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SERMON: "The Wider Ministry and The Concept of Community" Dean Howard Thurman
Marsh Chapel July 28, 1963

MEDITATION Psalm 139

Prayer Hymn: 'Mid all the traffic of the way.... No. 341

SERMON: "The Wider Ministry and The Concept of Community"

(Inward Journey #24 pg.42)

Keep open the door of thy heart.

It matters not how many doors are closed against thee.

It is a wondrous when there is disclosed to the mind the fact that there may be no direct and responsible relation between two human beings that can determine their attitude toward each other. We are accustomed to thinking that one man's attitude toward another is a response to an attitude. The formula is very neat: love begets love, hate begets hate, indifference begets indifference. Often this is true. Again and again we try to mete out to others what we experience at their hands. There is much to be said for the contagion of attitudes. There are moments in every man's life when he tries to give as good or as bad as he gets. But this presupposes that the relation between human beings is somehow mechanical, as if each person is utterly and completely separated. This is far from the truth, even though it may seem to square with some of the facts of our experienced behavior.

There is a profound ground of unity that is more pertinent and authentic than all the unilateral dimensions of our lives. This a man discovers when he is able to keep open the door of his heart. This is one's ultimate responsibility, and it is not dependent upon whether the heart of another is kept open for him. Here is a mystery: If sweeping through the door of my heart there moves continually a genuine love for you, it by-passes all your hate and all your indifference and gets through to you at your center. You are powerless to do anything about it. You may keep alive in devious ways the fires of your bitter heart, but they cannot get through to me. Underneath the surface of all the tansion, something else is at work. It is utterly impossible for you to keep another from loving you. True, you may scorn his love, you may reject it in all ways within your power, you may try to close every opening in your own heart--it will not matter. This is no easy sentimentality but it is the very essence of the vitality of all being. The word that love is stronger than hate and goes beyond death is the great disclosure to one who has found that when he keeps open the door of his heart, it matters not how many doors are closed against him.

I want to do two things this morning, and whether it is possible to do them I do not know. I want to think for a few minutes about the fundamental ground of community and what I think in essence it is, in terms of what seems to me to be the fundamental and basic intent of life itself. And then I want to talk, at least in two instances, of about certain aspects of the wider ministry in which I have been engaged this year, that will have bearing on the fundamental insight.

Sermon: "The Wider Ministry and the Concept of Community" Howard Thurman 7/28/63

I begin then with the fact that to me God is the creator of life and the creator of the living substance, that out of which all particular manifestations or expressions of life move and come into being and separateness. I think, also, that God is not merely the creator of life and the living substance, but God is the creator of existence, that the creative mind of God bottoms even the concept of existence itself, so that every manifestation of life, every separate expression, every form of being, every particular phrasing of an aspect of existence has in it that which is instinct with the intent of the creator. Now, wherever we observe life, in any of its forms, life is trying to realize itself. It is trying to experience itself, and it seeks to do this, naturally, by getting nourishment and the nourishment enables it to actualize whatever may be its potential. And in its quest for nourishment we see, at the same time, the quest for realization.

I have seen, I saw one day, some workmen opening up - digging a wide ditch to get at a sewer pipe under the ground, - and there was some difficulty, and I went over to see what was going on. And when they laid bare this huge joint of pipe, there was a network of roots that had encircled this pipe for a distance of maybe five feet, and these little rootlets had insinuated themselves into little cracks, and had finally gotten inside the pipe itself and there with all of the nourishment that they needed, the roots just grew and they closed the pipe. And I found that these roots came from a tree that was 500 yards away. That down under the ground they had gotten the scent of the thing that they needed to realize themselves. Now this is the way life is.

I feel then that as far as human life is concerned that the nourishment that human life needs in order to realize itself is not merely food for the body, the things that will keep the organism functioning, but the thing that the human beings need in order to realize themselves, in order that that which is potential in them might be actualized, is other human beings. We must have each other. So that there is an instinctive repulsion against isolation. We come to ourselves in the human encounter. It is when I establish an other-than-self reference in you that I begin to get some sense, some feeling of the

inside of what it means to be me. Therefore, it seems to me, that a part of the intent of creation is community. And community, the experience of community, for the individual human being is not merely when his body actualizes its potential, but when his spirit actualizes its potential by coming to itself in other human beings.

