Dean’s Charge to the Class of 2020
emile m. townes

It is rare that I quote Thomas Paine or even redact him, but I think his beginning of *The Crisis* is apt for us today—these are the times that try our souls. I do not like to use militaristic language in addressing the seriousness of global pandemic, but it is true enough that we must remain vigilant and cautious with not only our health but the health of others. These last seven weeks at VDS and beyond have stretched us in ways we could have scarce imagined in January. If you are like me, I thought that this coronavirus was a thing far away from me and those I care about and even those who may be a part of my community, but I do not know. As it has inched and now leaps and runs closer to so many of us, it is not something “out there.” It is as immediate as our breathing and as our alumna the Reverend Jen Bailey reminds us, this is a virus that takes our breath away.

Breath, wind, the sign of the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit that fills all of creation with God’s love, wisdom, joy, peace and justice has been our guide as we have made our way in this amazing journey called life and living. And now, we are facing a disease that would rob of this precious gift that we are to use to live out of faith and hope in a world that needs good news. But, so many of our religious gathering places sit empty or with only the essential workers—pastor, musician, social-distancing choir or soloist—to remind us of the power of the good news especially in times like these when our faith may be shaky or questioning or crying out in despair when we cannot be present in tactile ways when folks are sick or dying or marrying or birthing or all those large and small life events that knit us together and yes, even those that can tear us apart.

So, let me say this as I wind toward the end of my charge to you: too often we get the message that leadership means never showing fear, weakness, doubt, or pain. To never be lost, never be uncertain, never question. I say to you, my new colleagues, that this is the biggest pile of hooey spoken on the face of creation. Do not buy into this kind of lone ranger mentality—especially in these fractured times we are in. Folks want your presence, your compassion, your care, your love. Give these things with wisdom and an awareness that you do not have to do it all—that is what being in community is all about sometimes. But there is something about this pandemic that should get all of us thinking and feeling in new and deeper ways about helping bring in the new heaven and new earth.

Now I do not have the ultimate answer or answers on how to do all this as I join so many in tip-toeing in my fear of this unseen villain that can morph into an assassin. But I do know this: we must tackle this together. Through the self-isolation, through the loneliness, through the many ways that we use social media, if we have access to it, to keep some sense of touch into our humanity or our will to not just live but to thrive in the face of this pandemic that is trying our souls. A phrase from one of the old hymns of the church of my youth runs through my head and I offer it to you as we turn into a summer filled with unknowns: “Breathe on me, breath of God.”

Thank you for allowing us to accompany you on these latest years of your life journey. Stay in touch and take good care. We will always keep the light on for you here at VDS.