

One of the truths that we sometimes forget as humans is that in Jesus, God came not just for some, but for all people. The trouble is we as humans can sometimes forget how important it is to remember this fundamental truth.

You probably know the name Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who lived a life dedicated to helping promote this notion that all of us are created equal. But you might not know Howard Thurman. Thurman was one of the greatest influencers of Dr. King.

Born in West Palm Beach, Florida into a very poor family in 1899, from an early age he had visions. He'd see a face and know that something was about to happen to that person. He felt a deep connection to the natural world. While staring out at the ocean or taking walks in the woods, he'd feel an overwhelming sensation, as if gaining a depth of understanding about the universe he was incapable of knowing on his own. It was here, surrounded by nature, that he felt God's presence. Perhaps not unlike the Magi who gazed at the stars and felt compelled to travel to Bethlehem.

He felt it too in the peculiar encounters with strangers that graced his life. As a teenager, Thurman felt called to be a minister. In Daytona Beach,

where his family lived, there were no schools for African-Americans beyond the seventh grade. The closest black high school was in Jacksonville, a hundred miles away. Thurman applied and was accepted. He'd be able to live with a cousin and work pressing clothes to pay tuition.

So at 13, Thurman said goodbye to his family. A friend dropped him off at the train station. For the fare, his mother had borrowed money from an insurance policy. Thurman went to the ticket window with his battered trunk. It had no lock, no handles and was held together by rope.

That's when he learned the railroad required all checked trunks to have handles. The only way to get his things to Jacksonville would be to pay extra and have the trunk shipped by "railroad express." But that was money he didn't have. Thurman sat on the steps of the station, head bent, tears streaming down his cheeks. Then he saw them.

"I opened my eyes and saw before me a large pair of work shoes," Thurman would recall years later in his autobiography. His gaze traveled upward to find a Black man dressed in overalls and a denim cap.

“Boy, what are you crying about?” the man said. Thurman related the trouble he was in.

“If you’re trying to get out of this town to get an education, the least I can do is to help you,” the man said. “Come with me.” The man paid for the trunk to be shipped and handed Thurman the receipt. Without saying another word, he turned and disappeared down the train tracks.

He was always grateful for his mysterious benefactor. He began to think of everyone as being connected, in some unseen fashion, like atoms bouncing off each other, setting off a series of chain reactions, not at all randomly, but part of a plan, a master blueprint.

He’d go on to finish high school, then to Morehouse College in Atlanta, then to seminary and a series of jobs as a pastor and professor.

Twenty years later, Thurman stood on the other side of the world, gazing into Afghanistan across the Khyber Pass, the fabled mountain trade route. The last place he could have ever imagined life taking him that day at the train station in Jacksonville. It was 1936, and Thurman was an esteemed

professor of religion at Howard University. He'd been invited to India, Ceylon and Burma on a months-long trip as part of an African-American delegation representing the YMCA and YWCA—a "Pilgrimage of Friendship." Thurman had resisted going. He didn't think he was the right person for the job, even if it meant a chance to meet Mahatma Gandhi.

Now his eyes took in the seemingly endless path before him, twisting its way through the mountains. A place explorers and traders had ventured for hundreds of years. His mind suddenly became transfixed, shutting out everything around him until there was absolute stillness. Thoughts invaded his consciousness. Thoughts he knew were not his. He saw, in this illuminated state, a world not divided by nations' borders, by money or power, race or religion. But a world as one. All were God's children. Standing at the Khyber Pass, Thurman felt a deep call to action.

Weeks later, Thurman would at last meet Gandhi. But it was Thurman's vision at the Khyber Pass that really stayed with him. When he returned home from his trip, he set in motion a plan to form his own congregation, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco. A place where people of all races would feel welcomed. It was the first integrated,

interfaith religious congregation in the US. He hoped it would spark a movement across the country. But he never attracted much of a following.

At Howard University, his sermons had drawn hundreds of worshipers. In San Francisco, Thurman was sometimes preaching to just 50 people. All his life, he'd felt God leading him. Had he somehow misunderstood God's purpose for his life? Was his epiphany at the Khyber Pass an illusion?

In 1949, Thurman wrote *Jesus and the Disinherited*, calling for people to see beyond race. The book wasn't a huge seller. But among the few who took notice was a 20-year-old divinity student from Georgia. A man who'd go on to lead a bus boycott protesting the arrest of Rosa Parks. He was a virtual unknown at the time, called on to address an overflow crowd at the Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. There was no time to write a speech. He'd have to speak from his heart.

"We the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long are tired of going through the long night of captivity," the young man said. "And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality."

It could have been Thurman just as easily saying those words as Martin Luther King, Jr.

Thurman went on to become a trusted advisor of the civil rights leader, and in 1953 became dean at Boston University's Marsh Chapel, the first black dean of chapel at a university where whites were in the majority. He'd leave in 1965 and continue his ministry in San Francisco until his death in 1981.