So that when, in religion, we talk about love or the love ethic, we talk about the human family; when we use all of these phrases, what we are really saying is that there is a necessity laid upon the human being that makes it mandatory for him to knock at the doors of other human beings seeking entrance in order that he himself might be himself. And whatever may be the arrangement, however holy, sacred, political, or what have you that insists that the normal relationships between human beings involves separateness - whether on the basis of dogma, creed, metaphysics, theology, national origin, whatever it may be - if there is the insistence that the individual can only actualize his potential in isolation from other human beings, this position is essentially against life and, I think, it stands over against what seems to be in the rough and most basic sense, the intent the creator.

Now, with this in mind, I have felt for thirty years that experience, therefore, of meaningful unity between human beings are more compelling and more significant than all of the concepts, the fears, the anxieties, the prejudices, the doctrines, that may separate them. And if you can multiply meaningful experiences of unity over a time interval of sufficient duration, you ^{can} establish a climate that makes it a reasonable thing for one human being to trust another human being.

And on the basis of this, then, I have worked. And I feel that the journey on which Mrs. Thurman and I have been embarking since last September is but one more creative and, from our point of view, exciting manifestation of this fundamental insight. That experiences of unity between people are more compelling than all the things that separate them; and if you can multiply these experiences over a time interval of sufficient duration, you can undermine any barrier that separates one human being from another.

Now the experiences of unity may not, in and of themselves, do it, but the experiences of unity provide a climate in which the shy human spirit might feel its way gently and tenderly into another human spirit. And this is the essence of it.

So I want to illustrate it in two instances and pull it together, and that will be it.

You may have seen in the newspaper in the fall, an article written by a reporter on the Globe about the experience which I had in the Province of Saskatchewan. I was invited to spend five days as the guest of the Federation of Indian Chiefs. They are Chree (sp?) speaking Indians in this province, and it developed that during the past two or three years the Canadian government has relaxed its attitude somewhat so that Indians are permitted to leave the Reserves and they can work in communities and live in the communities. And, of course, one of the symbols of being citizens is that they are at liberty to go into a package place and buy whiskey, which is a symbol of being civilized. These men discovered that as they began to move around in the Canadian communities, that they encountered something that they had never encountered before as they lived on the Reserves. They found difficulty in getting a place to live, difficulty in getting work, in other words, they came up against discrimination and prejudice. And then they discovered that there are no words in the Chree language for discrimination and for prejudice; so they were having this experience and were unable to talk with each other about what was happening, because there was no symbolic tool by which they could communicate with each other. Well, the... so that the idea was that spending a few days there, talking and just being; little experiences of unity might make it possible for certain other things to happen in terms of their own actualizing of their potential. So I arrived on Sunday afternoon, and in the evening before the meetings began on Monday, I asked if I might have some time with three Chiefs. One was the interpreter, and the other was the...well another man, and another one. So when they

"The Wider Ministry and the Concept of Community" Howard Thurman 7/28/63

came in we spent the first fifteen minutes sparring, you know, you've seen a strange dog come on a street and the other dogs don't know whether he is friendly or what, so they sort of fool around a little and then he passes the test and then they start playing, or if he doesn't they start fighting. So, we passed the test. ~~And~~ And so I said, "Now that we are through with the preliminaries I would like to ask you a question." (Now, bear in mind what I am talking about as my thesis.) I said, "Are you Indians first, and then Canadians; or are you Candians and then Indians? And the first man to speak was the interpreter, and the President of the Federation. He said, "I am an Indian and then a Canadian." He said, You see, I believe that it is important that I keep in primary touch with all of the Seminole things that have sustained the soul of the Chree nation through all the generations. So I have taught my children to participate in all of the rites and the ceremonials that will give them a sense of being involved in the womb of the Chree peoples, and if they have this, then when they go out into the Canadian environment they will not be threatened by whatever the experience in the environment because they are relating to the environment out of a sense of center. " And he used a very quaint little figure, he said, "They will go and knock at the door of a Canadian and when the Canadian comes to the door, they will say, 'Do you have a sense of center?' and if he says, Yes, -- then the sense of center that my child has will flow into the sense of center that the Canadian has and then we will become one people. "

The second man said, "I am an Indian last, I am a Canadian first. I fought in the Army, the Canadian Army in Italy, and I think the sooner we get rid of anything that identifies us as Indians, as separated from the Canadian environment, the better. it will be. And when a Canadian walks down the street and looks at my house, I do not want him to say as he looks at the house, 'Oh, I know an Indian lives there.' and so forth.

