

2023 CHARGE TO THE GRADUATES

each year, i am reminded that you and i (and countless others)

are often called to ministry in the midst of the senselessness of our worlds

now some folks would say that this is depressing

a downer

somewhat despairing

maybe even abject — the ultimate doom and gloom

but i think that this is an exciting call because it reminds us that we are working with a Creator

who delights in shaping the infinite

who walks with us, even when we feel that we may be on the road alone

who invites us into a vibrant creation that we get to help make

who welcomes all of us—yes every single one of us

regardless

though we are all too human, but perhaps not humane enough

all too passionate, but perhaps needing more guidance and better strategies to help find answers to the questions we seek

all too comfortable, all too disconcerted, all too anxious and not at all clear, let alone certain, about how we will do what we are being called to do at this point in our journey

or we may be still trying to figure all this out

we are finite

and desperately so

but, also part of the faithful remnant

who are the ones that keep on holding on and striving to make this a better world

a more loving world

a world that takes justice and peace

and yes, even love—but a bone-deep love built by ornery, stubborn, and
 bodacious hope that flaunts its stuff when times are tough

and folks, we *are* in tough times

but, i think this makes each of us extremely interesting to God

because when God shows up and then also shows out, God is holding us in the immediate
 infinite of the holy

that lets us know that we are not alone

and that we must reach out to others as well

because God's infinite is not a possession for us to keep, but a gift to be shared

no hoarding allowed!

and as chaotic and scary and violent as these times are that we live in now

there are also spaces of clarity and reassurance and love and hope and peace

but the thing is, none of these things just happen

no, they all require our attention, our participation—either we are calling out the
 shenanigans or being helpmates of evil

and there is little room to try to live in between these poles and think we can wait it
 out

or act like it does not matter that we have decided to do nothing

either we are a part of helping this world be what it can be and take a consecrated turn to the new
 heaven and new earth or be the doo wop pom pom squad of inequity as we cheer on calculated
 wickedness

for it takes each of us, doing whatever it is we are doing, or failing to do, to bring in either
 peace and hope or wreck and ruin

so, which will you choose?

now this is a somewhat sobering picture i have painted this morning

after all, i *am* a Christian social ethicist

but i say to you that senselessness does not, must not have the final word

so, as i give my last charge as dean to a graduating class, i want to gift you with something that has helped me over the years when facing the troubles of this world, let alone this institution

it seems like a small thing

some of you may say it is trite

but i assure you that it has power if you can embrace it, if not master it

and it is this: whatever you encounter in life and living, live your ministry and your lives with joy

now i am *not* talking about: don't worry, be happy

rather than looking for happy, i encourage you to look for joy

happy helps us see that a more robust future is possible

joy gives us the fire and insight to refuse to give up on making that future real

happy gives us a lens into the hope for the world

joy pulls us, gooses us into not settling for far too little in our lives and witness

joy helps you stretch into the ministry and scholarship and activism that God calls you to

to celebrate the spiritual gifts we've been given

to walk around in them

to sit down and play with the holy sand God has given you

joy refuses to let you live your life in the past tense

the sad what ifs

the dead-end maybes

the rootless and fruitless could bes

joy dares you to live justice

joy takes us out of the folds of the old wounds that make all of us perform unnatural acts like homophobia and sexism and heterosexism and transphobia

racism, ethnocentrism, classism, Christian supremacy, ableism, ecological exploitation

joy means creating communities that are bodies of hope and righteousness that spit in the face of the cultural production of evil

a community made up of folks like miss rosie across the street

miss montez around the corner

cousin willie mae down by the juke house

mr. press over at the barber shop

mrs. m.o. sneed lee who taught generations of children to read, do their plus ones, and not kill themselves on the jungle gym

mr. butler who also taught generations of children to love math and science through rhymes and counting games and took you fishing on saturday mornings

and really didn't care if you never caught a thing (and that was me)

joy—that takes like and turns it into love

takes care and turns it into passion

takes concern and turns it into commitment

joy—that takes all the ways that black folk, white folk, brown folk, beige folk, and all folk have come to love themselves and each other and remember that we used to leave people be when it came to who they love or face forward into who they are

joy—it's what gets God up doing a standing ovation in creation

humph...

it may seem that my invocation of joy in the face of searing senselessness comes from a place of a disembodied eden

but i am not arguing for a theme park with gerrymandered thrills and fears

this is not a banal joy that clings to the rimbones of nothingness

or a bout of holified indigestion after woofing down a mess of Christian nationalist gruel

nope, not a marvel comics world

no avengers
dungeons and dragons
dune
hunger games

ghosted
transformers
flash, or
ant man

but do take a break from time to time, but you must come back to engage and reengage in the struggle

because regardless of how tough it gets some days, i am encouraged to live my work with joy and to remind myself that i want to be *very* old black woman when i die

because dying of old age is the ultimate joyous womanist move

please join me

hallelujah, alleluia, ashe