

SERMON: "VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE"  
July 14, 1963

Dr. Howard Thurman, Dean of Marsh Chapel

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-24.

"You have heard (that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Psalms 139:19-24

Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men. For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain. Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death.  
I hear him leading his horse out of the stall; I hear the clatter on the barn floor.  
He is in haste; he has business in Cuba, business in the Balkans, many calls to make this morning.  
But I will not hold the bridle while he cinches the girth. And he may mount by himself; I will not give him a leg up. Though he flecks my shoulders with his whip, I will not tell him which way the fox ran.  
With his hoof on my breast, I will not tell him where the black boy hides in the swamp.  
I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for death; I am not on ~~death~~ his pay roll.  
I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends nor of my enemies either.  
Though he promise me much, I will not map him the route to any man's door.  
Am I a spy in the land of the living, that I should deliver men to death?  
Brother, the password and the plans of our city are safe with me; never through me shall you be overcome.  
I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death.  
~~/I am not on death's pay roll, nor are you~~

I would like to use as the general background for our thinking, a poem written many years ago by Edna St. Vincent Millay when she was a young woman and as she grew older, at a later period she was not so sure that this was what she meant, but she had already said it.

"I shall die but that is all that I shall do for Death...."  
Death...."

It was suggested last Sunday that faith is given, faith is the affirmation and the reaffirmation of life which is always a precious ingredient and expression of any form of life, which expression manifests itself in very simple ways, seeking nourishment and renewal, always the feeling quality of the pulse beat of vital energy is that the nourishment can find fulfillment by the movement of the life itself.

At man's - At the conscious level of human life I think that this faith which is given, a part of what I think of as the givenness of God, this faith is expressed in terms of perhaps the deepest toward, (if I may make a word here) the deepest toward need of the individual life. And that is the need to be cared for, and the need to care for. This belongs in that tight circle that expresses itself at the elemental level in the searching and the seeking for nourishment. Therefore, it seems to me then, that when I seek to care I am not merely responding to some law external to myself, I am not responding to some order that exists outside of myself, I am not trying to conform to a way of life which seems to me by training or background or culture to be a good way of life, I am giving expression to the most fundamental urgency of my being.

And another way to say that is, that it is an expression of the fact that all life belongs together. And that wherever any expression of life denies this, then there is something deep within the individual that says that this is not in accordance with the law of life. Now, with that general background, I want to look rather quickly and I suppose therefore superficially, at violence and non-violence.

The two passages we read, the first is from the Psalms, expressing a hatred of those who were against God. And it is very interesting that the Psalmist had to put it that way. He couldn't bring himself to give any justification for his hate unless he put it in the Divine context. This is very interesting. "I hate them who hate Thee." I don't hate them who hate me, I hate them who hate thee. I count them my enemy, not because they are an enemy to me, but because they are the enemy of God.

Now violence -- violence -- is a form of force that has as its purpose either imposition of the private or collective will upon the object of the violence or it has as its object the destruction of the violent one. So that violence becomes a method by which men seek to impose their will upon another in a manner that at once confirms the unity that springs up out of this basic sense about which I have been talking. For if I can bring my will to bear upon your will so that my will dominates your will, then this is my way of including you in community. And ~~I~~ I must have you. And if I cannot have you on any voluntary basis then I will have you by the exercise of this kind of power.

Now individuals who are responding to violence usually find that they must protect themselves from violence by countering it in some way. And the most fundamentally historic ~~way~~ way to counter violence is with violence or with flight. You fight or you run. And if you fight, then you are saying that the person who exercises violence against you wills your non-existence if you will not come in and be as he is. And the violence in its logic, therefore, is the destruction of the life. It is the implementation of the will to the non-existence of another.

Now when I am dealing with violence, I recognize within myself that this, that I am dealing with something that wills my extermination and the most logical thing for me to do then is to affirm my own existence. And the only way that I can affirm

Sermon: "Violence and Non-Violence" Howard Thurman 7/14/63

(4)

My own existence in this particular context is to meet an affirmation of non-existence with an affirmation of non-existence. So violence tends to multiply itself in terms of hatred and all the things that go with it. It does not get the assent of the mind. It cannot get the assent of the will, because it does not permit any rule for the affirmation of the individual self.

Now violence is quick, it is very often effective. Many times in your life, I am sure, as in mine, that you have been dealing with your children and you want them to understand that the thing that you are doing is really for their good and for their best interests, but they are young, they are inexperienced, they don't know and they are a little stubborn, so that the only thing that you can do is to do something that will bring them sharp up to it, and you use either violence or the threat of violence which gives them a sudden sense of insecurity and they seek refuge in conforming, even though their spirit has remained untouched.