The third man created a problem. ~~And~~ ^I noticed that the interpreter asked him words that sounded the same, and then his reply was the same and this went on for about five minutes and nobody was saying anything to me, and I wasn't understanding what was going on, so I said, "Well, will you please enlighten me or do something?" And then the

"The Wider Ministry and the Concept of Community" Howard Thurman 7/28/63

interpreter turned to me and said, "I don't understand. Jonas is stupid. I ask him this question and he gives me the same stupid answer." I said, "What does he say?" "He says, that I live up in the Arctic circle, some ten or fifteen miles within the Arctic circle; I live with the wind and the snow and the ice in winter; and the streams and the rivers and the blossoms in summer. These flow into me and I flow into them, they are a part of me and I am a part of them. I do not quite know what you mean when you say Indian or Canadian." ~~And then, when,~~

And then, when, the next day when the time came for my first talk, and this is the heart of what I want to say, I decided I would not use an interpreter. I wanted to see whether it would be possible to have a sense of unity, of meaning that could transcend even the limitations of vocabulary. So for ten minutes I talked, and you know the feeling, well, if you don't well, when your words go up and they hit a wall and bounce back meeting other words that are coming and they dissolve out there somewhere and nobody gets anything. And then, suddenly, I don't know what happened, but the wall disappeared! and I had the physical sensation of flowing into those men and their flowing into me. And I knew now that a quality of being was shared that transcended all of the words and all of the vocabularies.

And then at the end, the last thing, the night before the meetings closed, one of the men came to my room and asked if I would talk at breakfast. And I said, well I am talked out, I have said everything that I know to say. And he said, Well we would like for you to talk, just ten minutes." And I said, "well let me sleep on it." And I went to breakfast the next morning and all the men were...half the men were through eating and putting their gear into the jalopies and into the busses and going, and getting ready to go, but a few were in drinking coffee. So he came over and said What about it? And I said, Nobody is interested in hearing anybody talk, they want to go home! But he said, Let me announce it over the loudspeaker that you will do it and they are very honest, if they don't have any interest they won't come. They aren't pretenders. So he did. And then they came back in and sat, most of them, about a

dozen of them stayed outside continuing to smoke, and so I talked. And then a strange thing happened. When it was over, the ten minutes. One by one the men came up, came by my chair, some would shake my hand, some would pat my hand, ~~th~~ and then ~~one~~ one old Chief with two big plaits down his...(this thing), put his hand on my head and sort of rubbed it like this, and finally I was left in the room alone. Every man had come by had touched me, but no man said a word...not a word.

Experiences of unity are more compelling than all the concepts and dogmas that divide. And if these can be multiplied..... (well, I see my time is up, but let me say one more despite the fact..)

This also was in Canada (I'll try to do it in five minutes). I have a very wonderful friend who was a student here in the School of Theology. He is conservative Jewish rabbi. He was the, he had a little synagogue in Providence, Rhode Island, He is now the director of Hebraic Studies at the University of Manitoba. And when I was going up to the University for five days, he wrote and asked if I would remain over to be a part of the family because his little boy was going to be Bah Mizpah'd on Saturday night. Well I couldn't do this because I was leaving in the afternoon but I did not have time to let him know. So in the morning that I arrived and was in the President's office waiting to go in for the first lecture. He blew in. And that is literal. He is a great big man, with a huge beard that covers all of this, and he wears all of the things that he should wear in accordance with his faith. And he blew in and gave me one of these huge bear hugs, you know the kind that come across and you salute on this side and you salute on that side. And he said, "I know you can't stay for the Bah Mizpah." And then he turned to the President, "but, four hours of this man's time belongs to me and you can work it out any way you wish." And he went out.

