

AColyte

NOVEMBER 2010

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College

SURVEYING THE LANDSCAPE



Sallie Roo Surveying the Landscape at the Canadian Escarpment, Tujillo, New Mexico 11.15.10

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WHAT IS AN *AColyte* AND WHY DO I HAVE ONE?

Welcome to the first edition of the *AColyte* for the 2010-11 school year. This journal is intended to provide a forum for the Austin College community to discuss theological issues and keep up with what's going on in our various Religious Life programs.

We operate with a fairly broad definition of theology around here. As far as we're concerned, anybody who spends time thinking about which things matter more than other things is a theologian. That probably even includes you.

The use of the term "AColyte" for our title is based on our hope that, like an acolyte who lights candles in a worship service, we can also be "bringers of light," or "bringers of flame," or instruments to help "lighten things up." If nothing else, we can promise to provide ample opportunities to practice the virtues of patience and forgiveness.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Thinking about the Bible
in the Corner of the Chapel
and Behind the Wheel of a Large Automobile
Fall 2010

This is a few years old, but we've been asked to share it again.

What follows might be of interest to a bunch of college students who occasionally spend time wondering how to figure out which things matter more than other things:

*A Big Back
Has a Big Front.*
--Tom Robbins, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*

*Little fish is eaten by the big fish
Swallowed up head to tail
Big fish is eaten by the bigger fish
'Til we're all in belly of the whale.*
--Kevin Welch

Sat here by the stony brook
until the gray day turned to dusk.
When up swam a fish with a children's book,
who thought that I was lost.
He was on his way to the salmon hive;
that's where they go to breed.
Saw me sitting on this log
and thought I'd like to read.
--The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band

But enough about fish.

A few years ago, the *AColyte* included a "Theologian of the Month" feature in which we discussed the prevalence and resonance of biblical themes by identifying and discussing the points of contact between the lyrics of the not particularly Christian Nashville singer/songwriter **Kevin Welch** (*Pushing Up Daisies, That's What I Like about You, Too Old to Die Young*) and the Bible.

Here's part of what Kevin wrote when he saw that *AColyte*:

You know, so far over this long stretch of my life from the mid teens to the late 40's, I don't consider myself a Christian, based on the fundamental requirements I was told back in the Baptist Sundays of my youth. I remain interested in the concept, though the mystery of it all is so frustrating that I just get mad. And then I get mad at the guys who pretend to understand it. It's quite a puzzle.

I wonder sometimes-what Staff of Life have Theologians like yourself found to wrap yourselves around. It must be something worthwhile or else you would be doing something else. What is it? Do you have an answer to that?

I think about this stuff all the time. I'm badly way-laid by the politics of right wing fundamentalists and by what I take to be terrible mis-readings of the Christ message. So, thanks for those clear verses of common sense. Those guys wrote pretty well huh? kw

Here's my response to him:

Kevin,

I hope you understand that you cannot send e-mail to someone in my line of work that says

I wonder sometimes-what Staff of Life have Theologians like yourself found to wrap yourselves around? It must be something worthwhile or else you would be doing something else. What is it? Do you have an answer to that?

without getting a long response.

A few years ago, you stood on my front porch and told me, "It's all about Truth. You have to start with the Truth. You can't drive a nail through the Truth." (I could tell by the look in your eye that the "truth" you were talking about was "truth with a capital "T.")

That's my answer to your questions about the Staff-of-Life I have wrapped myself around.

It's about the Truth.

It's got nothing to do with winning arguments or convincing myself or anybody else that people like us are right and everybody else is wrong. It's not about speaking on God's behalf or telling people that they have to change in order to be loved. It's not about knowing some list of right answers or having a "Get Out of Hell Free" card. It's not about making a list of the people God doesn't love. It's not about scolding or condemning. It's not about giving intellectual assent to a series of propositions.

In some way that I don't claim completely to understand, there is Truth in the stories in the Bible. They help me and people like me make sense of the world where we woke up this morning. Somehow, the world looks clearer to us when viewed through a biblical, Christian lens.

The Truth I wrap myself around is based on my belief or decision or observation that patience, longing, commitment, humility, sacrifice, hope, forgiveness, graciousness, and love are part of the truth about the world.

The Bible helps me recognize the universal and abiding nature of some of those human experiences. It helps me figure out and talk about some of the things that really matter.

I consider myself to be part of a community of people who have gathered prayerfully around those texts for centuries and had the experience of being addressed from beyond ourselves as we've studied and discussed them.

When we open the Bible, we're not looking for scientific facts. When we're at our best (and most faithful) we're not looking for proofs that people like us are right and that people who don't see things the same way that we do are wrong. We're not searching for some bludgeon that we can use to make other people act like we think they should.

When I open the Bible, I find ideas, images, and insights to help me think about what really matters and to figure out how we ought to live – together with everybody else that's here – on this shrinking and fragile planet.

As you know, the tribe that I'm part of has often used biblical texts and ideas to deify its prejudices and claim that God's limits, opinions, and preferences coincide exactly with ours. That has never been helpful.