The vision he had at Khyber Pass wasn't new. In fact as we celebrate Epiphany today, it's a celebration of the universality of the people of God, renewed in Christ. Traditionally the wise men were shown as being different racial types representing the three branches of humanity descended from Noah's sons - all are called to belong to the Church. Devotion to the magi has been said to originate from the so called 'dark ages' to show the inclusion of the Germanic tribes in the Church, each representing a different people. All are called to come to Christ. But there is another universality the magi show us.

They show us God is for all people. It is not just those who have some sort of experience of faith, those who have a natural interest in religion, an affinity with prayer and worship who are called to worship Jesus. He is Lord also of those who have no religious roots, those who in our secular culture search for what is true and good and beautiful. Christ is available to all. Some haven't responded, some have. Some are looking for him, some are not. But he calls all to make their way to him like the magi with great joy. And from Thurman's experience, we can learn very important truths, namely the importance of seeking Jesus, and the importance of recognizing that Jesus seeks all people without exception.

Thurman was a man who was deeply prayerful; he was always pondering what God wanted him to do, which is why his experience in Afghanistan was so profound, and why he also chose to leave Boston for San Francisco and persevere in his ministry even if preaching to just 50 people. So what about us? There might not be a star to lead us to the manger, but there are echos of Jesus in our world. Where is God guiding you? What is He calling you to do? Think about these things as we start the new year and take down the tree, being mindful that God is always there to guide us. So listen to where He is guiding you. But, no matter what God calls us to in life, we

are called to guide one another and help them respond to Jesus seeking them.

Two things with that, namely being persistent, but being patient.

Rev. Thurman helped to guide people to the truth that the color of one's skin, one's nationality or background doesn't put them higher or lower in God's eyes, and dedicated a lifetime to helping people see that truth. You and I are called to be the modern day star of Bethlehem if you will. We must present the Gospel to the world, even when it is costly to us or people don't like certain aspects of what our faith teaches. It can be costly and scary, but we aren't just called to talk football or the weather. The faith challenges us. This is why it is so important to know the faith and to think about it, and work to engage people in discussing the faith. Not by yelling, but by engaging and being persistent in planting those mustard seeds. At the same time we must strive to be aware of how our conduct, our attitude and how we treat others is a way we can either attract people to the faith or push them away from it. Rev. Thurman wanted to preach the Gospel to all people, and we have to do the same thing.

This requires patience and tolerance. One of the things we have always dealt with is tribalism, or a tendency to only see things one way, or to think that some people are better than others. It's the kind of thing Thurman battled with in a very overt way in his life as he dealt with institutional racism that was widespread. But in Afghanistan, he understood the truth of the epiphany in his own epiphany if you will, that all are God's children. And he dedicated his life to trying to make that vision understood by others. We have to remember that Jesus has come for all people, not just the people who go to Mass each week or share our religious or political beliefs.

Unfortunately as we are all aware polarization can be a big problem, so we need to look at it in our lives. Do we pray for those with whom we disagree? When someone says they take a position on an issue that the Church says is immoral, is our instinct to shout or say something inflammatory online, or to try to engage in an actual argument and discussion? No matter what your personal opinions on the direction of the Church, do you pray for the pope and bishops, or do you set yourself up as the final judge of all that is orthodox or correct? With politics, do you pray for elected officials, or try to explain or talk about why you believe what you do while being tolerant of the other side, or do you just find yourself yelling at the TV and getting riled up in conversations or online? I'm a very opinionated person; I have strong

feelings on the Church, on politics and other things like ketchup on a steak that is preferably well done. But through it all, tolerance is so very important. With respect to the Church, we have to remember at the local level, we work together, and at the universal level, we aren't a democracy but the Holy Spirit is guiding us. Change happens with the Holy Spirit and people remembering we are all working towards the same thing, sainthood. With politics, especially as we enter an election year, try to engage in conversations or arguments rather than shouting louder than the other side. Try to find some common ground. And with respect to those who aren't of our faith or who have fallen away, don't give up on them or look down on them, but rather meet them where they are at like Jesus. On the one hand, we want to bring people into the Church, we want people to see the truth and what our faith reveals. We have to be an apologist. But we can be so impatient sometimes. Thank God Jesus isn't like that but is patient with us.

Bishop Robert Barron gives an excellent homily this week on his website Word on Fire and in it, he makes the point that all of us are searching for the same thing, namely Jesus, it's just some of us don't know it fully. And it makes sense, because people truly mean well and are trying hard in life, and deep down people know that there is a deeper meaning to life than just

living in the moment, or moving up the corporate ladder or having more stuff than your neighbor. But faith is the assurance of all things hoped for. And it's a faith not just given to those of us who are cradle Catholics or those who are actively searching, but to all people. So let's strive to truly see God in all people, opening our eyes to the fact that that God came for all, and strive daily to love one another and help all people to find their way to being with Jesus for all eternity, by being engaged in the world rather than just engaged with those who are most like us, and through our words and actions over the course of our lives doing all we can to bring all to the heavenly kingdom.