Jesus and the Disinherited: Deception  Ken Wilson 3.19.17

For the record: *Jesus for the Disinherited*, by Howard Thurman a book that helped change my reading of Bible. Recommended by Marquise Williams, with us first year, before moving to Detroit.

For years, my reading was mainly informed by interpreters who were white men with plenty of social status (also called privilege, meaning benefits that come with your station in life—feels like you earned it, but you didn’t). Good scholars but not tuned in as much to certain things, sometimes missing forest for trees.

As humbling a book as I’ve read. Point so obvious, yet obscured by layer upon layer of interpretive tradition: Bible is written by/to/for the disinherited. Key lens. “*Live in harmony with each other; don’t be haughty but associate with the lowly*”—to associate with someone is to understand their point of view, their lens.

Note on “disinherited.” Jesus addressed S/M to “meek who will inherit the earth”—a promise to those with no inheritance: wealth passed on from one generation to another. African slaves worked for no pay, had nothing to pass on to their heirs. Slaveholders accrued wealth by slave-labor, passed it on to their heirs. Plus the wealth generated by slave-labor flowed only among white people, including those who didn’t hold slaves. **Money doesn’t die,** it just gets **passed on.** That unjust flow of wealth continues to this day.

**Inheritance close to concept of privilege:** benefits we enjoy due to our station—passed on in a system that favors men over women, white over POC, straight over gay, cis-gendered over trans. Tend to assume we earn our inheritance (it belongs to us!) but we don’t earn a dime of it. Same with privilege: those mostly hidden-to-us benefits that come our way due to our race/gender/sexuality....

The incarnation is God appearing in **disinherited human flesh.** Jesus was born a peasant Israelite under Roman occupation with no access to trickle-down power of Rome that some of his countrymen enjoyed. He also suffered stigma of **mamzar** status—term of the time for bastard---person of unknown patrimony.
Like most of us he had at least some privilege relative to some others (male, not female, a Jew, not a Samaritan) but that was it.

Thurman says the disinherited are affected by 3 forms of psychic oppression: the inner world of the disinherited is subjugated by fear, need to deceive in order to survive, and by hate.

Today: deception. Classic text is in Sermon on Mount: “Let your yes be yes and your no, no. Anything else comes from the evil one.” S/M is addressed to the disinherited, poor, persecuted, mourning. [Same context is clear in letter of James]

Thurman says the relationship between strong and the weak (people on top/people on bottom) is always marked by deception going both ways. Whenever one group of people has entrenched power over another group of people, those on short end feel forced to resort to deception in order to survive. Understandably.

Kids will deceive parents to assert their independence because they are in a weak power-position with parents. So they close gap with deception. Like my daughter Amy sneaking out of the house after we were in bed—most nights for months until we caught on. She thought we were too strict. This was her protest.

But deception goes both ways. Any oppressive system depends on deception. Benefactors of system rarely acknowledge the injustice of the system. In church, aping society, older teaching (by men) said women were inferior to men. When that would no longer play, church got more subtle. Ever hear, “Women are equal in the eyes of God, but can’t be pastors--nothing to do with equality!” Or let’s keep minorities from voting by passing photo ID laws, knowing they have a harder time getting photo ID (can’t afford to drive). Not discrimination: “Election Integrity Protection Act”

So Jesus called out the deceptive practices of the powerful. No time for examples but they are legion. But he also spoke to the disinherited about the corrosive power of deception on their own souls. His typically-Jesus, straight-up-talk version: “Let your Yes be yes and your No be no. Anything else comes from the evil one.”
We have to be careful here, because Jesus fully understood that vulnerable people pay a heavy price for too much honesty with their oppressors. It’s not for the powerful to say this to the vulnerable. Jesus said this as one of the vulnerable to his peers.

Truth-telling, when practiced by someone with less power, takes **courage**. It’s harder for you to tell a hard truth **to your boss** than for your boss to tell you a hard truth. But truth-telling by the less powerful is necessary to overthrow the yoke of oppression.

We see this in our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. Fifty yrs ago, price for honesty was ghastly. Many gay/trans people stayed in total hiding whole lives. But a few brave souls started “coming out”—moving into the light of the truth about themselves. Bolstered by their courage, others followed suit. More people began to recognize the rap on LGBTQ people as scurrilous lies. The walls of Jericho started tumbling down. They were thick walls still falling

**We’re in the early stages of that courageous witness.** Many of you know exactly what I’m talking about. It takes time and courage to come out to yourself and to others. And it requires wisdom.

I’ve seen how being in a system that oppresses certain groups puts a muzzle on your honesty and breeds deception. I can’t tell you how many pastors I know who have shared with me their 3/4 sympathy over LGBTQ inclusion. They go up to the line of changing their minds but **stay on the safe side of the Rubicon**, endlessly double-minded, telling themselves “I still haven’t resolved this.” Right. Because the punishment in system for truth-telling keeps you from coming out to yourself.

