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## Review – Howard Thurman, *Sermons on the Parables*, David B. Gowler and Kipton E. Jensen, Eds.

C. Vanessa White  
*Catholic Theological Union*

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**Howard Thurman. *Sermons on the Parables*. Ed. David B. Gowler and Kipton E. Jensen. Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2018. 157 pages. ISBN978-1-62698-283-3**

Howard Thurman, mystic, theologian, pastor, and educator is considered by many to be one of the most influential religious figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in 1899 in West Palm Beach, Florida and raised in Daytona, Thurman came of age during a tumultuous time in the United States and in the rest of the world, too. Throughout his childhood the experience of slavery was still fresh through the stories of his grandmother as well as the rampant racial discrimination and segregation of the time. His writings influenced the work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, who was known to keep a copy of Thurman's most famous book *Jesus and the Disinherited* in his possession at all times. A prolific writer and preacher, Thurman's sermons have only recently been transcribed from recordings and tapes which were made during his life. In *Parables of Jesus*, David Gowler and Kipton E. Jensen have selected some of his sermons on the parables which offers insight into his spirituality and his development as a theologian and mystic.

In these sermons, Thurman focuses on Jesus as the central authority of the Christian faith. For Thurman, Jesus is the one who created these parables to offer a window into who the creator God is. Thurman's format for the sermons also offer a guide to spiritual seekers looking for the meaning of life, a personal examination of life's journey, and words of hope for those who may be overburdened by the contradictions of life. Thurman's take on the parables is inextricably bound to his belief in the power of community. The Jesus of the parables that Thurman preached is one who is in solidarity with the disinherited and who stood up against oppressive cultural mores and systemic injustice. (xxiii).

For those who do not know Thurman, the editors offer an extensive introduction that focuses on his life and teachings. They acknowledge that Thurman was in many ways a "Tutor for the World." The reader may find particularly helpful the chronology positioned at the beginning of the book which may aid the reader in understanding the trajectory of Thurman's life.

The book is divided into 15 chapters, each focusing on a different parable. The editors have chosen to focus on the sermons that Thurman gave in the 1950s, most of which were written and delivered between 1951 and 1957. They have preserved Thurman's exact words with little editing. Because these sermons were preached in the 1950s, there was not the attention to inclusive language that is our current reality. Masculine nouns and pronouns are used throughout the sermons. This may in fact be somewhat startling for the reader. But, the editors believe that Thurman's life bears witness to a belief in gender equality and they remind the readers that these sermons were written over sixty years ago. The format is essentially the same throughout the book. This includes an introduction by the editors, followed by a short meditation, and then the actual sermon

The first sermon, "Growth and the Kingdom of God," focuses on two parables: The Sower (Mark 4:1-9) and the Seed Growing Secretly (Mark:26-29). It offers a message of hope. Thurman encourages the reader to not lose hope, for "the contradictions of life are not final." Thurman believed we are living the parables which highlight the consequences of our actions. While life may be challenging and difficult, for Thurman, there is always the assurance of hope.

Later in the book, we see Thurman tackle what for many is Jesus' most popular parable, The Good Samaritan. (Luke 10: 25 0 37). Thurman explains that this parable breaks down the barriers that divide us, the lines that every culture draws between those who belong and those who do not, and the lines human beings draw to develop their individuality and identity in the world. He states that it is the very nature of cultures and civilizations to make distinctions as to who belongs and who does not. Thurman moves beyond culture to remind the reader and the listener that we are to look beyond race, creed, and religion and to instead focus on the person. How we relate to the other person is paramount in our journey in life.

Throughout the sermons, Thurman lays out the parables for the reader's initial review and then begins to go deeper and deeper until he touches the inner core and meaning of the story. This is not a book that can be easily read in one or two sittings. Instead, the reader is invited to take a journey, a journey that may take a lifetime in understanding the meaning of Jesus' stories. This book is recommended for anyone who is a scholar or a lover of Howard Thurman. It is also a great

companion for the preacher who encounters the parables of Jesus on a Sunday morning.

For all those on the spiritual journey, use these words of Howard Thurman as a guide:

*Go thy way, all things say. Thou has thy way to go. Thou hast thy time to live. Do thy thing. Know thou that there is no other who can do for thee that which is appointed thee of God. So go thy way and do thy thing. (157)*

C. Vanessa White  
Catholic Theological Union

