The 40 days of Lent parallels the time Jesus spent in the desert. At the end of 40 days, he faced temptation before beginning his public ministry. Typically, Christianity frames temptation as a way to bring us down from our place of respectability and self-control. We are strong, giving into temptation makes us weak. We are respectable, temptation threatens to degrade us in some way. But, Jesus flips that on its head. Jesus was humble and weak after those 40 days. He knew he was a child of God, but was tempted to do three things: 1. to turn his hunger into immediate satisfaction (by changing stones into bread). 2. To turn his humility into a show of strength (by testing God), and 3. he was tempted to turn his poverty into wealth and power. Jesus was not strong being tempted to be weak or to lose his respectability. He was hungry, humble and poor. He was tempted into becoming a “strong man” with immediate satisfaction, a thriving ego, and all the glory that seems to come with wealth and power. Instead, he relied on his identity as a son in his relationship with the God of Israel. He aligned himself with all people of all genders who are humble or weak.

During Lent, we are focusing on this incredible book by Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited. We read this book in our Theology on Tap small group a couple years ago and our conversations impacted my understanding. Thurman wrote in the 1940’s from the depths of his own experience as a Black man born in America, living through the 20th century. He unflinchingly understood the harms Christians had done against his people based on race, religion and national origin. Yet he found in the religion of Jesus a solution for all people who, as he put it, have their backs against the wall.

Speaking about this is a daunting task especially as a European American, a US citizen, and addressing Christian church. (*Blond, I can’t see what I can’t see.) Honestly, it’s easier for me to share about personal experiences or my identity as a woman or even my mental illness. But, my experiences of otherness doesn't mean I can know all there is to know about another other. But God who sees each of us fully does know. And God calls us to reach across our divides with love.

Howard Thurman’s prophetic work shows us how the Gospel can be read as a manual of resistance for the disinherited. Now, more than ever, we need a manual of resistance. And in Blue Ocean speak, when we say “for the disinherited” we mean for the victims of scapegoating. Within my understanding of intersectional feminism, “for the disinherited” means for the survivors of intersecting systems of oppression. In Jesus’ language, this means quite simply for the persecuted, the hungry, the poor and for the poor in spirit.

Jesus’ ministry to the hungry, the poor and the persecuted always seemed incredible to me and influenced my career choices. Although I stopped going to church, I spent 10 years of my career trying to
do Jesus’ work, but without Jesus. I’ve worked as a special needs camp counselor, and in the mental health field. I’ve worked on violence prevention in Chicago public schools, and was a case manager in the foster care system. I hoped to use my strengths to be of help to those in need.

So, after college I packed up and moved to the hot dry southwestern desert of Phoenix AZ. I worked at a residential treatment center for teenage girls. Since then, I’ve maintained a friendship with one of the incredibly resilient girls I worked with there. She once told me that the main thing she remembers about me, beside our friendship connection, was that I cried all the time. I was probably super effective crying all the time. (Clarity, you know this story). The point is that I thought I was strong, but turns out I was pretty soft.

It’s so important to serve and give and love others - that may come from religion or just from being human. But, trying to change others from a position of so called strength isn’t all that transformational. For Howard Thurman, it is utterly beside the point what the religion of Jesus has to offer to those of us who want to be helpful to those in need. The most pressing and urgent question in his book is, in the religion of Jesus, is there help FOR the disinheritance? What really matters is what Jesus offers when we face our own 40 days in the desert, when we are humbled, when we are hungry, when we are up against that glass ceiling or our backs are against the wall.

All too often, powerful politicians or well-established church goers have used the Christian message as a tool of the strong over the weak, to administer to the people in the margins as they see fit. This is nothing new. Howard Thurman witnessed a Christianity that supported slavery, justified segregation through Jim Crow, and later he lived to see a church that considered the civil rights movement quote “a prostitution of the church for political purposes.” I wonder what he would think about Christianity’s role in justice today - especially with #BlackLivesMatter, founded by 3 women, 2 who identify as Queer. And also the threats of violence against Jewish Community Centers and places of worship, the plight of the working class poor, and the targeting of Muslim Refugees and undocumented immigrants. Here at Blue Ocean Faith, we have witnessed a Christian movement that officially supported the exclusion of LGBTQ folks from marriage and pastoring, under professions of Christian love. Like I said earlier, one experience of being other does not mean we can know all about another other. Still, Thurman’s question remains powerful and relevant: What help IS there to be found in the religion of Jesus for the disinheritance?

Jesus was a Jewish man familiar with the same kind of discrimination that threatens all people with their backs against the wall - and especially when it comes to race, religion and national origin. He grew up in the ragtag town of Nazareth (1/10th of Milan!), born to an unwed woman, poor, living under a Roman occupation. We can witness in reading that manual of resistance - the Gospels - that Jesus’ solution in his relationship with the God of Israel was liberating. It was transformative. It cannot be not be touched by birth, circumstance or identity, but at the same time, cannot be understood without them. This liberation enabled him to serve others, but not from a position of strength. Thurman writes that Jesus’
solution for himself and for Israel is the word and work of redemption for all downcast people in every
generation and every age, and it’s rooted in the heart of the prophets of Israel (18).

It is impossible for Jesus to be understood outside of the sense of relationship Israel held with God. Even
the seemingly unique ideas of Messiah, the divine Son of Man, death and resurrection were deeply
embedded in Second Temple Jewish thought, prior to Jesus of Nazareth. The history of anti-Judaism has
its roots in the global trend of pitting the strong against the weak. It is important that we move away
from dismissing the deeply Jewish context of the first century originators of our faith. And just because
Christianity became, through the years, a religion used as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt
us into believing that this is right with Jesus. It is written that ‘In him was life; and the life was the light of
all people.’ Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage in the face of their fears.

