

AColyte

May 2011

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



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**Thank You for Another Great Year
in the Chapel, in the Religious Life
Program, and at Austin College.
Especially,**

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“It’s good to be us.



Thanks to the 2010-2011 Sallie Majors Religious Life Interns!

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(500 miles from Sherman...you don't even want to know)



**Congratulations to the
2011-2012 Sallie Majors
Religious Life Interns!**

Bryan Botello, Nicole Breckling, Bridgette Deem, Coral Kennelty-Cohen, Katie Senior, J. Tucker, Asil Yassine



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Across the street from the Alamo
March 25, 2011

Sad songs say so much.
--Elton John

The words go nice together.
--Max Stalling

Okay, so for most of the Spring, I've been thinking that the last *AColyte* of the year would probably be about "context." I've been particularly aware of how much the little headline crawls that go along the bottom of the screen on CNN and the "facts" that can be downloaded from the internet are presented entirely without context. I was planning to talk about how context is always important.

But I keep thinking about this line from an old song.

Regular readers of this journal know that I have a whole vocabulary of song lines. There are lots lines that I like to quote a lot, but my reasons for quoting them don't necessarily have anything to do with the context in which the lines occur in the songs.

The line this Spring is a good example.

I just like the line.

It's from kind of a sad song.

This guy is figuring out that his relationship is clearly not working. And he decides to cut it off quickly rather than let things linger and pitifully fade.

After carefully considering the whole situation

I stand with my back to the wall.

“There’s really not much future for us. I’m gonna have to face facts.”

*Walking is better than running away.
And crawling ain’t no good at all.*

It’s a classic Willie Nelson, heartbreak, love-gone-bad song. It’s from his album, “Phases and Stages”, from the mid ‘70s. I fell like I’ve known it forever.

I’ve found myself humming that song (it’s called “Walkin’”) a lot this Spring, and it took me a long time to figure out why.

My back is not to any wall.

All the “Love Gone Bad” songs I know must be about somebody else.

There’s nothing that I want to walk, run, or crawl away from.

But, for the last month or so, I keep thinking about that song.

On March 25, I woke up across the street from the Alamo.

I was at a conference with chaplains and presidents of many of the Presbyterian colleges and universities in the U.S.

I forgot to pack T-Shirts as I prepared for the trip and – since I like to wear t-shirts under my starched shirts – I decided I’d better go buy one.

I left the Emily Morgan hotel and walked down the block to a souvenir shop. They had a sale – 3 shirts for \$9.99. I bought one for each of my kids and one for myself so I had a clean one to wear among all those college presidents.

I ended up getting a pretty cool shirt.

I wore it that day and I’ve worn it several times since.

It’s a good work-out shirt. It has a photograph of Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata. I’ve been interested in him ever since I took Latin American History from Victoria Cummins 30 or so years ago. He’s always seemed a little more dashing and a little less crude to me than Pancho Villa.



Next to the photo, is a famous quote from Zapata:

*Prefiero morir de pie...
Que vivir de rodillas.*

"I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees."

That phrase has literally been draped on me at several different times in the last month or so. I've seen it when I looked in the mirror.

It's a classic Zapata line. And, in the last few weeks, it has kind of oozed into my addled old brain and found a kindred line.

That's why I've been thinking about Willie and his love gone bad.

It's not really all that far from

I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees

to

*Walking is better than running away
And crawling ain't no good at all.*

So I think that's why I've been humming "Walkin'."

Even though in many ways it's just a typical tear-jerking, love-gone-bad, honky tonk song, "Walkin'" has a couple of lines that are worth noticing; lines that resonate particularly with cowboy preacher types.

The second verse begins with the lines

*If guilt is the question
Then truth is the answer.
I've been lying to me all along.*

I'm still chewing on that one, but it sure seems like there's probably a good sermon in there somewhere. Maybe about two kids eating fruit and hiding in a garden. I'll get back to you on that.

But it's the next line of that verse that's my favorite.

The singer decides that the best thing for him to do is to leave the woman and thereby save both of them from the heartache and trouble that he's sure is coming if they stay together.

Here's what he says:

*There ain't nothing worth saving except one another.
So before you wake up I'll be gone.*

I don't know if Willie meant for that line to be profound – almost certainly not – but the first half sums up in eight words one of the great and often overlooked themes of the Bible.

There ain't nothing worth saving except one another.

During this year, ACTivators have led youth retreats in East Texas, West Texas, New Mexico, and Arkansas.

And wherever we've gone, we've talked about the so-called "Doubting Thomas" story in John 20:19-29.

It's a pretty familiar story for lots of folks who grew up in the Church, but we've been calling attention to a particular idea that's not often a focus when that story is studied.

John 20:19-29 goes like this:

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week,

“That day” would be Easter.

and the doors of the house where the disciples had met

There were actually only ten of the twelve disciples there. We know why Judas wasn't there (even in the Bible, it's not cool to rat out your friends) but Thomas wasn't there either (see verse 24). We don't know why.

were locked for fear of the Jews,

Makes sense. These guys who just watched their buddy, their leader, get arrested and executed a couple days ago are understandably concerned that the same guys who got *him* are gonna come after *them* next.