John West, who spoke here recently was such a pastor. Spirit working on him but he kept it quiet. Until, guess what? he was prepping a sermon on “let your yes be yes.” He’s writing in sermon notes: “We should be a community of those willing to reveal things about ourselves that are hard to reveal.” And the Spirit said to him, **“Do you believe that, John?”** He wisely said, “I know the correct answer is ‘yes’ but since you’re asking, I’m guessing you think I’m holding back—not practicing what I’m preaching here?”
That’s when he got nudge: it was weekend of SCOTUS marriage equality decision. John supported it. He gulped, and in sermon, disclosed his personal views on the matter. That was upsetting to enough people that he lost his church. But he gained his soul.

When we are in a system that punishes us for telling the truth about ourselves, the effect can be corrosive on us. Because in the process of hiding truth from others, we sometimes end up deceiving ourselves too. And God would spare us that.

I want to stress: if you are in a vulnerable position on this, it’s not for me or anyone else to tell you how/when or to whom to tell a risky truth. Jesus speaks personal truth personally. That’s for him to whisper to you when he’s ready, you’re ready, and time is right.

Those who wrote NT didn’t willy-nilly say stuff that could get them killed. They said, “Jesus is Lord” but didn’t add the implied, “And Caesar is not.” It was true, but making it explicit could have gotten them killed. Book of Revelations is written in code about Roman Empire---insiders knew code, but it wasn’t open sedition

What I can be confident to say is this: God is setting captives free and he’s doing that with us together, as a community. And the more we walk together toward the light in our truth-telling, the more freedom will come to more people. We want to be the kind of place where we can tell the truth we know—especially about ourselves—when we’re ready to tell it. As the Spirit leads us.

When the Samaritan woman met Jesus at the well, he had more privilege than she did. Samaritans had lower status than their Jewish neighbors. They were “half-Jewish” practicing a minority version of Israel’s religion, not recognized as valid by the Jews who looked to the Jerusalem temple as center of worship. Like Mormons walking into a convention of Southern Baptist pastors.

Jesus strikes up a conversation with woman. He’s supposed to be too good for that (disciples scandalized). Starts by asking her for a drink, which puts him in lower position, needing her help. She’s a real theologian and ends up telling her secrets of the kingdom he hasn’t yet revealed even to his disciples. Then this exchange:
Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.

What I think he’s doing: He’s letting her know he already knows something she would otherwise hide from him. She was in habit of hiding this from any holy person. But his brand of holiness is not oppressive power. Her truth is safe with him. She is safe with him. Later she runs back to her town, “Come see a guy who told me everything I ever did!” He didn’t, but she felt completely known by him and accepted in the knowing, so anyone could come and be known in the same way.

This is the germ, the seed, the beginning, of truth telling. Even when we can’t be honest with ourselves, or others, we can be honest with God. This God. The God revealed by this Messiah.

We can tell him anything without fear of retribution. He won’t blab it to others, or remind us later to score gotcha points. Somehow when we say it to Jesus the shame/fear that kept it locked in that box inside us, dissipates like mold in the sunshine.

**My Big Ask:** getting thru some anger I’ve had trouble accessing about some past events. *Let me get into, thru, beyond this anger.* My dad was chronically irritated due to PTSD from WW2 so I’m super cautious about my own anger and as a pastor you really learn to limit your expressions of anger. Praying this every day.

Just doing that made me less afraid of my anger, more willing to face it. Recently, had a glass of wine and a little time, listened to some music, relaxed, got an angry psalm out, prayed it, then told my anger to Jesus—used my bad words—and for me, let it rip. Led to some unexpected sweetness, too personal to share. I’m not done yet, but off to a good start. And now I’m not so anxious /ashamed/fearful about my anger. I’m not alone with it anymore.

Oppression is a system that censors its subjects. Women are penalized for being normally angry. Or that skit—**Luther, Obama’s Anger Translator**? Obama had to be totally
restrained, and Jordan Peele translated it into normal anger. The truths we’re most likely to hide from others, even ourselves, are truths about ourselves.

QUIET REFLECTION

Offer a little meditation on the idea of a completely safe and private space with God. The kind of space devoted to saying anything without penalty, fear of it getting out, etc. Like a counselor’s office and the counselor is bound by law to keep what you say confidential.

So, if you like, get comfy in place, close your eyes if that helps, and focus on your breathing. Take 30 seconds of quiet to begin, quiet ourselves and relax.

Romans, who were the occupation force in Jesus homeland, looked with suspicion on private prayer. Prayer was supposed to be public, not private. But Jesus, knowing that emphasized the value of complete privacy in prayer. “The inner room” was only possibly private space in most peasant homes. Equivalent might be the bathroom

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Invite you to picture yourself in a pleasant and completely private space. Could be a room or a private outdoor space, all to yourself...[fireplace, candle,]

Invite you to imagine that God is with you in the form of a friend or other person you are completely comfortable with. You can say anything be anything in the presence of this person. Whatever you say held in strictest confidence. And you have no concerns about being judged...