Maybe our friend Ray Wylie Hubbard was pretty close to the truth:

*I don't concern myself with how Jesus was born
or if he was raised from the dead.
I believe what it comes down to
is the things that he said.
So many more than Judas have betrayed his name.
And his beautiful, ancient wisdom
has been prostituted for personal gain.*

*But the real trick is to find a reason to believe
in spite of all of this...*

The “reason to believe” is that the Bible and the Church lead many people to lives of humility, service, gratitude, and love.

I do what I do for a living because

- a. Jesus deserves more than Fred Phelps and Pat Robertson;
2. everybody deserves to be treated like they matter;
- iii. if you look carefully, we're a pretty interesting species living in a pretty interesting place; and
- D. whether you call it God, your Higher Power, or the Superego, there's something going on out there beyond our ability to comprehend, predict, or control. And the fact that we're here at all (and here in a place that includes air conditioning, chocolate ice cream, stereos in cars, and lots and lots of self-giving and sacrificial love) suggests that that Something likes us.

The Bible is a great source of ideas, images, and insights. It's a good place to go to do some thinking about Which Things Matter More than Other Things. People like Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, and Martin Luther King Jr. entered the world described by the Bible and came out living lives of selflessness, service, gratitude, and love.

Everybody's got to stand somewhere.

I choose to stand there. Here are some of the reasons why:

A Sampler of Old Testament **“Ideas, Images, and Insights”**

What follows is a brief and incomplete list of some passages in the Old Testament that might be helpful for folks who are engaged in serious thinking about What Really Matters.

Before we start, a couple disclaimers are in order:

1. This is by no means any kind of exhaustive list. Other folks find ideas, images, and insights from different passages. We need to pay serious attention to all of them. Different eyes looking at the Bible and the world will see different things. We're never finished doing this.
2. The list that follows was produced in about an hour at a hotel in San Francisco in 2005. It is not the result of long and specific study undertaken specifically for this task. That's important because we're talking about the long-term familiarity, relevance, and usefulness of these passages – at least for one guy.

3. The point is not to give any kind of exhaustive, correct, or orthodox list. The point is simply to demonstrate a way of thinking about the Bible that presumes that paying attention to these texts is still interesting and maybe even helpful.

Here's the list:

Genesis 1

These words about the creation of "the heavens and the earth" are interesting for several reasons. Does it seem true to you that we're not here simply as a result of some accidental collision of molecules, that there is purpose to all of this, that what's here is good, and that people are fully part of the whole plan? At the very least, that's interesting stuff to think about.

Genesis 2:18

"It is not good that the human should be alone."

In this one verse, the Bible suggests that creation isn't complete until there is a human community. Although we like sometimes to pretend that we are simply and completely and ultimately individuals, that doesn't really resonate with our experience. Until I meet someone who conceived herself and bore herself, I'm gonna presume that being human means being part of some communities.

Genesis 2:19

So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

In a really compelling and often overlooked scene, God follows the comment in 2:18 that it isn't good for the human to be alone by creating all sorts of new animals and then bringing them to Adam "to see what he would call them."

I think that to treat this simply as prologue to the creation of Eve is to miss a very significant feature in the development of the characterization in Genesis of what it means to be human.

In verse 19, God creates all these other animals, but then Adam gets to name them. And, according to the text,

*Whatever the man called every living creature,
that was its name.*

That's important.

I have a degree from a Presbyterian seminary. My doctoral studies involved Presbyterian Church History. I've read hundreds and hundreds of pages of Calvinist theology. I'm quite familiar with characterizations of a sort of over-functioning, OCD God who is apparently unwilling or unable to let *anything* happen without controlling it completely.

But that's not the God of Genesis 2:19. In this scene, God invites Adam, the human, to participate in the ongoing process of creation. It's really a pretty amazing story. God lets Adam decide what to call all these new beings. According to Genesis, one of the prerogatives and abilities of the human is to *name* particular elements of creation – to play a real role in the ordering of things.

Genesis 3:1-12

This is the story of Adam and Eve eating the Forbidden Fruit. That story of that man and that woman denying their dependence on anything beyond themselves, denying their responsibility for their actions, separating themselves from each other, and separating themselves from God feels like the way people (including me) behave in the world where we woke up this morning. The truth that's in this story has nothing to do with whether or not you believe in talking snakes.

Genesis 6-9

This is where we find the stories of Noah and the Flood. Since everybody who wrote down, read, told, or heard this story had seen a rainbow, we can safely assume this story is much more about rainbows and promises than punishment and mass drowning. The rainbow part reminds us that the God we meet in the Bible is patient and compassionate, not vengeful and petulant. The folks who wrote down or remain stuck on the stories in which God seems vengeful and petulant seem to have missed some important points along the way.

This is also the first place in the Bible where God makes a covenant. And the covenant that God remembers every time a rainbow appears is a covenant between God and “every living creature (Genesis 9:15-16).” Not just one tribe. Not just one religion. But “every living creature.”

