

“The Difference Between Judgment and Accountability”

Romans 14:1-12

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In 1452 and 1455 Pope Nicholas V authorized the seizure of all non-Christian lands by white Europeans in the name of God, encouraged the enslavement of native, non-Christian peoples in Africa and the Americas. These two papal bulls – known as “The Doctrine of Discovery” – encouraged Europeans to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue” all non-Europeans wherever they found them. It is the Christian smoking gun that authorizes the genocide and forced slavery of non-white people. This doctrine was reinforced by the United States government in 1823 by a Supreme Court whose chief justice stood to benefit financially and directly by the decision. Rather than standing down because of a conflict of interest, Chief Justice John Marshall wrote the decision. The Native American tribes at the moment of “European discovery” were no longer sovereign and no longer had property rights but were “domestic dependent nations.”

If it wasn't for Jesus I'd have left the church a long time ago. Who wants to have to defend their participation in a church with a history of white colonialism? Who wants to defend a church whose thousand year love affair with civil power has spawned so much violence and hate? Who wants to be associated with this kind of history woven into their religious DNA?

If it wasn't for Jesus I'd have left the church a long time ago. Howard Thurman said something similar when he was challenged about his participation in church. This giant of a theologian, who inspired many of the civil rights soldiers, told of having to defend his Christian faith to a Hindu colleague who could not understand how, as a person of color, Thurman could also be a Christian: “More than 300 years ago, your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves,” the friend challenged Thurman. “The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. One of your famous Christian hymn writers, Sir John Newton, made his money from the sale of slaves to the New World. He is the man who wrote, ‘How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds’ and ‘Amazing Grace’. The name of one of the famous British slaves vessels was ‘Jesus.’ I am a Hindu,” his friend said. “I do not wish to seem rude to you. But, sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position.”¹

Thurman wrote *Jesus and the Disinherited* in defense of his faith, which articulated how faith in Jesus gave him and anyone with their “backs against the wall” the courage, the blueprint, and the faith to dismantle the very racist church structures that had been setup in Jesus' name. Not only that, but Jesus actually made

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Boston: Beacon Press), 1996, pp. 4-5, (first published in 1949 by Abingdon).

it possible for a true fellowship of racial reconciliation. If it wasn't for Jesus, he seemed to say, he'd have left the faith a long time ago.

Paul wrote to a church long before the church had gained much worldly power to say to them, be careful not to lose sight of Jesus, or things can go haywire. Unity is more than possible, he wrote. It has already been achieved in Christ. Judging each other for eating meat or not, is the road to division. Judging each other for keeping a special calendar or not will lead in the opposite direction of faith. There's only one Lord in the church – and it's not you. Unity in the church is possible, Paul said, but not without Jesus.

Maybe because human beings can't seem to embrace our differences without a God who leads the way. Difference seems to activate our judgment gene, if you pay attention to human history. Thurman argued that at the root of hatred is contact without fellowship: encounters between people who are different without real relationship that deepens empathy, understanding, mutual care and love.² Contact without fellowship – Europeans coming to the Americas to “subdue” people they knew nothing about – contact without fellowship. White nationalists chanting “Jews will not replace us.” Contact without fellowship. People on the neighborhood social media site Nextdoor posting “suspicious looking person” when a person of color walks through the neighborhood. Contact without fellowship.

Fellowship requires you to question the stories they've inherited about those who eat different from you, dress different from you, speak different from you, look different from you. Fellowship means questioning the stereotypes we make up about each other. Fellowship means getting deep enough into the conversation that you are willing to be hurt. Fellowship means sticking it out. And that's the hard part of being with a post-colonial, post-Christendom, post de jure segregation church. Because the more you learn about the history of the church, the more you want to run. The church doesn't live up to the ideal.

That's what I tried to do years ago. Seek out *real* community, not the fake community peddled by the church. Build a real multi-racial force for justice, not the hypocritical church. That's what I tried to do. Leave the church behind. DIY community – without all the baggage, without all the historically verified hate, without the overwhelming history that can never be justified.

That's what I tried to do. And then I started noticing that so many of the people who had the stomach to bring down Jim Crow – to stick with it through the days of struggle when victory was not clear - they were followers of Jesus whose courage never seemed to wane. So many of the people who didn't burn out when they didn't get their activist dreams immediately fulfilled were followers of Jesus whose hope rested not on external circumstance but on confidence that God's justice will be done. Christians from around the world – whose ancestors had been introduced to Jesus through the very colonizers whose idolatry I rejected - they had been visited by Jesus and transformed by him.

And while it might seem like a big stretch to try to connect this Romans text about a vegetarian/carnivore debate with the killing and enslavement of millions of indigenous peoples, or with our racial history that American has never fully faced, I

² Thurman, 65.

think Paul recognized at the very founding of the church that when the church leaves Jesus out of it, we're all in trouble. I don't mean the image of Jesus carved into a statue, encased in a window, written in a book. I mean the living Christ who rails against any religious hierarchy that puts itself in the judgment seat – the judgment seat that belongs to God. The living Christ who defines love while he's on his knees washing another's feet. The living Christ who feeds the hungry, who understands the curse of the rich, who would rather die to end the cycle of retribution than live another day to see people go on killing each other. The living Christ who knows real fellowship because he lived it.

The more I look at our world, the more I think it's nearly impossible to maintain that kind of hope without Jesus. I look at the activist approach and see a tendency to know everything about what the church ought to say and do except how to actually build true fellowship, how to sustain hope beyond a few marches or beyond your early 20s. I look at the modern evangelical approach and see a tendency to sweep under the middle-class, European, heterosexual rug anybody who doesn't fit a shallow vision of unity that is about conforming to a particular culture more than conforming to Christ. We don't do so well when we try to build community on our own. Sooner or later someone other than God will end up in the God's judgment seat.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer went so far as to say that “those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial. . . those who dream of this idealized community . . . enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly. . . whatever does not go their way, they call failure. . . so they first become accusers of other Christians in the community, then accusers of God, and finally the desperate accusers of themselves.”³

What's really needed in the church is not another round of judgment whether from the right or the left, but accountability. The sense that we are not our own, that we are accountable to God and therefore to each other. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. The clarity that gave Bonhoeffer the courage to know he belonged to Lord, not Hitler. The clarity that gave Thurman and his descendants the courage to know they would bow only to Lord, not Jim Crow. And there's no way that I know to achieve that kind of accountability in the church without Jesus at the center. When we take him out, someone or something ends up taking his place – a pope or a personality, a demagogue or an idea.

No, the paradox of the church is that unity is not an ideal. It is a divine reality – a gift.⁴ A gift that can be received when we leave the judging to God and realize that the only lord over us is the one we find washing our feet, teaching us how to do the same. The only lord over us is the one who told us that the people we think of as our enemies are actually neighbors we don't yet know. The only lord over us is the

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated from the German (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1996, p. 36.

⁴ Ibid, 35.

one who encourages us to see abundance where we so often see scarcity and life where we see only death. The only lord over us is the Lord who doesn't lord it over anyone.

The progressive church worries a great deal over whether or not Jesus is the problem. But I think people like Howard Thurman tried to tell us that Jesus really is our salvation. The truth is, without Jesus, I would have left the church a long time ago.