

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
March 24, 2019

Luke 13:1-9

When the external circumstances of life are dramatic...causing the human spirit to make demands upon all the reaches of its resourcefulness in order to keep from being engulfed, the value of its findings... are significant.

Howard Thurman,
The Negro spiritual Speaks of Life and Death

Spirituals are the language of the soul. Who is not attracted to the depth and majesty and the beauty and power of spirituals? When things get tough, really really tough, that's the time when we need whatever it is that the soul can muster forth—and that is the time when life's most important truths come to light. Out of communities and groups of people who suffer most, a remarkable honor and strength and power **emerges**.

Terrible, terrible damage is done—yet out of the ashes emerges a phoenix-like strength and stunning beauty. Who would suppose that through suffering the world is being born into something new. I supposed this is the secret of God revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus—a faith to make us whole. Not later, but here and now, in the messiness of living. If you have eyes to behold the beauty...

*Blessed are those who know their need of God,
for they are inheritors of the Kingdom of God.*

There is no better testimony to resurrection than the power and strength and beauty imbedded in Spirituals. Do you remember when you first heard a Spiritual? I do. I went to a weeklong summer vacation Bible school when I was about 8 years old. It was not at the church where we belonged. I wonder now why my mother enrolled me. (I wish she were

around to ask.) The young teacher was African American. I don't remember the activities of the day camp but I do remember the music. And I remember her.

“Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.”

“You've got to walk this lonesome valley all by yourself.
Nobody else can walk it for you....”

“Joshua fit the battle of Jericho.”

The year was 1958.

“We are climbing Jacob's Ladder”

I wanted to be on that ladder with her.

Even young children have a sense of hard times, of overwhelming odds, of disappointments and fears— too big for their small hearts. And, they know and remember when their soul is touched and quieted.

“Swing low, sweet chariot.”

I remember and love these songs—and sang them to my own child. Why? Because I instinctively know that spirituals strengthen our inner world—and singing them to my son would strengthen and bolster his.

Dr. Thurman recalls seeing Haley's Comet as a young child. He was afraid the earth would catch fire. It was his mother who reassured him,

“Nothing will happen to us, Howard; God will take care of us.”

He writes,

“I have learned that life is hard, as hard as crucible steel; ...[but] the majestic power of my mother's glowing words have come back again and again, beating out its rhythmic chant in my own spirit...[with] the power to strive, to achieve, and not to yield.”

“... [S]pirituals,” writes Thurman, “are a source of the richest possible testimony concerning life and death.

They are the cumulative voice and message of generations of people for whom suffering and death was their daily food. And in haunting undertones and overtones the voice of spirituals is still vibrant and resilient and lasting, reaching across generations and the vicissitudes of life—(Thurman uses this word a lot.) “Vicissitude of life” —meaning, changing circumstances or fortune— usually unwelcome or harsh.

Spirituals are the language of the soul. Who is not attracted to the depth and majesty and the beauty and power of spirituals? The music goes deeper than words can express.— Born out of particulars but these songs belong to the eternal quest of humankind for God.

“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child...”

The song is an expression of pain and despair—of a child who has been torn from her parents. Yet in the midst of her reality, in the depth of her being, we hear something different. She dives deep into her experience. and what emerges is breath-taking—a beauty and power that is born not from avoiding or denying but from abiding.

Abiding. In her world of sound, of breath and heartbeat, of rhythm and vibration there is life, lived large—bigger than death. She soars —“ *Sometimes... sometimes. ...*” We hear the pain. But *sometimes* means that *sometimes*, maybe not most of the time, but *sometimes*, she doesn’t feel that way!

For the American slave, the pain of loss and humiliation is excruciating. Separation of families, a homeland —“a long ways from home.” But in plummeting the depths — one can discover that there is more—the present of God—the ground of all being—the mysterious source of all creation. Strip it all away—yet still... there is God. In many of the Spirituals, the *hereafter* is longed for. Yet in *real time*, God is here in the absence. In Spirituals there is no need to distinguish between God and Lord and Jesus. Jesus is experienced as the Lord of Life— even in the midst of death.

Some years back a seminary professor at General Theological Seminary in New York lost his son in a terrible auto accident. He left the school for many months. No one dared ask where he was. Then one night, he returned and walked into the refectory at dinner time. The room went silent. He spoke. “Friends,” he said, “I have been to the bottom... and I found that it is solid.” The ante-bellum slave preacher was the greatest single factor in determining the spiritual destiny of the slave community. Like this seminary professor, he spoke an eternal truth that he learned through experience. He was a veritable Door of Hope. His one important insight was that he was convinced that every human being was a child of God.

"You are created in God's image. You are not slaves...
you are God's children."

The music which sprang from these experiences are still passageways and *doors of hope* for all those who know their need of God. Dr. Thurman—"The one who knows with certainty that he or she is a child of God, is able to transcend the *vicissitudes of life*, however terrifying, and look out on the world with quiet eyes."

The Gospel scriptures are also *songs of hope* if we know them to be stories retold by a people suffering in war-torn, first-century Palestine—surrounded every day and threatened by fear and hate and annihilation. Like the American slave, there was never a time of day or night when first-century Jews in Palestine could not be torn from their families, accused and killed or beaten for any reason. They were less than real. If murdered, they were "just another Jew thrown in the ditch"—of no real value. These gospels have been called by some scholars, "War Gospels." Stories from the trenches of survival.

An important distinction that Howard Thurman makes concerning religion as it is practiced is "the religion about Jesus" and "the religion of Jesus." It is the later that is relevant and speaks to the heart and soul of people with their "backs against the wall" — another image from the writings of Dr. Thurman.

In today's Gospel from Luke Jesus is told about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Had slaughtered. Jesus adds reference to the eighteen innocent bystanders who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. We are not

given the details of these events, but they are part of the community's daily experiences and horror. But in spite of these calamities—"God isn't done with us yet," Jesus says. "Give the fig tree another year! God isn't done with us yet!"

"Repentance" is about diving deep into the messiness of life, into the pain, into the uncertainty, and reorienting ourselves with an assurance that the bottom is somehow solid. The Psalms, Lamentations, Spirituals, and the Blues—I love them all! They take us into the hard places and help us say out loud what we feel. They are visceral, cathartic, and starkly emotional. They move from deep sadness to unbridled joy—from hopelessness to assurance. In Old testament times and in Jesus's day—and in the cotton and vegetable fields of the South, music was prayer—the language of the heart and soul. And also by grace, prayers answered—for God moves within our souls and we feel the breath and strength of it.

Listen down deep, down to the core of your being. You will find music. You will find strength. You will find God. Do not be afraid to experience the full score, the *vicissitudes of life*, for we are One with God at the very bottom...and throughout.

Amen.