Genesis 12

This is the chapter where God promises to make Abraham's descendants a great nation that will be a blessing to all nations. That gets overlooked a lot by folks seeking to make exclusive claims about their tribe's special relationship with God. But the suggestion here is that the special status of Abraham's descendants (later the Bible tells us that means Israel and the Church) will be manifested in their service and usefulness to all nations.

Exodus 3:7-10

This passage is kind of the “topic sentence” of the whole Old Testament. Here we learn that God is the One who sees, hears, knows, comes down, brings up, and sends. The Biblical story is the story of an active, attentive, interested, and intentional God.

Exodus 20:1-17

Here's the first place we see the list that is traditionally called the Ten Commandments.

It's time for a quick grammar interlude:

While Christians speak of ten commandments, the Jews speak of ten words. That is actually what the original Hebrew of the Bible calls them. ... Although [the] Hebrew [language] has an imperative, the usual way to express a prohibition was not with a negative imperative but with a negative future. So our usual translation – “Thou shalt not” – is entirely legitimate. But a negative future can also express a promise.”

--Albert C. Winn, A Christian Primer (1990), pp. 185, 191

The Israelites were all by themselves in the middle of the wilderness. Moses had been gone for a long time and they were scared to death. It doesn't make sense to believe that the best thing for God to do in that situation would be to slam down a list of threats and prohibitions and reasons for people to punish each other.

Those people were scared to death. They didn't need threats, they needed comfort. And that's exactly what they got. God didn't tell them, "Here you go—here's a bunch of excuses for you to punish each other." That's what some scribes and Pharisees and Presbyterians think we have with the Ten Commandments—a bunch of excuses to punish other people. But what God was basically telling the Israelites was, "Chill out, it's gonna be alright. I'm not going anywhere. When I signed on with the Hebrew nation, I signed on for the whole duration. And by the time I'm finished with y'all your lives will be great. You won't get confused about what's important and what's not. You'll always know who I am and where I am. You won't talk the talk without walking the walk. You won't work so hard it makes you sick. You'll respect each other. You won't need to kill, you won't cheat on each other, you won't steal, you won't lie, and you won't wish for stuff you've got no business wishing for. It'll be great!"

The Ten Commandments are not a list of excuses for God or preachers or lawyers to punish people. It's not a list of threats—you know, "You will not commit adultery, OR ELSE!" It's a list of promises from a loving God to a bunch of scared, confused, but clearly beloved people. It's not about punishment, it's about promises.

Leviticus 18-19

These two chapters include all sorts of interesting statements. Some of them seem entirely relevant for us as we read them thousands of years after they were originally written (*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*). Others seem time-bound and irrelevant in the contemporary world (*It is an abomination for a man to mar the edges of his beard*). There's also a verse in there that says, *It is an abomination for a man to lie with a man as with a woman*. It's an interesting question whether that verse belongs on the Entirely Relevant list or the Time-Bound and Irrelevant list.

Deuteronomy 6

In the course of the Biblical story, this chapter is part of a long series of instructions from God through Moses to the nation of Israel telling them how appropriately to behave as God's chosen community. One of the interesting ideas here is that when the Israelites get to the Promised Land and enjoy its bounties they need to "take heed lest [they] forget the Lord, who brought [them] out of the land of Egypt." This idea that we need never to conclude that the blessings of our lives are clearly the result of our personal superiority and supreme deserving seems especially useful on a campus full of extremely bright and talented people—all of whom are among the most affluent 0.1% of all human beings who have ever lived.

Deuteronomy 10

In another piece of advice about living as a community with a special relationship with God, Moses says that "The Lord executes justice for widows and orphans and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing." Then he tells the Israelites, "Love the sojourner, therefore; for you were once sojourners in the land of Egypt." Widows, orphans, and sojourners (strangers) were all people in that society who didn't have an adult male looking out for them. The implication of this passage is that people who claim to be living in relationship with God

should take care to look out for the people among them who have no one else looking out for them.

Ruth

It's cool that – despite the claims of lots of people in the Bible and in the present day that only people from one community are acceptable in God's sight – there was a Moabite woman (not an Israelite) who was part of the ancestry for King David and Jesus.

1 Samuel 3

God keeps waking Samuel up, but Samuel thinks it's his teacher Eli calling him. Finally, Eli figures out that it might be God calling Samuel and encourages him to respond to God's call. It's a famous story among people who talk a lot about God calling folks to ministry, but without the old guy, it would just be a story about Samuel's bad dreams. Us old guys kind of like that.

1 Samuel 11-12

King David, Israel's greatest king, has his next door neighbor killed so that he can sleep with his wife. Yikes! There's something interesting about the fact that this story has been included in the Bible and studied for thousands of years. David was a great king. He did a horrible thing. And he eventually faced it and owned up. All of that sounds like the same world where we are now.

1 Kings 19

Whiny Elijah runs away from Jezebel and tries to convince God that he's the only faithful one left. God gently but firmly tells him to get over himself and sends him back to his community. And, to his credit, Elijah goes back, quits whining, and gets busy.

