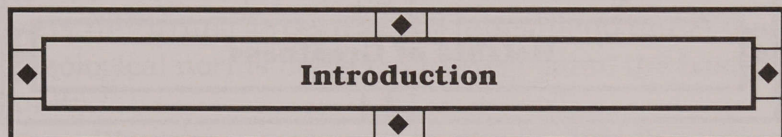


Viewing Life from High Places*

Psalm 139:1-18

Luke 19:1-10

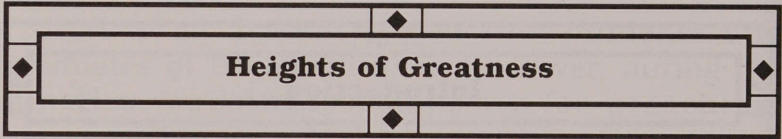


The word had spread! Jesus would pass through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem for the concluding events of his earthly life. Jericho, seventeen miles northeast of Jerusalem, was the oldest city in all of ancient Palestine, and its founding around 7800 B.C. made it one of the oldest in the entire world. The crowds thronged the streets where Jesus was to pass but seeing him was difficult except by those in front.

Zacchaeus, the Commissioner of Taxes for the Jericho District, was in the crowd. Reflecting upon his profession, he was probably skeptical of being too prominent. Tax collectors, then and now, are not in our pantheon of favorite people. Zacchaeus, however, had another problem. He was small of stature and could not see over the heads of the crowd; therefore, he climbed into a sycamore tree. Seeing him, Jesus called his name, inviting himself to his home, amidst the grumbling of his followers. Zacchaeus, experiencing such magnanimity from Jesus, offered to restore to the poor half of all he owned. Further, any receipts gained by fraud were to be repaid fourfold. This act of repentance and restitution caused Jesus to say to him,

*Eulogy for Harry Van Buren Richardson, the founder and first President of ITC, December 1990.

"Today, salvation has come to this house." This story states that no one is excluded from the invitation to the Kingdom of God.



Heights of Greatness

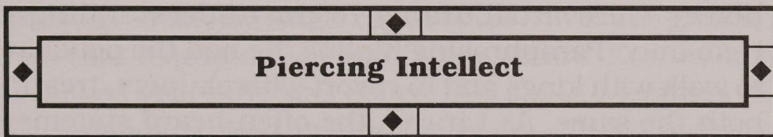
There is something about the aura of experiencing God's grace in Jesus Christ that makes the shortest of us, physically and spiritually, rise to the full measure of our humanity and seek a higher level from which to view life. Such was the case with Harry Van Buren Richardson, whose life we celebrate today as a fitting testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There can be no doubt in any mind that Harry Richardson is one of the great personalities of the twentieth century. It is interesting to speculate what caused this little man from Jacksonville, Florida to view life from such lofty vistas. Was it a Napoleonic complex due to his slight stature? Was it because most of his life and ministry were spent in the heart of the "cotton belt," a place from which he witnessed life in its rawest form? Was it because he worked with and was influenced by giants, men and women such as Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Frederick D. Patterson, Mary McLeod Bethune, and his own indefatigable and peripatetic wife, Selma White Richardson? Was it because Harry Richardson was committed to lifting the "veil of ignorance" and parochialism from the Black preacher, especially in the rural South? Was it because his association with

Tuskegee University, then Tuskegee Institute, fanned the flame of a love affair with Black higher education? Was it because he viewed narrow denominationalism just as divisive as racial and class separation? Perhaps it was because psychological and sociological factors were the driving forces dividing humankind rather than theological norms being the healing balm, the basis of unity.

Was it because he saw too much of Black religious life as a parody of a distant past, seriously lacking salvific qualities? Was it because the meaning of reconciliation and ecumenical dialogue was limited to dictionary definitions rather than being experienced in human interchange? Then, too, it could have been the result of seeing remarkable personalities relegated to positions of subservience because of race and class, and seeing lesser persons elevated to prominence strictly on the basis of wealth, class or position.

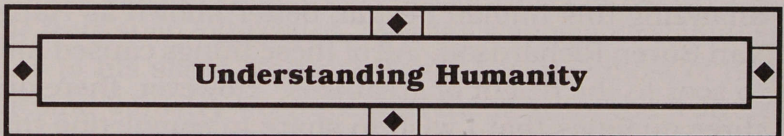
Obviously, all of these factors weigh heavily in analyzing this human *gestalt*, better known as Harry Van Buren Richardson. All of these things caused him to soar to the height of greatness. However, there are three qualities that I wish to share in completing this analysis.



