

God's Empowering Word

(Commencement Address at New York Theological Seminary Saturday, May 16, 2015)

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Mr. President, Members of the Board of Trustees, Faculty, Guests and Esteemed Graduates,

Thank you for the honor to deliver this commencement address today. A good many years ago, our beloved Dodie Younger retired from the Board of Trustees and I assumed the position of Chair of the Academic Affairs Committee which I now happily yield to the capable hands of Professor David Daniels, the Henry Winters Luce Professor of World Christianity at McCormick Theological Seminary. What a great privilege it has been to help the Board, President, and Faculty design and implement academic policies for this school's unique mission of preparing men and women for urban ministry in New York and cities round the world.

Now the subject of this address is, "Proclaiming God's Empowering Word.:" At the time when you decided to seek admission to this seminary you had already encountered God's empowering word in your life. That eternal word had created the entire universe including humankind made in the divine image. Moreover, that word had become human in Jesus of Nazareth who dwelt among us, suffered, died

an ignominious death and rose again from the grave. Finally, that word had singled each of you out for a vocation of leadership in continuing the mission that Jesus began.

Appropriately humbled by that calling and feeling inadequate for its demands, you chose to submit yourself to the offerings of this seminary. Hopefully, you now know a lot more than you once did about what you do not know. That is to say you have not learned it all. But you are now better prepared to know where to look for what you do not know and all of this is part of every good leader's tool kit. Never think you know it all. Rather, when you walked through the doors of this seminary you encountered a deep expansive reservoir of thought and experience that seemingly has no end. Your degree now initiates you into that company of learned pilgrims who are destined to meet others all along the way: some more learned and others less learned than you but all as equal partners seeking increased insight into the empowering word of God.

Power is often viewed negatively as a dominating force bent on destruction. In fact, there is a saying that says, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." On the contrary, I claim that that dictum is only partially true. In fact, power may or may not corrupt because power is the capacity to do either good or evil.

As a matter of fact, power is the essence of reality. Without power we can neither be nor do anything. **Power** is the capacity to get out of bed in the morning, stand-up and walk. **Power** is the capacity to live: to think, write, speak, read, tell stories, love and everything else. **Power** is the capacity to initiate action and to assume responsibility for those actions. **Power** is the capacity to overwhelm and overcome various kinds of restraints. **Power** is the capacity to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God” whom we acknowledge as absolute power each me we say the closing words of the Lord’s prayer, “For thine is the kingdom, **the power** and the glory forever and ever.

Power is the capacity to gain liberation from bondage. **If the bondage is ignorance**, then education must be the necessary power that leads to enlightenment. **If the bondage is some form of sickness** then access to medicine must be the necessary power to restored health. **If the bondage is some form of prejudice** then the advocacy and exercise of justice must be the necessary power for effecting the desired change. **If the bondage should be some form of social, economic or political injustice** then participation in decision-making processes must be the necessary power to effect liberation. **But, if the bondage should be moral and spiritual depravity**, namely, ill-will, hard- heartedness, self-centeredness, greed, the need to dominate others, excessive pride in one's own

race, gender, religion, nation, or wealth, then spiritual power alone must be the necessary means for overcoming such spiritual disease.

Clearly, we have abundant evidence all around us of how power is often used to abuse people rather than to repair, renew, and respect them. Those who diminish the lives of the poor, the downtrodden, the homeless, strangers, ex-convicts, and the most vulnerable seek self-aggrandisement by trampling on the bodies of others. They can all do otherwise. They can use their power to enhance the lives of others rather than diminish them.

The tragic deaths of Travon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and many others evidence a careless neglect and abuse of human beings. Their executioners could have been less hasty. They could have been more sensitive to the other side of the conflict. They could have responded more mercifully to their victims' verbal pleadings for help and understanding. In other words, they could have done justice by treating them as the children of God they were. Caution and preparedness do not require insensitivity, arrogance and disrespect.

As followers of Jesus, we are charged to preserve God's creation by doing justice both to other persons and the rest of the natural world. If we fail in that task, then we become the victims of our own tragic actions. Consequently, our own

moral and spiritual depravity will surely corrupt and destroy both ourselves and everything else around us.

Alas, that has been the destiny of all tyrants and every imperial empire. Similarly, all perpetrators of injustice will one day die and turn to dust and neither their political, economic nor social power will save them from that certain end. Remember also that all who persist in abusing the natural environment will also perish because as a part of nature our existence is dependent on its well-being. These facts should cause us to pause and to take inventory about the spiritual and moral quality of our own lives. To what extent does our life-style contribute to the preservation and enhancement of God's whole creation: both the world humans have built and our natural environment?

God's word is the gift of empowerment. **God empowers** the weak and the powerless because God is merciful and loving and empowering the powerless is the work of love, justice and mercy. But when the powerless are empowered, they will need to rely on the continuing grace of God to use their power for good and not for evil. **God empowers** the faithful ones; those who wait on the Lord and who refuse to give their primary devotion to idols whether material or immaterial. Isaiah waxes poetic in describing God's empowering effect on all who resist such idolatry.

"They shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."(Is. 40:31)

God empowers those who work for justice; those who, like Jesus, accept for themselves the mission to which God called the people of Israel and today's churches to embrace: "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free."

I am confident that God has empowered you to help preserve and enhance God's creation by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with your God (Micah 6:8). Helping justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream is the good and right exercise of the power we now have and by God's grace, will continue to have for the rest of our lives.

Remember this one thing. God's grace is the gift of empowerment. **God has empowered** you not for our own personal fulfillment alone but that you might go forth and empower others in God's name. **God has redeemed** you not for your own personal salvation alone but that you might go forth and redeem others in God's name. **God has inspired you** not for our own personal enjoyment alone but that you might go forth to proclaim God's empowering word in your speech and actions.

Finally, let me say that whatever God has done for you, God wants you to do the same for others. God has set us all free from the bondage of sin that we might

set others free from similar types of bondage. Most important, God has promised never to leave us alone and that is God's greatest power: the promise that God will be with us every step of the way. That is our greatest comfort because where God is, all is well. In life and in death, God's presence is the greatest comfort and security against all fears.

May God continue to bless and empower you that will bless and empower all those whom you meet as you journey through life.