2 Kings 22

The people seeking to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem find old tablets that contain the Torah – what we know as the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy. They're not sure exactly what they've got, so they go to their wise religious leader and she helps them. Did you catch that? SHE helps them. According to this story, the wise teacher to whom they looked for guidance was a woman. And it's not treated as any surprise at all. It is taken as a matter of course that sometimes the leaders whose wisdom and insight guided the community were women.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Jonah

These three books seem to go together. Ezra and Nehemiah are books about how important it was for the Israelites to maintain the integrity of their community. There is value, even today, in doing some thinking about what distinguishes our particular faith communities. It makes a difference how we talk about who we are and how we're distinctive. But it sure is easy to go from healthy concern for distinctiveness to exclusivism that claims that God only likes people like us. That's where Jonah comes in. Although the big fish is clearly the most widely recognized part of his story, the book of Jonah is really about the inappropriateness and ridiculousness of assuming that God only likes people like us – people in our tribe. At the end of that story, Jonah pitches a fit because God is gracious and compassionate toward the extremely non-Israelite Ninevites. And the message is pretty clear that Jonah – like all the rest of us with exclusivist tendencies – should get over himself and recognize that God is always gracious and merciful; even when we don't approve of God's choices.

Job 38

This chapter comes late in the book of Job. After all those horrible things happen to Job and all his well-meaning friends try rationally to explain to him why they happened, Job finally gets fed up and really gives God a piece of his mind. He essentially calls God an idiot and scolds him for making such a mess of things. Then, as we get to chapter 38, God responds to Job.

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?"

This begins five chapters of God essentially telling Job, "Step up, smart guy! Clue me in about some of this stuff. Fill the room with your wisdom!"

Somehow there seems to be a little affection in God's response to Job. You don't respond at that length to people you don't care about. And, at least when I read this, it's reassuring. The suggestion of the book of Job is that God can handle God's business, but also that God is attentive and responsive to all of us who stumble along and try to make sense of the things that happen to us.

Psalm 19

*The heavens are telling the glory of God,
And the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech
And night to night declares knowledge.*

The Psalmist is essentially saying, "This whole place is great! And it's so interesting!" Go to the Lake Campus, sit down, and pay close attention to everything around you that moves or is alive. I think you might begin to get a little sense of what motivated this psalmist.

Psalm 20

This is a typical prayer Psalm, except that it's not a prayer for the psalmist or the reader, it's a prayer for other people.

*The Lord answer **you** in the day of trouble.*

*May we shout for joy over **your** victory.*

It's a great piece of generous, other-directed literature.

Psalm 22

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?...
My heart is like wax...
I can count all my bones...*

Wouldn't that make a good blues song?

Psalm 23:5

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

Psalm 139

*Whither shall I go from your Spirit,
Or whither shall I flee from your presence.
If I ascend to heaven, thou art there.
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there.*

Among the ideas, images, and insights in the Bible, perhaps none is more beautiful and useful than the notion that you'll never be anywhere – before or after you die – where you are out of the reach of God's love.

That might be a "Staff of Life" that we could wrap ourselves around (see p. 1 above).

Isaiah 43:18-19

*Consider not the former things
Or remember the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing,
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

This is a great reminder for us all to remember that new stuff happens all the time.

It's not all good. But some of it is.

There is some comfort in the recognition that the primary dynamic of the universe is not a stand pat, "same as it ever was," God.

Jeremiah 29:7

*Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,
For in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

That has all sorts of potential ramifications:

- Pay your taxes.
- Support public schools.
- Clean up your messes.
- Help each other.
- See Deuteronomy 10:18-19.

Ezekiel 3

At the beginning of his ministry, the prophet Ezekiel eats a scroll containing the Word of God. He doesn't memorize the rules or study some list of facts or doctrines, the whole thing becomes part of who he is. In addition to the potential connection with the Christian Lord's Supper, there also seems to be some kind of insight here about the goal and process of Bible study.

Hosea 11

After a fairly detailed accounting of Israel's many sins and really lousy behavior as God's chosen people, God says:

*How can I give you up?
My heart recoils within me.
I am God and not human,
the Holy One in your midst;
And I will not come in anger.*

This suggestion that the fundamental dynamic of the universe—the life and attitude of God—is more about patience, forgiveness, and graciousness than about vengeance and wrath is entirely consistent with our human experience of being beloved and gifted despite our very real failings.

Amos 5

*I hate, I despise your festivals,
And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...
Let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Does this mean that God doesn't much care how Solemn and Serious and Important we can be unless we are continuing to work hard to care for the ones that no one else is looking out for? Does it mean that the cool fish on my bumper, the cross around my neck, my ability to quote the Bible more or less accurately from memory, or my certainty about God's attitude toward people of other faiths or no faith are not particularly interesting to God? Probably.

Micah 6:8

*What does the Lord require of you,
But to do justice*

Treat others the way God has treated us.

And to love kindness

Live for one another.

And to walk humbly with your God.

Let God handle the God stuff and refrain from the temptation to make pronouncements about others on God's behalf.

