

New Brunswick Theological Seminary
Rev. Dr. Renee House
Commencement Address
May 18, 2013

“Choosing to Die”

[The first lesson: Numbers 10:10-15; The second lesson: 2Corinthians 4:1-2]

President Mast, Mr. Chair of the Board, my beloved colleagues on the faculty and staff, you blessed, exhausted, elated, soon to be graduates, family and friends, grace to you and peace from the One who was, and is and is to come, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, firstborn of the dead, and ruler of the rulers on earth. I am honored and humbled by the invitation to speak with you on this day of celebration. My theme is: Choosing to Die. I know it doesn't sound like a particularly cheerful topic, and I have more than once regretted having chosen it! And, please know, I did not choose this theme as a result on my eight weeks as a parish pastor! (Although there have been moments). It just so happens that these two Biblical texts became my favorites while I was in Seminary, and to this day form the moving center of my convictions about God, the church and the ministry of Jesus Christ to which we have been called. I stand before you today in the deep conviction that at this moment in history as the church experiences decline and apparent weakness, the spiritual vitality and witness of the church depend on our claiming our identity and our agency in this God whose heart was moved by the cries of some slaves in Egypt, this God who we know in Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

Moses didn't want to do it. He knew from the start it was a bad idea. He often lay awake in the night imagining a giant "do over," a chance to stand his ground and just nonchalantly observe from a distance, "now ain't that interesting, a bush burning in the wilderness. If I didn't have these sheep to tend, I'd go over and take a closer look." If only Moses could have a "do over." If only he hadn't been drawn into the burning passion of the living God who was bent on liberating a bunch of slaves from their bondage in Egypt. Beware the burning bush. Beware the burning passion of the living God. Beware the risk of finding out that God's "Yes" is louder than your "No."

I know how often some of you have lain awake in the night wishing for a "do over" as you faced the heavy burdens of "studying to show yourselves approved." The heavy weight of having too much to read, and too much to write; alongside the reality of lives already over-full. And I know the even heavier burden of having tidy Biblical interpretations and theologies challenged, of having coherent worldviews shattered, and of struggling to hold onto a core sense of your self and of God, while your mind and heart are being torn open. I know the dyings and the risings you have undergone at New Brunswick Theological Seminary. But, you stayed with the wrestling and made it to the finish line with a holy limp, and with the help of lots and lots of folks, family, friends, faculty and staff, who believed in you and believed in God's call on your life.

But you know, don't you, that with your graduation, you won't escape the night terrors, or find an end to your wishing for a "do over." Because God's "yes" was louder than Moses' "no", he finds himself in the trackless wilderness with a whole lot of murmuring people on his back. Confronting Pharaoh turned out to be not so bad.

Actually, it was pretty wonderful. All those great displays of power. All that muscle and mastery. All that winning. All that wild shaming of King Pharaoh and his evil empire. God's opening of a way out of "no way," the dry-footed passage to freedom, and the fancy-footed dancing on the far shore. Being the hero felt pretty good, no, it felt really great! No regrets for having investigated that burning bush and getting pulled into the burning passion of the living God.

No regrets, until now. The people are weeping, God is angry, and Moses is done! God might be sorry now for cutting loose Moses' stammering tongue. God gets a lashing. "Did I conceive these people? Was it my idea to bring them out of Egypt to the Promised Land? Did I miss the fine print on my call contract that said I would have to let these people suck me dry? The burden is too heavy for me! If this is how you reward me for saying "yes", then I say "no." If this is the life you choose for me, then I choose to die!" And, I get it. I have known how Moses feels. If I can't get a "do over," then let me die to this call.

Beware the burning bush. Beware the burning passion of the living God. Beware the risk of finding out that God's "Yes" is always louder than your "No." God's "yes" got me thirty years ago. In February of 1983, I wandered into a little church in my New York City neighborhood. I was twenty-six years old. Separated from my husband. Broken. Lonely. Lost and feeling like a failure. When I walked in, I saw a woman minister, the first I had seen in my life. She was holding the broken handle of a clay jar, preaching about Jesus and the woman at the well.

And in that moment, at the lowest point of my young life, I felt God calling me to preach and teach the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. I was drenched in living water. My own sense of call and my own sense of what it means to share in the ministry of Jesus is all wrapped up in this central image: a shunned, shamed woman with a clay jar who finds a wide welcome from Jesus. I read her story differently today, but in 1983, feeling shunned and shamed myself, I saw her in my image and felt the powerful grace of God in my broken, weak, clay-jar self.