Fear is one of the hounds of hell we are studying today. It affects all of us in different ways, for different
reasons. But, fear has deep deep roots in the relationships between the weak and the strong. For the
poor, the economically and socially insecure, Thurman describes the constant fear experienced from the
conflict around them as a climate closing in, like the fog in San Francisco. We are seeing this today
among the poor and many different groups targeted for separation and exclusion.

For the dominant group, though, fear insulates them from a sense of wrongdoing when they carry out
policies leading to more separation. For example, David Gushee, a friend of Blue Ocean, studied what
Jews have come to call the “Righteous Gentiles” during the holocaust. Less than 1% of Christians actively
resisted the Nazi agenda of separating Jews from the general public - at first ideologically and then
physically. However, resistance was far far stronger in places with good quality Jewish-Gentile
relationships. This reveals the great power and importance of loving across the divide.

Fear can also affect our belonging within groups when we’re together in fellowship. Thurman says,
“When we don’t belong in the normal ways to belong = deep insecurity” (39) Our physical bodies are so
often the focus. Our brain chemistry, our sex, our melatonin, our physical ability, and our physical
attraction to certain people all mark us as vulnerable to exclusion within groups that we belong. Fear of
rejection may lead us to change ourselves to fit in, or even force us to check parts of ourselves at the
door.

Lisa Ruby shared about checking at the door expressions of love for her wife Lisa at the old church and
the relief that comes when we can belong in a group as our full selves. But, I know that some or a lot of
us still check parts of ourselves at the door. A friend of mine who grew up Hindu came to Blue Ocean to
see what I’m up to these days. She said affectionately (I think) that we seemed like a bunch of Ann Arbor
hippies. She forgot the Milan, Dexter, Saline and Ypsi Hippies, but she does know these hippies come
from all walks of life. One thing about BOF is sure - many of us have felt the fear that we don’t belong in
the normal ways to belong.
Last point about fear before I discuss a solution. Fear may also lead us to withdraw, especially when we just don't have the energy to insist that we DO belong. And even when we persist and insist on being full members, dominant members may carry out practices to put us back in our place. Fear truly is a hound of hell.

Jesus was surely no stranger to fear and his death was an attempt to put him in his place. Yet, radically, he understood that he was born from above as a child of God. He also understood himself as the divine Son of Man. Some Jewish people believed this teaching and some rejected this understanding, but not because this was a foreign concept to them – he just didn’t fit expectations. The thing is, Jesus didn’t want or seek validation from the people around him. He wanted life for people around him and sought only the glory of God above. His conviction that he was God’s child absorbed the fear reaction and immunized him from human scrutiny. Despite being among the disinherit, and violent acts to keep him in his place, his understanding of profound self-worth made him unconquerable from within and without. In this, he calls us to follow him.

When we are in the presence of God, of “I Am Who Am,” we free ourselves from the scrutiny of our fellow humans. We turn instead to face the one who concerns them-self with every hair on our head. Be careful not to lift another human being to a place of superiority that belongs to God and God alone. It is written: “Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.”

Even if we doubt the existence of God, or come from different faith backgrounds, I think this can still make sense in our everyday understanding. The genetic difference between humans, all humans, is exceptionally small, less than point 0.1%. We are far more similar than we are different. Yet, our social reality is that if we don’t submit or fit into society’s hierarchical order, we run the risk of being marginalized, expelled or killed. Our physical bodies and mental health are at risk. We must find ways to overcome this fear. Now, I’m the last one to be without fear, and I cry even when I see other people’s fear or pain, but there is hope in this teaching FOR the disinherit, hope for us all. There is a treasure buried in the field of religion.

It’s not religious or different to buy into the idea that those in power and comfort are superior to other groups - we all do this to some degree. This has been true from Pharaoh to Caesar to today. But, God opposes the proud, and gives grace to the humble. If you are among the disinherit, it is truly radical to claim inheritance from God – the way Israel did; the way Jesus did. It is radical for women and gender minorities to claim equality with the sons of men and even to be “sons of God.” It is radical for the queer and the excluded and the poor in spirit to receive the kingdom of heaven.

One last story. In 2012, I went to Emily for prayer. I was distressed and told her that I was afraid that if I asked God into my life, that I would get “sick” again. I had been hospitalized for symptoms of bipolar
disorder and psychosis in 2008 and I was starting to experience symptoms again. A week later, they took me to the psychiatric emergency room. I passively but very firmly resisted any medication, so they forced me to receive antipsychotics through injection. This was a humiliating violation of my body and mind, but it is legal and justified in today’s mental health treatments. After it was over, I walked back out into the main room. A little boy about 8 or 9 came up to me. He looked at me and said, “It looks like you could use a hug.” I said ok and he gave me a big hug. I don’t know why he was in the emergency room. I imagine he was also experiencing some distress, but I felt seen. Reaching out to this child, I ruffled his hair and for some reason said, “God knows how many hairs are on your head!” We laughed at this. But for me this was an important moment. God knows us, each of us, so intimately that even in our most fearful moments, we can resist and recover from dehumanization with dignity - as children of God.

CONCLUSION
So in conclusion, rather than focusing on what the “strong” can do for the “weak,” Howard Thurman’s book shows how the Gospels can be understood as a manual of resistance FOR the disinherited. Though tempted, Jesus did not become like the “strong man” seeking immediate satisfaction, a thriving ego and worldly power. Instead he relied on his relationship with the God of Israel - as a child of God. This gift of profound self-worth absorbs the fear reaction and readies us to walk in the way of the Lord. This way of resistance against the powers of this world does not guarantee ease and comfort, but it does guarantee life.