Habakkuk 2

*Write the vision, make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.
For still the vision awaits its time.
If it seems slow; wait for it.
It will surely come. It will not delay.*

A person driving North on U.S. highway 61 out of Louisiana into Mississippi will encounter the following road signs, about a half mile apart:

1. *Rosemont Plantation*
2 miles
Boyhood home of Jefferson Davis.
2. *Adopt-a-Highway Litter Control*
Next 2 miles
Wood County NAACP.

Sure, there's a lot left to be done.
But things are getting better.
The vision is hastening.

A Sampler of New Testament **"Ideas, Images, and Insights"**

One more observation before we continue:

The construction of this list has produced the interesting, and somewhat surprising, recognition that many of the New Testament passages that I find most interesting and intriguing have some clear (to me) tie to particular Old Testament "ideas, images, or insights."

Not sure what that means exactly. But it could be significant. It could be a useful and important reminder that the New Testament is not a new or different book. It's about the same God, the same world, and the same species (That'd be us).

Here's the list:

Matthew 17:1-5

In this vivid and peculiar story of the "Transfiguration," Peter, James, and John watch as Jesus' appearance changes and his clothes become "dazzling white." Then Moses and Elijah appear with him and a voice from heaven says "This is my son. Listen to him!"

Although, if we're honest, this story reads kind of like a bizarre passage from *Fear and Loathing in Judea* or *The Gospel according to William Burroughs*, it's actually pretty interesting. Moses and Elijah aren't just extras in the story. Their appearance is significant. Moses represents the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy). Elijah represents the prophets (Isaiah through Malachi). Together they represent the sum of Hebrew religion up to that point. So, when they get these cameos next to Jesus and then the voice of God – making reference to the shiny guy – says, "This is my Son. Listen to him!," the message would seem to be that this whole Jesus business is about the very same God who we've known all along through the Law and the Prophets.

Matthew 20

In this Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the folks who are hired at dawn and agree with the landowner to be paid a certain wage for their day's work get all whiny when, at the end of the day, that landowner gives the same wage to other workers who weren't hired until late in

the afternoon. The punch line of the story occurs when the landowner asks the workers hired at sunrise, “Are you envious because I am generous?” If you’re not careful, this story can really start bouncing around in your life and ruining all sorts of instances of righteous indignation.

Matthew 25:31-46

This is the famous Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in which Jesus tells the ones who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned, “When you have done these things to the members of my family, you’ve done them to me.” And he tells the ones who failed to do those things for others that their omission was failure to do those things for him. The point would seem to be that God expects us to treat each other well and consistently at all times, regardless of the circumstances. It reminds one of God’s suggestion in Amos 5 that the pomp and circumstance and solemn rituals of the community of faith were of no interest or value apart from general and abiding demonstration of concern for justice and intentional and appropriate behavior toward all people.

Mark 2:23-28

Jesus and his disciples are traveling on the Sabbath. As they make their way through a field, the disciples are “plucking heads of grain” – that is, picking food to eat. (*“Plucking Heads of Grain” is probably the best potential band name in the whole Bible – ED.*) Some Pharisees object that Jesus’ disciples shouldn’t be doing that because Exodus 20:10 prohibits doing any work on the Sabbath; and “reaping” is one of the 39 activities that Jewish tradition had enumerated as being forbidden by that prohibition. Jesus tells a story in which he misquotes I Samuel (*I Samuel 21:1 says Ahimilech was the High Priest during the story that Jesus talks about, but Jesus says in Mark 2:26 that it was Abiathar – ED.*) and then tells the Pharisees, “The Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath.” It’s a great lesson about rules. Rules are of value when they help us care for ourselves and each other. When they get in the way of such care, they should be ignored. This lesson has even led some of us to fearlessly split infinitives from time to time.

Luke 3:16

John the Baptist says that “one who is mightier” than him is coming and that, while John baptizes with water, this One who is coming “will baptize with Holy Spirit and with fire.”

The folks who run the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Pawhuska, Oklahoma say they periodically set fire to the prairie because such fires “remove dead vegetation, control encroaching woody vegetation (*“Encroaching Woody Vegetation” is another really good band name. – ED.*), and clear the way for vigorous new plants to bloom and prosper.” That’s what Holy Spirit seems to do in our individual lives and our life together: remove dead ideas; control encroaching, unhealthy, root-sapping ideas; and clear the way for the prospering of vigorous new ideas.

Luke 10:17-20

After Jesus has sent out seventy people in pairs to prepare the way for his coming, they return “with joy” and tell him “even the demons are subject to us in your name.” Jesus tells them, “I have given you authority to tread upon scorpions and serpents.” What a great image for whatever it is in the world that hurts or scares people! It’s easy to get excited about having been given authority to contend against the things that hurt, scare, or diminish people.

Then Jesus tells those 70 folks, “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits submit to you. But rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” I think that means, “Rejoice that you’re on God’s Contact List. Rejoice that you are among the ones who get called when God is planning to use some folks as instruments of divine love in somebody else’s life.”