"We have this treasure in clay jars." In my flesh and in my bones, Paul's words have resonated for years. In my own ministry, when I have felt most crushed and cracked, most powerless and depleted, most vulnerable and vacant, the light of Christ has shined through the cracks of my life, and this life-giving water has seeped through the fractures of my being to drench others in God's amazing grace. I know how my own human weakness and brokenness, how the very human "death at work in me," is taken up by the Spirit to manifest the extraordinary power of God. There can be no mistake about whose power and glory is at work in and through our fragile, clay selves. So, I get this part of what Paul is saying in his letter.

But then he goes on to say, "We are always carrying in our bodies the death of Jesus." The death of Jesus is at work in those of us who are called to preach and teach, so that life might be at work in those to whom we proclaim the word of the cross. Paul is not talking here about the very human death that is at work in us. He is not talking about our very human brokenness and weakness. He is talking about the death of Jesus, the cross of Jesus, this story of profound weakness and humiliation, as the manifestation

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of God's power, God's agency at work in us and in the world. Our human weakness is taken up into self-altering, world-altering weakness of God.

And it is a dangerous, volatile mix. Because in our very human brokenness and weakness, our chief aim is demonstrate the opposite. Our drive is to show our competence. To make a success of it. To convince ourselves and others that we have got it going on, that we are "all that" and more! Then Paul appears, admitting that he and his partners in gospel ministry are afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, and that they are a model for us. They have resisted all of the self-aggrandizing, self-securing, self-protecting impulses of their own human weakness and let themselves be filled by the weakness of God in Jesus Christ. They have refused the very human temptation to preach for personal gain, for affirmation, for success in human terms, they have refused to make the gospel acceptable and palatable, they have not dodged the scandal and utter foolishness of the cross. Paul will not let the cross of Jesus be emptied of its power which paradoxically, painfully resides in weakness.

Theologian James Cone, drawing a parallel between the horror of lynched black bodies hanging from the trees and the body of Jesus hanging on the cross, Cone says this, "The word of the cross we are called to preach is a lynched word, it is a tortured word, it is a humiliated word." In this parallel that Cone draws, the brutality of humankind is exposed. Not only in the cross of Jesus, but in all the crosses and lynching trees that cast dark shadows over the landscape, human brutality is exposed, although the perpetrators rarely see it. And in this parallel between the cross of Jesus and the lynching tree, we know and confess that God is revealed as the One who stands

in solidarity with the marginalized, the powerless, the lynched, the humiliated, the innocent victims of human sin and evil. We know and confess that the cross confronts us with a moral mandate to live out God's solidarity with the victims, and to stand with God against the life-destroying powers of the world.

But if Jesus is only the innocent, humiliated victim who undergoes a violent death at the hands of colonizing powers instigated by the religious leadership, then we are all lost. If Jesus has no agency, if Jesus is exercising no power, if Jesus is only the defenseless object of the devastating powers of human evil, then we are a people and a world without hope. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus the innocent object of murderous hate, is also Jesus the acting subject. Both things are true. Because Jesus chooses to die, because he does not resist the shame and humiliation of the cross, we are drawn into the powerful agency, the powerful protagonism of the living God whose love for the world is written in the bloody, scandalous, word of the cross. And it is in this powerful protagonism, this powerful self-giving love revealed in the weak presence of Jesus Christ crucified, that the very heart and purpose of God is laid bare. And on Easter morning, we can begin to see it, when this innocent victim is raised to life and comes forth from the grave with the word of forgiveness written on his flesh, and forever formed and flowing from the tip of his tongue.

On Easter, we can begin to see it, but Easter doesn't erase Good Friday. Easter doesn't un-write this dark, devastating chapter in God's love story. It is Jesus' self-giving, sacrificial life and death that God raises up on Easter morning. Easter is God's "Yes" and God's "No." It is God's "No" to the crosses and the lynching trees. It is

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God's "Yes," God's affirmation that in the cross of Jesus we see and know what true life looks like, we see and know what kind of people, and what kind of world, divine love is creating. In the resurrected blameless victim who chose to die, we are drawn into the strong protagonism and paradoxical power of God which is hidden and revealed in the weak presence of Jesus Christ on the cross.

It is this magnificent love, this strong power in weakness that is freeing us and the world to repent of all the self-aggrandizing, self-protecting, self-securing, other-destroying powers that bind and drive us. It is this magnificent love in solidarity, this strong power in weakness that is freeing us and the world from the shame and humiliation we carry in our bodies. As surely as we have been chosen and now choose to carry in our bodies the death of Jesus, as surely as we have been chosen and now choose to speak the word of the cross, so surely we are sharing in the cross-shaped life and agency of the living God. Alleluia for God's "Yes" and God's "No" in the cross of Christ, towering o'er the wrecks of time, the wrecks of human hate. And alleluia for God's "Yes" and God's "No" in our flesh and our bones, in our hearts and our minds, forever forming and flowing from the tips of our tongues!