So on Thursday he came to get me. I got in his automobile, one of these wonderfully sensitive automobiles that you have to know which thing to pull to get which response. And there is a bell hanging down from the top of it and every time the car moved, the bell would ring. And I said, "What is this?" And he said, "I'm going to give you one of those bells. I have it there because, every time the bell rings I am reminded that

I am not as good as I ought to be."

Then he took me over to the Hillel place and he wanted me to see the Chapel; everything in the Chapel except the pews had been done, created, made by the students or their families. All of the, even the curtains before the Ark was embroidered by one of the senior girls, and so forth and so on. And he said, "My family will be coming and I want you to meet them. My father is coming, he doesn't speak any English. He is from Galatia, but I want you to see my whole family. So they all came and we sat around a table and had coffee and a sweet roll. And right in the middle of it, he said to his son, "Dr. Thurman is going to take you in to the Chapel and give you a blessing since he can't be here for the Bah Mizpah." / So the three of us got up and we went in to the Chapel and had the blessing. And then, when that was over, they went home. And he took me up to his office. He said, I want you to sit in here for fifteen minutes without being disturbed, because I want you to open all the windows of your spirit so you can get a feeling of the place where I live and work and think, and then when you are away from here, the climate that you get now you can carry with you and you can put me in it and see me in my setting." ~~And then~~

And then when that was over, we got in his car and drove fifteen miles. And we came to a gate, a huge iron gate. And a monk opened the gate. This was a Trappist Monastery. And the monk who met us at the gate said the Brother Superior, (or whatever his designation is) is waiting for you. So we went up and were introduced. And he said, "We have five minutes before Vespers." And he gave me a ^{breviary} breviary and gave the Rabbi a breviary and he said to the Rabbi, "Now you know where we are, and you know where to go." So we went around and sat in the Chapel in stalls in the rear while the Trappist Monks had their ceremony up in the front part near the altar. When this was over, maybe two-thirds of the way, something happened. I don't know how I can say this to you. But there came a moment while one of the chants was being sung, when it seemed as if I was moved out of my little (this) place, and it was such a stirring thing--it seemed as if I was stripped to something very elemental in me, and I was not, it is the sort of thing that happens

sometimes in prayer, when you are not you and you are not your problem, but you are sort of laid bare, just the palpitation of your essential self reduced to what is literal and irriducible in you in the presence of God.--and when this happened my eyes left the breviary, and I turned to him as he turned to me - our eyes met, this orthodox Jewish Rabbi and I. And our eyes met and held.~~and~~/ And then as we turned away, I to go back to my breviary, the man, the Trappist Monk who was leading the prayers, turned away from the altar in time for his eyes to meet our eyes. --Just a minute... And then we left the service ~~and~~/

And we went around to have supper. We sat in a little room to have supper. And the monk who prepared the supper said to the Rabbi as he stood at the door, "The food has been prepared with your dietary requirements in mind, so you are at liberty to eat everything that is here." And when that was over, another man came, from whom the ban of silence had been lifted, and here this man was the person who had charge of the Spiritual Disciplines for the Order. And he said to the Rabbi, "Since the man with whom you studied Spiritual Disciplines in your University is here, I thought it would be a very good thing if the person who is in charge of Spiritual Disciplines for our Order could have an hour to sit and visit about spiritual disciplines." So he and I sat and talked for an hour about the things of the spirit. And without self-consciousness and without being, for the moment, protestant or Catholic, French, Canadian, black, white, none of these things amounted to anything. And then when this was over, we went in to Complean (?) which is the last act for the day, and this is in,..the chapel is in darkness and then at a certain point there is an illumination, and the altar with Mary and Jesus at the top, is shown and then there are prayers..and then there is a long silence, and then the gong, and everybody goes out.