Luke 10:35

This is the verse in the Parable of the Good Samaritan where the Samaritan takes the ambushed traveler to an inn and tells the innkeeper, “Take care of this one. I’ll be sure you have whatever you need.” It’s easy to identify with the Ambushed Traveler, or the Priest, or the Levite in this story, and to aspire some day to act like the Samaritan, but I think those of us who claim to be part of the Church will do well to identify with this innkeeper. One suspects that our life together is filled with folks whom God has brought to our doors or placed in our paths and told us, “Take care of this one. I’ll be sure you have whatever you need.” Thinking about the story this way will probably lead to the realization that God has placed *us* in the paths of others and said the same thing to them about us. It also might be a good way to think about how to go about being a church-related college – caring however we can for the ones who show up at our door.

Luke 11

This is the chapter where, while talking about the way God cares for us, Jesus basically says, “Of course God will respond lovingly to your petitions and requests. Don’t you respond lovingly to the petitions and requests of your children? You don’t tease or trick or toy with them. And don’t you think God loves you even more than you love your kids?”

There are some in the church who conclude that these words are proof that we have a responsibility to “do” something to instigate our relationship with God. This position presumes that we have to “ask,” or “knock,” or “let Jesus in.” That understanding of the nature of our relationship with God, however, is not consistent with the parental metaphor that Jesus uses in Luke 11. No parent will tease or trick or toy with a child who asks for bread – but neither will any parent wait for the child to ask before taking steps to take care of her. Jesus’ use of this parental image is an illustration of the intimate, attentive, *and* unconditional nature of God’s love.

Luke 15

This is the chapter with the three stories about seeking and finding things which were lost: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the Prodigal Son. There is comfort in these suggestions that God will pursue us tirelessly and patiently when we are “lost.”

But it is also interesting that when the seeker finds what was lost in each of these three stories, that person throws a big party and invites all the neighbors. I’d like to be one of the neighbors who gets called and told “Come celebrate with me.” That part of these stories brings to mind Psalm 20 (“may we shout for joy over your victory”). I’d like to be invited to your party.

There also seems to be some relationship between the grumpy behavior of the older brother of the Prodigal Son and Jonah’s little hissy-fit when God shows mercy to those rascally Ninevites. In both cases, the landowner’s question from Matthew 20 seems to apply: “Are you envious because I am generous?”

Luke 19:1-10

This is the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. And, as the ACTivators know, some of us think that, if these ten verses were all the Bible we had, it might be enough.

In these ten verses, we have:

- Wonderful uncertainty about whether or not encounters with God require prior effort by humans (why did Zacchaeus climb that tree? Did he intend to meet and encounter Jesus or just see the parade that was going by?);
- A reminder that God always moves first in the divine/human relationship. Jesus starts the conversation with Zach, not vice versa. See Genesis 1:1 – “In the beginning, GOD...”;
- A three-part model for evangelism (in Luke 19:5, Jesus looks around, calls Zacchaeus by name, and invites him to share a gift);
- A reminder that we’re all gifted, even if nobody – including us – realizes or remembers that. Jesus begins his relationship with Zacchaeus by talking about what Zach has to offer (“I must stay at your house today”). See I Peter 4:10;
- The comforting realization that Jesus, unlike our tacky neighbors, looks beyond our sin and sees a beloved child. (“Zacchaeus hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘[Jesus] has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’”); and
- A wonderful example of how to make grateful response to God’s grace by sharing our stuff and cleaning up our messes (“Half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”)

Theologians have spent careers thinking and writing and studying about God, Groups, Grace, and Gratitude. And it’s all here in these ten verses.

Luke 24

In this story, the risen Jesus meets two disillusioned and disappointed guys who are walking home after witnessing his trial and execution. They don’t recognize him until he’s at dinner with them and “breaks bread.” “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” Those of us who somehow believe that Christ is present among us, even nearly 2000 chronological years after he was crucified, died, rose, and ascended can get some good clues from this story about where to look for him now.

John 1:1, 14

*In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was with God;
And the Word was God...
The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*

Every time you utter a word, everything that you are is in that word – it’s not somebody else; it’s you. But it’s focused and limited for a specific context. It has to be, so that you can

accomplish some specific communication and interaction. Might this mean that the whole Christ event is God's Whole Self, focused and limited for a specific context so that we (with our limited brains) can receive some specific communication and interaction?

In a sixteenth-century sermon about these verses, a cool Swiss guy named Heinrich Bullinger said, "To accommodate our feeble minds, God makes himself little."

That kind of makes sense.

John 6

This chapter contains John's version of the story of Jesus feeding 5000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread and the story of Jesus walking on water. They're called "miracle stories" because everybody knows that, in the real world, you can't feed 5000 folks with 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread and that people can't really walk on water.

There was a time when "everybody knew" that a cancer diagnosis was a death sentence; that human beings would never walk on the moon; that people couldn't really use telephones that they carry around in their pockets; and that people from different religious, ethnic, or cultural groups could never live peacefully together.

