

The Sound of the Genuine

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent, March 8, 2026

Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42; Psalm 95

Sermon text: The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” John 4:25-26

This morning I would like to share the work of Howard Thurman. Have you heard of him? If you haven't, you are in for a treat.

Wikipedia sums up the top line: Howard Washington Thurman (November 18, 1899 – April 10, 1981) was an African American author, philosopher, minister, theologian, Christian mystic, educator, and civil rights leader.

As a prominent religious figure, he played a leading role in many social justice movements and organizations of the twentieth century. Thurman's theology of radical nonviolence influenced and shaped a generation of civil rights activists, and he was a key mentor to leaders within the civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King Jr.

Thurman served as dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University from 1932 to 1944 and as dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University from 1953 to 1965. In 1944, he co-founded, along with Alfred Fisk, the first major interracial, interdenominational church in the United States.

That's just the bare bones; I encourage you to learn more. Meanwhile, the other day, I encountered a notice for an upcoming retreat at Trinity Conference Center entitled, Howard Thurman, *The Sound of the Genuine*. I looked up the title and discovered that was the title of a commencement speech Thurman delivered at Spelman College in 1980 (the year before he died). You can even hear the audio of it—it is well worth listening to. The speech is thirty minutes or so but I have prepared some excerpts that I think get to the heart of what he said. Here goes.

You are the only you that has ever lived. Your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all the existences.

And if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.

There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. And sometimes, there is so much traffic going on in your mind, so many different kinds of signals, so many minute fast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations long before you were even a thought in the mind of creation. And you are buffeted by these. And in the midst of all of this, you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you. How does the sound of the genuine come through to you.

When I was a student at Rochester, New York, late one night, I was coming down Main Street about 12:30, streetcars stopped running, no traffic. And I thought I heard water flowing under Main Street. So the next day, I asked one of my friends who lived in Rochester, is there some water or a river, canal, something on the Main Street? He said, oh yes, a part of the Erie Canal flows under Main Street. But during the day, so much traffic, streetcars, automobiles, you can't hear it. But when the noise dies, then it comes flooding up from under Main Street.

The sound of the Erie Canal.

The sound of the genuine is flowing through you. Don't be deceived, and thrown off by all the noises that are part, even of your dreams, your ambitions. All these things that distract so you don't hear the sound of the genuine in you. Because that is the only true guide that you will ever had. And if you don't have that, you don't have a thing.

You may be famous. You may be whatever the other ideals that are part of this generation. But you know that you don't have the foggiest notion who you are, where you're going, what you want.

If I were to ask you, what is the thing that you desired most in life this afternoon, you say a lot of things off the top of your head. Most of which you wouldn't believe, but you would think that you are saying the thing that I thought you ought to think that you should say.

But I think that if you were stripped to whatever there is in you that is literal and irreducible, and you try to answer that question, it may be something like this. I want to feel that I am thoroughly and completely understood so that now and then, I can take my guard down, and look out around me, and not feel that I will be destroyed with my defenses down. I want to feel how this is. I want to feel completely vulnerable, completely naked, completely exposed, and absolutely secure.

This is what we hope from our most intimate family and friends...

That I can run the risk of radical exposure and know that the eye that beholds my vulnerability will not step on me.

That I'm secure, because I hear-- I hear the sound of the genuine in myself.

Cultivate the discipline of listening to the sound of the genuine in yourself.

And having learned to listen to that, I can become quiet enough, still enough, to hear the sound of the genuine in you. For there's something in everybody that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in other people. [We are better at listening and hearing that perhaps than to our own self].

Now if I hear the sound of the genuine in me, and you hear the sound of the genuine in you, it is possible then for me to go down in me, and come up in you. So that when I look at myself through your eyes, having made that pilgrimage, I see in me what you see in me. And the wall that separates and divides will disappear. And we will become one, because the sound of the genuine makes the same music.

There is in every person, that which waits, waits, waits, and listens for the sound of the genuine in himself. There is that in every person that waits, and waits, and listens for the sound of the genuine in other people. And when these two sounds come together, this is music God heard when he said, let us make man in our image.

Some commencement speech. You can even listen to it for the original tape has been posted online. Look it up, Howard Thurman, the sound of the genuine.

I believe this is what happened between Jesus and the Samaritan woman he encountered at the well.

I think it is safe to say that Jesus heard clearly the sound of the genuine in himself. It was the sound of the Father telling him he is the beloved Child. He heard the call to go preach and teach and heal. He heard the hard call to the cross. He trusted that death would be conquered by life. and he was right.

And earlier, when he encountered the disciples—whatever he said to them, and whatever he saw in them—genuine strength that they did not see in themselves—caused them to follow, not at all sure of what that meant but willing to learn,

until the day when they too felt the power of the Holy Spirit and carried on the work of Christ.

And so it is with each of us. Each in our own way has the inner voice, the authentic self, the sound of the genuine. That ultimately comes down to trust in the you that God made—the only you that has ever or will ever be created, the you that no matter how many failed marriages or mistaken paths have been followed—or how much success and outward trappings of social standing—still longs for the deep and true connection between your soul and God, your soul and that of those you love, your soul and the one you meet.

James Ruff, in his retreat yesterday on Celtic Spirituality, quoted Richard Rohr, who said that to get in touch with our deepest self, to get in touch with the divine within, we need to get past “the steel manhole cover of the ego.”

Hear the sound of the water deep within that will then flow up into eternal life. Hear the “singing presence” of God made in the encounter of genuine selves. Feel the delight of God in beholding these beautiful and unique souls that flower and dance before and with him.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

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