

Students, with fellow faculty and staff, families and friends – welcome to this special celebration of the completion of your seminary years. It has been a rough and wild few years for us, with a global pandemic, changes in our institution, shifts in the culture and the church that might have taken place over ten or twenty years happening right now. I can't know exactly what you feel, but I imagine it might be both excitement and trepidation as you go out into this world that is changing, as you yourself have been changed.

Today we also celebrate the life, work, and ministry of Thurgood Marshall, the first Black Supreme Court Justice, a lifelong fighter for the rights of the oppressed, and an active Episcopalian layman. The readings today are chosen as reflections of his life and his legacy, and I cannot believe how perfect they are today for us as well. There are so many possible paths to understand these scriptures – as critiques of authority, as a demand for justice, as a resetting of what authority means in the context of justice – but I found myself thinking about a different question: what does it mean to sit in the gate.

Amos mentions it three times: the place of reproof; the place where some push aside the needy; the place where justice is established. But what does it *mean* to sit in the gate?

At this very moment, and indeed for the last few years of your lives, you have been sitting in the gate between one mode of being in the world and the next. In our tradition's language, many of you are moving from the status of a layperson

to that of an ordained person. You will take vows of obedience and discipline beyond what a layperson takes, putting you in a special relationship with the hierarchy of our church. If we see a gate as something you walk through, a linear movement from one place to another, from this point as you leave the gate of seminary and go through the gate of ordination you will live life differently, with different responsibilities to the community, different life trajectories, than what came before.

But for Amos, in historical context, the gate was the place where two parts of the world met: the outside world that supplied everything the city needed to survive, and the city world that was the source of power, governance, and wealth. The gate was the weak point of a city wall, to be specially defended in times of war or unrest. The gate was also a place where people's anxiety was highest – will I get through? Will the guards stop me? Will I be safe when I leave my familiar place? No one likes to just *stay* in this strange in-between place. There are places to go, people to see. And yet Amos reminds us that the gate was also a place of a different sort of transformation: teaching, discernment, reproof, judgment.

The book of Amos as a whole is a condemnation of the wealthy's continuous exploitation of the poor, even using things stolen from the poor to fulfill religious obligations. Amos will have none of this and calls the wealthy to repent, but he's also a realist. Those who reprove at the gate are hated. The prudent, he notes ironically, are silent in an evil time. Amos is not prudent. For Amos, the one who

sits in the gate is not called to prudence. Those who go through the gate, in and out – they have the choice to listen or not listen. The one who sits in the gate can only offer truth, can only point to the justice and love God desires of us and point out where we together are falling short.

Amos implies that there is may be a sort of responsibility to *imprudence* for those who sit in the gate: sitting there, still, watching the world pass by, speaking to those who would listen and who desire conversation or comfort or clarity, noticing where God is at work in the people and the world, and teaching about God's desire – what we in the church might call God's mission. It is the people passing in and out through the gate who are accomplishing that mission. It is the person who *sits in the gate* who reminds them of what it is, and helps them discern and be inspired and supported to accomplish it.

Amos also knew, as you may know that being prudent will not protect you. In the gospel, Jesus talks about leaders having a certain amount of public respect that they love to receive. Being human, we want to have that respect, and we will try to find it wherever we can. Amos tells us, be prepared to let that go. We may not receive respect from the world for the work we do. That has nothing to do with our work. We may receive other things entirely, times of discouragement, learning our own vulnerability, unexpected joys and paths opening, new relationships that challenge us, deepening of the relationships we depend upon. The respect received, or not, from the world has nothing to do with our value, and how deeply beloved

we are by God. You are beloved. The heart of salvation is how deeply God loves you and the world.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples that none of us should be called rabbi, or teacher, because we have one teacher, and we are all students of that one teacher. Me quite as much as any of you! I have worked hard to attain some specialized knowledge, no denying, but it's my role to serve you with it – I am your servant in your work of learning, or I have been, or I have tried to be, over these past years. You too, as you go to sit in your gates, wherever they may be – everything you have learned, everything you will be able to do as ordained ministers of the church which others are not able to do – you hold that in trust for the people who walk by in the gate. It's not so you can lay burdens on anyone. And you share it with them because that is part of your servant role, and you offer them the hope that you have found, and you reprove as reproof must be, because thanks to your faith, thanks be to God for this gift and call, you are a servant. A servant who sits in the gate.

This love, this joy, this promise of God: that is the good news I hope you, and I, and all of us will take with us as we walk through the gate, or remain within it. That deep, abiding love of God for us, and for us all as a community and a church and a world, and for each of us individually. For each of *you*. When you sit in the gate, remember that God loves you, God desires your flourishing and your joy and your justice as a part of the flourishing and joy and justice of all the world.

As you sit in the gate and share your hope and love and God's promises and desire for the world, as you decide when to be prudent, as you receive discouraging dislike or dangerous admiration from others – may you center yourselves in God, who walks with us all in every gate, on every path. May this joy of Christ's love fill you and support you, layperson or ordained, on all your paths, remaining within the gate, or walking through it.