Now violence -- It is for this reason that violence is the instrument of national policy wherever there are governments and states. Because this is the way by which response, obedience can come without obtaining the assent of the individual. Now the thing that is wrong, or in my judgment evil, about violence is the fact that it makes for isolation between expressions of life that belong together. It cuts off the possibility that I will be able in a given time interval to care for you and to experience your caring for me.

Now non-violence is a form of force which has another purpose in mind. The purpose of non-violence is to get the assent, to get the Yes of the other person. Now this pre-supposes primary exposure to that there will be a chance for the ingredient to work. But if one is dealing with a system of which individuals are victims, and there is no way by which you can have a primary, personal exposure with your affirming non-violence to the violent individual; then, what you are forced to do is to deal with the context that gives to the violent man his stability. And if you can undermine the context, if you can upset the context, if you can shake the context, so that he is

no longer stabilized in it, then in that kind of what one of my friends calls, in that kind of "moment of shipwreck", he becomes available now to the quality of your spirit.

Now the important thing to remember both about violence and non-violence, in this context, is that they can very easily, both of them, can very easily become skills and techniques; they can become impersonal procedures. We see it all around us. When I lived in Florida, there was a dog that came down our street everyday at four o'clock in the afternoon, in the summertime. And my friend always met him on the corner and, as he turned into our street, and he would clear his throat so the dog would look up, and then when he caught the dog's eye, he would draw his arm back as if he was going to strike him, and the dog would yell and run down the street. And then by the time he had settled himself, he would be in front of another boy's house who would repeat the same thing. So we passed him from house to house down the street. No one of us ever struck him. But he had been struck. And the system, the whole etiquette that had created the behavior pattern went on working, even though the initial act had long since been removed.

Now, this is why dictators who come into power in a country very quickly circulate all around, by devious ways and by many particular acts...two o'clock, three o'clock in the morning, the gap at the door...the rumor that the most important, the most precious thing that you have in the world is your physical life. Now once this rumor is set and established and fixed, then all that the violent man has to do is to threaten the life, it doesn't have to take it, just threaten the life. And when the life is threatened, the behavior capitulates.

Now we recognize this about violence, we know what its mechanism is, we know how it operates through all kinds of means and we know that it becomes a way of life of a society, as it is of most of Western culture and Western civilization. But what we do not recognize too often is the fact that non-violence also operates

on the same basic way. That non-violence that moves out from the soul force of an individual, to use <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ ancient phrase, that has as its purpose the wooing and the persuading and the enveloping with the sense of inclusive caring of identity, all of those things that are present when the non-violent act is most dynamic and most effective, being released in the world, but once it is released then it moves on the basis of its own etiquette and its own morality and its own values. Which are very good values and very good morality.

And individuals may find themselves manipulating violence when they themselves are not violent. Individuals may find themselves manipulating non-violence ~~when~~ while they themselves are violent. For, you see, when the dynamics and the <sup>up</sup> elements that go to make non-violence begin to operate in human life, then individuals begin to respond to this either in terms of more violence or in terms of capitulation within themselves that opens doors that are closed. And it becomes a system with which they are dealing. And, therefore, when non-violence working in a society, as it is working in our society in various places and in different ways at this moment; when non-violence carries the weight of its morality into the society with the creative result of the removing of the things that in the first place called it forth. To be specific, when non-violence as it works its way, let us assume that non-violence will be able to eradicate all the barriers that separate men in our society so that that which called the non-violence forth will no longer be necessary. Then those who believe in non-violence and are committed to it, and have suffered for it and have worked hard on its behalf, may be tempted to affirm that the work is done once the barrier is removed. What I am saying to you this morning is that once the barrier is removed by this process, the way is clear for the first time for the real thing, the real building of community, the real thing that is fundamental in what I am calling the givenness of God, this faith, this thing that expresses itself in the need to care for and to be cared for. This is now ready to be operative. Non-violence cannot create it. Violence cannot create it.

Only this other dimension can create it. And what I am afraid of is - when the barriers are removed, and that time will come, for life now is against the barrier - when the barrier is removed will there be enough of this deeper thing to build the community?

If I may illustrate this. When I lived in Washington on Howard University's campus, we lived, our yard was bordered by a picket fence and our dog, Barrymore, sat up on the front porch always and he watched the Western Union boys as they rode down the long walk and turn to go down past our picket fence. He would meet them at the corner of the fence and bark them all the way down, and then he would go back up on the porch and wait till he saw another boy coming. And then one winter day we had a snowstorm in Washington with four-foot drifts in the corners, and when Barrymore watched his Western Union boy come down to the corner, he met him here, barked him all the way and before he knew it, he being Barrymore, went up the snow bank and was over the fence. And I heard this yelling and I ran to the front door to see what was happening. I thought somebody had attacked Barrymore. Nothing had happened except that, suddenly he found that the barrier was removed and there was nothing between him and the boy but air. And he panicked!

