pestered the judge, not to give up on God.

One of the most difficult periods of my life was in the Army in the aftermath of World War I, during September, October, November, and December of 1945 while I was stranded on the island of Okinawa. In mid-August, 400 miles out of Pearl Harbor on the way to Okinawa, our convoy of troopships was stalked by a Japanese submarine, but it was driven off with depth charges from our destroyer escorts. The day we landed in early September, a week after the peace treaty was signed, there were 100,000 troops on Okinawa gathered in preparation for the invasion of Japan. However, there were not nearly enough ships to bring us home. We sat there with nothing to do, month after month after month. By November we were all pretty depressed. During October and November there was an average of one suicide a week on the island.

I never prayed so deeply or fervently in all of my life...every day...several times a day...just asking God to hold me together in one piece so I didn't explode. I was in a state of despair and in a real depression, along with most everybody else. It was a time of suffering. To use Jesus' words, I had "lost heart" and the only thing that kept me from falling apart was the fact that I threw myself into the arms of God in prayer.

In early December my luck changed, or my prayer was answered. My

name was drawn out of a hat and a group of 30 of us were flown to Tokyo for a three-day pass. That trip to Tokyo broke my depression, and by early January of 1946, I was on a ship home.

In 1948, during the Christmas vacation of my senior year in college, I heard Howard Thurman speak at the Student YM – YWCA conference at Asilomar near Monterey. Dr. Thurman was one of a dozen outstanding preachers in the U.S. selected by LIFE Magazine during that period. He was one of the most brilliant individuals that I've ever encountered. How can I describe him? He was a Black mystic who combined several traditions: part Baptist, part Quaker, and part Unitarian. He was a prophet and visionary. At the time he was minister and co-founder of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco. It was one of the first integrated churches in the country. A month later I went to San Francisco to ask him if I could volunteer as a Summer Intern at the church before going to seminary in the fall. He accepted my offer and I spent the next two wonderful summers, '49 and '50 in San Francisco. That began a deep relationship in which he shaped the formation of my spiritual development for years to come. When I graduated from the Yale Divinity School in 1952, he asked me to become his Assistant Minister at Fellowship Church. I felt a sense of humility and honor at the same time.

In 1953 Howard Thurman went to Boston University to become Dean of Chapel. He wrote a book entitled, *Meditations of the Heart*. He gave me a copy that summer and inscribed these words on the title page, "To Francis, younger brother in whose life the Way points upward and beyond." I later became minister of Fellowship Church from 1955 to 1963.

In January of 2002, Robert Franklin, President of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta was interviewed by an editor from the *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. Dr. Franklin told the editor that after September 11th he found himself turning to Thurman's book *Meditations of the Heart*. The editor wanted to know why. Dr. Franklin responded, and I quote, "In the post-9-11 era, I think that America has been grappling with four major agendas: 1st – We are healing. 2nd – we are fighting back against opponents. 3rd – We are reckoning why this happened. And 4th – We are rebuilding and projecting a better future, not only for our nation, but for the world. I find all four of those themes addressed in *Meditations of the Heart*." (close quote)

The interviewer talked about overcoming evil and that suffering is part of the rhythm of life. It is something that we don't always hear about in America. Dr. Franklin replied, "Indeed. Thurman really understood the goal of suffering in human existence-the purifying, focusing impact that suffering has. And he also understood very profoundly this concept that Dr. King later articulated but Thurman wrote about first---that unmerited suffering could be redemptive for other people; that the suffering of the innocent, of

Jesus on the cross, this innocent victim, of King and other civil rights workers who were innocent but who lost their lives and were given as sacrifices in the struggle for a better world. That's powerfully redemptive, both for those who are the immediate beneficiaries of their sacrifices, but even, Thurman argued, to so-called opponents and enemies who observe the witness of that sacrifice. " (close quote)

My own brief suffering on Okinawa during the last four months of 1945 was redemptive because I threw myself into the arms of God in order to survive. However, that little patch of suffering cannot ever be compared to the eighty years of suffering that Howard Thurman endured growing up black in the South at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the life-long experiences of his own suffering, and that of African Americans in this racist country, Howard Thurman threw himself into the arms of God again and again. Like the woman before the judge in Jesus' parable, Thurman did not lose heart. He did not give up on God. In *Meditations of the Heart* he wrote, "There are qualities that seem to be hidden deep within the very texture of the human spirit that can only be laid bare that they may grow and be fruitful, by the most terrific flailings of a desperate adversity. There are not only such qualities as endurance but also such qualities as tenderness, gentleness, and boundless affection. It seems that these qualities emerge in their fullest glory only when there is nothing more that adversity can do. There is a strange halo surrounding great tribulation which shines in a transcendent glory. This radiance is the basis of the moral appeal always inherent in profound suffering." (p.88) (close quote)

That is how Howard Thurman survived. Again and again he prayed his way into the center of his pain. By God's grace his suffering was turned into healing for himself and healing for a suffering world. Lest you get the wrong impression, he was not a man of sorrows, because that pain could not extinguish his irrepressible joy. As in the lead-in to the parable he prayed always, but he did not lose heart. Amen.