One wonders to what extent "miracle stories" are really just stories about failure of imagination.

John 8

This is the story in which the Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery to Jesus and ask him what they should do with her. They know full well that there are places in Jewish law that say that people caught in the act of adultery are to be executed – stoned to death. Jesus writes something in the dust at his feet and all the Pharisees leave. Then he asks the woman, "Where are they? Is there no one left to condemn you?" She says, "No one." Then Jesus says, "I don't condemn you either, now go and do not sin again."

In that little exchange we see both that Jesus is not looking for excuses to punish or condemn this woman *and* that the woman shouldn't commit adultery any more. This suggests that the Law of God in general and the Ten Commandments in particular are not primarily justifications for the punishment of folks who make mistakes, but neither are they simply irrelevant words that have nothing to do with how people should live their lives. In this story, we learn both that God's unconditional love even includes adulterers and also that adultery has no place in the life of the faith community. Those commandments aren't justifications for the punishment of folks who make mistakes, but they are guides to help us see the sort of life to which God is calling us and helping us achieve.

John 20:19-26

This is the so-called "Doubting Thomas" story.

It's Easter night. Jesus' disciples have hidden themselves in a locked room because they are afraid that the same people who executed Jesus will come after them. Jesus, who – you will recall – died the night before last, shows up in this locked room and says "Peace be with you" to the disciples. Later, he breathes on them, says, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and then tells

them that whatever they do in the context of their life together on earth will be confirmed and endorsed in heaven. Thomas isn't there when Jesus shows up the first time and he is skeptical when the other ten disciples tell him that Jesus – who died on Friday – was hanging out with them on Sunday. And then, a week later, Thomas and the other ten disciples are still together.

There are at least three interesting features of these eight verses:

- When Jesus says, "Peace be with you," he's not expressing the hope that peace might characterize the disciples' life together, what he says becomes a fact when he says it. This is much like Genesis 1:3, when God Says, "Let there be light" and what God says becomes a fact when God says it.
- When Jesus breathes on the disciples and says "Receive the Holy Spirit" he is doing the same thing to the church that God does in Genesis 2:7 when God breathes into a lump of clay and that lump becomes the living person Adam. In John 20, that loose gathering of scared guys becomes the living body of Christ, the Church.
- The first time we see what the "Peace" of the risen Christ looks like is when we see, in John 20:26, that even though Thomas and the other ten did not agree about whether or not Jesus had risen from the dead, they were still together anyway. The Peace of Christ is evident in their recognition that continuing to love and care for one another was much more important than agreeing with each other. Here in the world of "Red States" and "Blue States" it might be good if we all had John 20:26 tattooed to the inside of our eyelids.

John 20:30-31

Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that, believing, you may have life in his name.

What we have here is a Gospel writer telling us why the Gospel got written. It was not to give an exhaustive and historically accurate biography of Jesus. It was not to answer every question that any reader might ask. It was to help readers understand what we can learn about God and ourselves by paying attention to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

To paraphrase verse 31:

*This stuff is written to help you see that who Jesus is, God always was;
and to live with the understanding that God is **for** you, even after you die,
and that God calls you to live for others.*

Acts 9

This story comes up a lot in discussions with parents about decisions that their sons or daughters make while they are in college.

It's the story of the conversion of Saul. This really smart young Pharisee strikes out to Damascus to continue the important Pharisaical work of stopping the spread of Christianity. Everybody is proud of him. He's so bright! They all know that God has big plans for him and they can envision him having a long and illustrious career. Then he gets struck blind,

stumbles around for a few days, and comes home talking about Jesus and telling everybody to call him “Paul.”

What must his mama have thought?

If we’re gonna keep telling this story, I think we need always to be ready to be surprised by what God might be up to – even in our own lives or the lives of our children.

Y’all remind me about this when Emily and Joseph go to college.

Acts 10

Peter didn’t quit being a good Jew when he became a good Christian. He had spent his whole life studying what we know as the Old Testament and he knew the basics. He knew, for example, that there were clearly things that good Jews didn’t eat and people that good Jews didn’t associate with. Two interesting things happen in Acts 10 that lead him to rethink those certainties and to make an important and revolutionary statement.

The chapter begins as we hear about this guy named Cornelius who was a Roman centurion and clearly not a Jew. Nevertheless, Cornelius thought that the best way for him and his family to live would be to pursue an intentional and serious relationship with the one God whom the Jews worshiped. So he prays that God will send someone to lead him and his family toward a more complete and appropriate relationship with that God.

In the meantime, Peter is up on the roof of a house where he’s visiting, he’s hungry, and he falls asleep and has a dream. In the dream, a sheet is lowered down on which are a variety of animals that any good Jew knew not to eat. A voice from heaven says, “Arise, Peter. Kill and eat.” Good Jew that he is, Peter says, “I’m not gonna eat that stuff that God through Moses told us not to eat.” Then the voice says, “What I have called clean you must not call unclean.”