First of all, Harry Van Buren Richardson rose to the pinnacle of greatness on the strength of an uncommonly piercing intellect. He had the capacity to

understand philosophical thought and collect its essence. Thus, these weighty concepts could be grasped by the average man or woman in an audience. Never did he resort to the utilization of multi-syllabic words for intellectual effect. Unlike most of us, Harry had the capacity to view the most complex situations facing humankind with corresponding seriousness. In each situation he found that glimmer of hope at the core of the Christian gospel.

He was Chaplain at Tuskegee Institute from 1932 to 1948, at which time he came to Gammon Seminary, Atlanta, as President. Richardson filled the chapel with students, faculty, staff and community people and travellers who timed their visits to coincide with the hour of his preaching. Never long, it was, nonetheless, penetrating, depthful, humorous and useful. I can hear him say in his quiet but forceful way, in a room filled with women and men, "Now brethren."

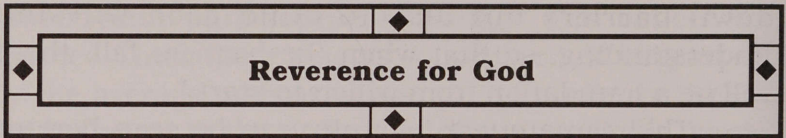


Secondly, his ascendancy and placement in high places were attributable to an understanding of humanity. Paraphrasing Kipling, he had the penchant to walk with kings and to cavort with paupers, treating both the same. As I travel, the often-heard statement regarding his relationships is, "Harry made me feel like a real person." In 1979 the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published a feature story on his life which stated, "My concern in race relations has been not only to break

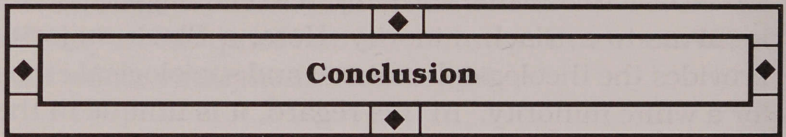
down barriers but also to build good will and understanding, so that when the barriers fall, there will be a foundation from which to start."

This same quest for unity can be seen here at Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC). It is not easy to form six denominations into a cooperative, ecumenical program of theological education. Each denomination brings to this mix a hundred—or more—year heritage and outlook for the future. With the precision of a neurosurgeon, Dr. Richardson was able to convince each school that more could be achieved together than separately. While still a matter requiring constant affirmation, the ITC experience is probably one of the world's most successful experiments in ecumenism. Its greatest gift is providing the reverse model of ecumenism. Normally, a white majority opens its arms to a Black minority. Here, a Black majority provides the theological, cultural and sociological ethos for a white minority. In this regard, it is unique in the world. A less-gifted person than Harry Richardson, with few organizational and relational skills, could never have achieved these ends.

As important as was the founding of ITC, it pales in significance when compared to the unity and spirit which characterized Richardson's understanding of family. Probably no single cause of his travel was greater than that required to attend family affairs. Even in his advanced years, he was concerned about members of his immediate and extended family. The crowning feature of his interest came last summer when he joined Selma and others for a major family reunion from which he gained great strength.



Thirdly, although not a theological purist, Richardson understood that God required the best of the mind, body, personality and all of the human spirit. Thus, he rejected all forms of sham, pretense, shoddiness and inconsistency as being outside the boundaries of theological acceptability. God was for him incomparable but also, in Jesus Christ, the friend, the companion, the Liberator, the helper, the father and mother of the homeless, as represented in the Black Religious Experience.



Early last Thursday morning God summoned Harry Van Buren Richardson to move from "labor to reward," from the "Church Militant" to the "Church Triumphant," from the sorrows of earthly life to the fullness and joy of an eternity with God. And, now, this "Quiet Crusader" has moved to his normal position of loftiness. This time, however, he is beyond the bounds of time and space, beyond the limitations of human frailty. Yes, it is within the limits of the imagination to speculate that he is there with God organizing the heavenly hosts into a celestial CEC—the Center of Ecumenical Cooperation.