And when the Chapel was completely empty, then the Rabbi and I went out and we found our place, with our coats and hats. And we went to the gate to start back to Winnipeg. Just as the gatekeeper was about to lock the gate. So he unlocked the gate. He let us out. And then, as we stood, about to get in the car. He said, "It is a long ways to Winnipeg and it is a cold, bad night. Would either of you like to go to the

Men's Room?" Just, just this... And I smiled and the Rabbi smiled, and we left. And the Rabbi and I rode the entire distance back to Winnipeg, and no words were spoken between us.

Experiences of unity are more compelling than all the concepts, ideologies, creeds, as important as these are, that divide. And if these can be multiplied all over the world, over a time interval of sufficient duration, there isn't any barrier between any of the children of God that cannot be removed.

And if you believe this, then you will never close the door of your heart against any man, even though he may close the door of his heart against you.

Accept our Father, the offering of our faith and our words
and our lives. Walk beside us as we go our way, tutor us
in community, our Father.

H.T.

Boston University

Marsh Chapel

July 28, 1963

The Prelude: Voluntary in a minor Prelude	John Stanley Frederick Jacobi
Cantio Sacra: "Wir Glauben all an einen Gott"	Samuel Scheidt
The Call to Worship	
* The Morning Hymn: "God the Omnipotent!"	No. 505
The Invocation	
The Responsive Reading: First Reading "The New Covenant"	Page 589
* The Hymn: "These things shall be: a loftier race"	No. 512
The Morning's Lesson: I Corinthians 13	
The Worship of God in Offerings	
The Offertory: Panis Angelicus James McCullough, soloist	Cesar Franck
The Period of Meditation: "Mid all the traffic of the ways - Turmoils without, within - Make in my heart a quiet place, And come and dwell therein:"	
The Prayer Hymn: "Mid all the traffic of the ways" (Congregation singing stanzas 2 through 4)	No. 341
The Sermon: "The Wider Ministry and The Concept of Community"	Dean Thurman
The Benediction with Organ Amen	
**The Postlude: "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee"	Marcel Dupré

* Congregation will stand

** Congregation will remain seated until end of Postlude.

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

Summer Preaching Schedule

Dr. Henry Hitt Crane, August 4

Dr. Robert Hamill, August 11 and 18

021648

FOR MEDITATION

It is no easy thing to examine the fabric of one's life and discover the single thread of personal responsibility despite the complexity of the pattern and design. For always there is the extenuating circumstance that one could not anticipate and for which one could not prepare but whose existence at the critical moment made such a large difference. The circumstance need not be extenuating, it may indeed be as fundamental as the fact of parents of a certain kind and the place and the time of one's birth. It is no mere reaction of mood or temperament to say that life would have been very different if parents had been happy, or well or secure. How to isolate the threads of the pattern and say "This is mine" or "This is not mine."

There may be come incident of birth, causing one to be very tall, or very short or predisposed towards obesity or frailness. Or there may be some birth mark that has always held one prisoner of a terrible self-consciousness that undermined the personal confidence and the private morale. "What a difference life would have been," one might say, "if I had not been burdened by this 'Brand,' this ugly thing." How to isolate the threads of the pattern and say, "This is mine alone," or "This is the work of the 'brand'."

General and wide spread is the agreement that the "times are out of joint," that the sense of foreboding and "not-quite-disaster" is heavy in the air. It is a sense of foreboding - it is not that we are faced with a definitive, ominous fact which can be challenged, faced and dealt with. No. Modern man is like a certain figure in a painting. The man is looking over his shoulder at something that is off the canvas. The observer cannot see it, the only thing that is visible is the horror on the face of the man. How to isolate the threads of the pattern and say "This is mine" and "This is due to the fateful times in which my life is lived."

At long last there can be no escape from one's private fact which must include the extenuating circumstances, the incident, due to birth and heritage, the times in which one lives. With one creative sweep of the spirit these, all of them, must be taken into clear account as belonging to what one means by one's self. These are the given and they must never be degraded into alibis. To do what one can with one's thing is to accept life without being submissive to it. It is through one's fact that God works His work in one's life. A man may never separate the threads of his fabric and say "This is mine" or "This is not mine." A man's life is made of many things but a man's life is *One Thing!*

H.T.

7/28/63

Officiating Today

Dean Howard Thurman, preaching and presiding
Dr. Max Miller, organist
James McCullough, soloist