Then Peter wakes up in time to meet messengers from Cornelius. He’s still trying to make sense out of his weird dream and he agrees to go and talk about Jesus to all of those unclean Romans. He does his usual Christian song and dance and is astonished to discover that Cornelius and his non-Jewish family understand it all.

In Acts 10:34, Peter says something that we all need to remember whenever we’re tempted to conclude that some people matter more to God than others:

“Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality.”

(See Jonah, chapter 4 – ED.)

Romans 3:23

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Not just you people.

Not just those people.

All people.

So scold less, forgive more, don't act surprised when others turn out not to be perfect, and get over yourself.

This leads directly to:

Romans 5:8

*The proof of God's amazing love is this:
While we were still sinners Christ died for us.*

God's love for us in Jesus Christ has no conditions or prerequisites.

God's grace is unilateral.

"Deserve" is not part of the divine vocabulary.

Talk about Shock and Awe!

Romans 8:38-39

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth [nor cancer; nor bus accidents; nor repeated sexual abuse from childhood; nor alcohol; nor sexual, theological, or vocational confusion; nor sick kids with rifles; nor dead parents; nor live but incompetent or uninterested or piss-poor parents; nor depression] nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's a "staff of life" you can wrap yourself around – and I think it's why Easter is such a big deal.

(see Psalm 139:7-12 – ED.)

Ephesians 2:8-10

*For by grace you have been saved through faith.
And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God –
not because of works, lest anyone should boast.
For we are what God has made us,
created in Christ Jesus,
for good works,
which God prepared beforehand,
to be our way of life.*

The Emancipation Proclamation wasn't read aloud in Texas until June 19, 1865. President Lincoln freeing the slaves was like grace – it just happened. It had nothing to do with anything that any individual Texas slave might have done. But knowing that they had been set free changed the way African Americans in Texas acted. They had been technically free since January 1, 1863 – but that didn't matter much. When they *knew* they were free, though – after June 19, 1865 – they acted differently. That's like faith. We don't receive grace because we act a certain way. But understanding that we've received grace changes the way we act. And until we act differently, our having received grace doesn't mean much.

(This might be what the book of James means when it says that "Faith without works is dead." – ED.)

Philippians 2:5-7

*Have the same mind among you that was in Christ Jesus
who, finding himself in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave...*

Paul is encouraging Christians in Philippi to try to think about themselves in the same way that Jesus thought about himself: not exploiting their relationship with God, but seeking to offer whatever they can offer.

This is really good advice for a church-related college. We've got no business exploiting our relationship to the church by trying to make everybody on this campus like the folks in the church – requiring forms of religious behavior like worship, or Bible Study, or loyalty oaths from faculty members. We need to try to make our relationship to the church an obvious and abundant benefit to all students, faculty, and staff; to the church; and to the world.

I Peter 4:10

*As good stewards of the manifold grace of God,
serve one another
with whatever gift you have.*

We're all gifted people.
We should all act like gifted people.
We should always be about the business of "serving one another."
Any questions?

I John 3:1

*See what love the Father has given us –
that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are!*

We're all beloved people.
We should all act like beloved people.
We should always be about the business of "loving one another."
(See John 13:34 – "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you..." – ED.)
Any questions?

At the beginning of this piece, there's a strange Tom Robbins quote that seems vaguely profound:

A big back has a big front.

That might mean something like this:

It isn't difficult at all to find somebody who can reel off a long list of ways that people have used the Bible to justify all kinds of lousy behavior – from slavery to the oppression and denigration of women to the rampant and indiscriminate murder of non-Christians.

And there are folks among us who would argue that the Bible is currently being used to justify lousy behavior in the present day – from the denial of equal rights to homosexual persons to the claim that only Christians should be in positions of authority in the United States.

That sure seems like a “big back.”

But, as we've tried to demonstrate in these pages, that same Bible is full of relevant and hugely useful ideas, images, and insights.

It remains a great place to which to turn as we seek categories and tools to help us figure out what really matters in our individual lives and in our life together.

There's a lot there.

There are poetic suggestions and reminders that:

- The universe didn't just happen, there's purpose behind it all – it means something. (Genesis 1);
- Nobody matters more – or less – than anybody else (Jonah 4, Luke 10, Acts 10);
- The primary dynamic of the universe is love from the Creator to the created (Hosea 11, I John 3);
- The Creator's love is love that invites response (Deuteronomy 10, Luke 19, John 13);
- We should seek to be instruments of God's love in the lives of others (Luke 10:17-20 and 35);
- We won't be (and shouldn't be) taken seriously unless and until we take each other seriously (Amos 5, Matthew 25),
- We should work hard never to lose our capacity to be surprised (John 6, Acts 9 & 10); and
- We are all beloved and gifted and have been created to act like beloved and gifted people act. (Ephesians 2, I Peter 4, I John 1).

At least for some of us, the Bible remains uniquely relevant. And we can confidently assume that somebody else is going to discern something else in there that's just as useful and interesting. So we have to keep humbly and respectfully listening to each other.

That's the “big front.”



Until Next Time I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Still Exploring after All These Years.

JOHN WILLIAMS
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