Now this is what I am talking about. That when either, even assuming that by violence the barrier can be removed, assuming that by non-violence the barrier can be removed--the great critical question, particularly for the man of religious insight this morning, is, who will have the right to stand at the moment of the panic of the collective psyche when the barrier is gone? and the awareness of its non-existence will break into the mind? and if there is any judgment that rests on the church I think it is the judgment of God that it has so lost the moral initiative that it may not have the word at the moment of the panic. It may be that those of us who are struggling for social change must have a little area a little reservoir of energy left, like the Volkswagen (I don't mean to advertise it)

Sermon: "Violence and Non-Violence" Howard Thurman 7/14/63

(8)

But it has an extra something of gasoline, that when the tank is empty you throw a little gadget and you can get another gallon of energy. Now these who are working in the struggle which is so exhausting and exhaustive, which makes such a primary and absolute demand upon all the resources of one's life, there must be provisions made for some little pocket of energy untapped, ready to move in at the moment of exhaustion when the wall comes down. This may be the way, The faith, The givenness of God will assert itself in our time. And may we find a way to be ready.

Forgive us for all the failure and all the ineptness, the blundering stupidity of words and thoughts on which we have labored so long and accept Thy acceptance of us as our offering to Thee, O God, our Father.

Amen.



# Boston University

## Marsh Chapel

July 14, 1963

The Prelude: Prelude and Fugue in e minor Leon Boellmann  
"Sheep may safely graze" Johann Sebastian Bach

The Call to Worship

\*The Morning Hymn: "Guide Me, O Thou great Jehovah" No. 301

The Invocation

The Responsive Reading: First Reading Page 628  
"Good Friday"

The Dedication of: Anne Margaret Pahnke  
daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Walter N. Pahnke

\*The Hymn: "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind" No. 342

The Morning's Lesson: Matthew 5:21-24, Psalm 139:19-27

The Worship of God in Offerings

The Offertory: Laudate Dominum Mozart  
Joanne Harris, soloist

The Period of Meditation:  
"Dear God, our Father, at Thy knee confessing  
Our sins and follies, close in Thine embrace,  
Children forgiven, happy in Thy blessing,  
Deepen our spirits to receive Thy grace."

The Prayer Hymn: "Dear God, our Father, at thy knee confessing"  
(Congregation singing stanzas 2 through 5) No. 361

The Sermon: "Violence and Non-Violence" Dean Thurman

The Benediction with Organ Amen

\*\*The Postlude: "Lord Jesus Christ, be present now" Johann Walther

\*Congregation will stand  
\*\*Congregation will remain seated until end of Postlude.

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You are cordially invited to join in fellowship at the  
Coffee Hour following the service downstairs in the Lounge.

### Summer Preaching Schedule -

Our preacher next Sunday, July 21, will be Dr. Harrell F. Beck  
Professor of Old Testament, School of Theology.

The following Sundays: Dean Howard Thurman, July 28;

Dr. Henry Hitt Crane, August 4;

Dr. Robert H. Hamill, August 11 and 18.

## FOR MEDITATION

It is good to remember that God has not left Himself without a witness in our spirits. There is a Spirit in us that contains our spirit, that provides the secondary consolations which float the big anxieties, that sustains the effort beyond the calculated endurance, that makes the case for the good impulse when the rational judgment sends the mind spinning in the opposite way, that brooks over all weariness and all despair until the change comes and the heart is revived, that holds the confidence in the integrity of the self when the deeds that contradict will not be stilled and the act that destroys goes on its relentless way - it is good to remember that God has not left Himself without a witness in our spirits.

It is good to remember that God has not left Himself without a witness in our lives. There is at work in life much that seems so circumstantial that the release of explanation can come only by the great word of the noncommittal: coincidence. Even the most cursory examination of what may be regarded as the most commonplace life, shows that at many points startling things have occurred that altered the entire direction of the life: some chance word heard at a critical moment, some single encounter along the way, a paragraph tucked away in an ordinary book, a stray thought out of nowhere, finds a cuddling place in the mind and there begins to live and breathe and reproduce its kind until something emerges as a new outlook, a different way of thinking. It is good to remember that God has not left Himself without a witness in our lives.

Despite all the wanderings of our footsteps, despite all the ways by which we may have sought to circumvent the truth within us, despite all the weaknesses of spirit and of mind, despite all the blunders by which we may have isolated ourselves from our fellows or proven unworthy of the love, the trust, the confidence, by which again and again our faltering lives are surrounded, despite all these things it is good to remember that God has not left Himself without a witness in our spirits and in our lives.

H.T.

--"The Inward Journey"

7/14/63

### Officiating Today

Dean Howard Thurman, preaching and presiding  
Dr. Max Miller, organist  
Joanne Harris, soloist