

2020 CHARGE TO THE GRADUATES
Delivered May 2, 2021 by Emilie M. Townes

You are the only graduating class to get two charges from the dean. I'm not sure if this will help or hurt but here we are. In this unusual moment, let me begin by reminding you that last year I began by quoting Thomas Paine and his line “these are the times that try our souls.” And I went on to describe the challenges of the pandemic as we knew them nearly a year ago. We had no idea that we were just at the tip of the coronavirus iceberg and that in the coming months we would witness

- the murder of George Floyd and national and international protest that followed that was more diverse than any I can recall in my lifetime
- over 585,000 COVID-related deaths (and for some of us, that is not just statistics—it describes our relatives, our partners, our friends, members of our congregations and groups we work with—so it is personal),

- a presidential election that saw the largest voter participation in 120 years *and* was and continues to be rimmed with the big lie, a coup attempt on congress,
- the stirring words of Amanda Gorman—if only we're brave enough to see it. if only we're brave enough to be it—
- the rise of hate crimes against Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islanders that joins those continuing crimes against Latinx and Black communities, trans people, and more;
- 3 vaccines and the dawning of hope that this pandemic can be defeated,
- the conviction of Derek Chauvin
- the ongoing roiling questions we have about what it means to protect and serve,
- the end of another academic year
- and a year where you have moved on from VDS and are doing all manner of changing the world for the better things—large and small.

Usually, my charge to the graduates is my launch to you into your futures. But you've already moved on or are moving to your next. So, I am changing my charge to you into a check in—more a set of reminders in the form of questions for the journey.

From your perspective of one year out with many more years to go; how is your heart, mind, body, and soul? I'm asking about your insides and if and how you are caring for your thick isness as you are moving through these challenging times.

Have you taken periodic breaks to dig deeply and carefully into yourself and to do your first works over so that you better understand “the you” that you have been and are bringing to your various moments of living and to hold fast to the fact that as God's revelation is ongoing, so should your life journeys and awarenesses of the world around you?

Have you been tempted to pull a pre-2 Kings move and only sit by the city gate or do you live in communities that remind you to have the gumption of the four lepers who take up the work of going into the city—not knowing what we will find there--but at least being agents in your living

rather than roosting hens of despair? This takes, more than good
cornbread stuffing!

you see, when the writer of Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by
so great a cloud of witnesses, to run the race with perseverance, we are
encouraged not to abandon our salvation but we are also being challenged
to have endurance

which is to live with the past and in the present with a hope for our
tomorrows

this kind of endurance coaxes us to have patience in the midst of the
challenges we face and joys we revel in

this kind of endurance does not always depend on our smarts or our ability
to explain the unexplainable or how well we craft our thoughts in sermons
or meetings or petitions

this endurance has its heart in the deep *knowing* of faith and welcomes
our check in time with ourselves so that we can continue on

you see, there is an important difference between knowledge and knowing

a difference between technical expertise and listening to the rhythms
of a living God in our lives

a difference between being able to count how many people are sitting
at the dining room table

and sense when all are there and to know when someone is
missing

a difference between strategizing about your next move on how you
were going to get closer to the one who has captured your interest

and turning around time and time again and there they are
both have their place, and both are needed and sometimes they come
together in marvelous ways

but the ongoing challenge you will face is having the faith to allow
knowledge and knowing to work on God's time and not exclusively
on our own

and keep to the various tasks you have been called to morning by
morning and day by day

and remember that God is not calling you to do everything and be all
things—no, you are being called to do that which is needful, that
which you can do,

and to remember that countless others are receiving this call as
well

the journey to this kind of endurance is

heart work

head work

it means getting into trouble, making mistakes, having success,
starting over, trying again

and this is the good trouble of change and hope

rimmed with love and faith

as you continue to work your way to spirit-filled justice as
individuals and in communities

intentionally, imaginatively, strategically

Thank you for allowing us to accompany you on this part of your life journey. Stay in touch or continue to stay in touch and take good care. We will always keep the light on for you here at VDS.