John says the disciples had locked their door “for fear of the Jews” and some particularly belligerent and perpetually aggrieved Christians through the centuries have used phrases like this to somehow blame all Jewish people for the arrest, conviction, and execution of Jesus.

Christians have justified all sorts of damnable anti-Semitic behavior (including the Holocaust) based on verses like this (Mel Gibson leaps to mind). And there are even some indications that John himself was grinding a particular ax against the synagogue that had kicked him out for becoming a Christian.

But when we read about the “Jews” that the ten disciples feared that night, I think all it really refers to are the particular people who were responsible for encouraging Pilate to get rid of his PR problem by executing Jesus. I'd be scared too.

Jesus came and stood among them

Whoa!! What?!!

Take off your stained glass spectacles and try to get your mind around that as if you'd never heard the story before.

This guy who the Ten had watched die on Friday (see John 19:30) is now hanging out with them on Sunday.

The last song the Chorale sang before Finals Breakfast on Monday night was "Zombie Jamboree." Is that what we've got going on here?

and said, "Peace be with you."

"Peace" was probably not the definitive mood in that locked room that night.

But it's a very important feature of the story. More about that later.

20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

After having pulled off the ultimate surprise visit, Jesus says, "Here. check out my gruesome, mortal wounds."

Odd.

But it serves to demonstrate clearly to the disciples that it really is Jesus— not just some ghost, hologram, or group hallucination. It's a big deal that it's really the exact same guy they had been following all along.

So...

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

They don't "rejoice" until they see Jesus' wounds.

21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you.

More with the "Peace" talk.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

When you are a follower and student, you're called a "disciple."

Someone who gets sent is called an "apostle."

In John's version, this is when the "Disciples" become the "Apostles."

22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

"Tomb Breath" would be even worse than "Morning Breath."

I think we might be supposed to think of Genesis 2:7 right here:

*then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;
and the man became a living being.*

23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Put this with

1 Corinthians 12:27

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it

and

Matthew 16:19

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

and you've got John's version of the beginning of the Church.

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

We don't know why; he just wasn't there.

25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord."

Of course they did. Remember when they "rejoiced" at the end of verse 20?

How could you have that experience and then not tell anybody?

But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A couple things about this:

1. As far as I know, it was no more common then than it is now to hang out on Sunday with someone who you watched die the previous Friday. Thomas kind of had a point.
- B. And all he was asking for was to have the exact same experience as the other ten had in verse 20 (*After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side*)

Thomas wasn't buying any of that "Jesus isn't dead any more" stuff. And it's hard to blame him.

So as verse 25 ends, there is not agreement among those 11 guys (the entire Church at that time) about whether or not Jesus had been raised from the dead.

In seminary, they taught me that that's a pretty important theological point.

But watch what John tells us next:

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.

Think about that.

That's almost as hard to believe as the notion of hanging out on Sunday with a guy you watched die on Friday.

For a week, there was not theological unanimity in the Church.

The ten who had been in the room on Easter night were of course completely convinced that Jesus wasn't dead any more.

Thomas – who hadn't been there and wasn't crazy – thought his partners had lost it. There's a line from a James McMurtry song that would fit for his reaction to the ten:

You wish so hard you're scaring me.

But there they were.

The ten hadn't kicked Thomas out even though he didn't believe what they believed.

And Thomas hadn't left, even though he just couldn't see the world in exactly the same way as his old comrades did.

Jesus has already said, "Peace be with you" twice to the disciples (verses 19 and 21).

Do you want to know what that kind of peace looks like?

"A week later his disciples were again in the house and ***Thomas was with them.***"

Don't just fly by that verse too quickly.

Sure, Jesus comes to the room later in verse 26 and Thomas sees him and gets what he asked for. Jesus utters his punch line – "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." – and everybody's happy.

But before that, Thomas and the other ten had stayed together even though they didn't agree with each other about a really important thing.

Apparently, in the interval between the end of verse 25 and the beginning of verse 26, Thomas and the other ten figured out that there are more important things than agreeing with each other, fixing each other, correcting each other, or winning the argument.

Somehow those guys had learned that – in the last analysis – it's more important to be loving than to be right.

I think maybe that's what peace looks like.

Other places in the Bible get at this idea in different ways.

- In Mark 2:28 Jesus says, “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

It’s not just about the rules.

- In John 8:1-11, scribes and Pharisees bring a “woman caught in adultery” to Jesus and ask him if they can stone her since that’s what it says to do in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22.

Jesus bends down and writes something in the dirt (no one knows what) and they all leave.

Then he asks the woman, “Has no one been found to condemn you?”

She says “no one, Lord”

And he says, “Neither do I condemn you, now go your way and do not sin again.”

It’s not always about condemning, even if the rules say you can.

- In Amos 5:21-24, God’s opinion about the difference between being loving and just being “right” is pretty clear:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

It’s not about following the rules and making a big show, it’s about how you treat each other.

Sound familiar?

That's awfully close to:

There ain't nothing worth saving except one another.

I think that's probably a good place for us to wrap up the year.

Don't be afraid to be smart.

Do your best to be right.

But never forget to be loving. Ever.

My friend Karl Travis has a quote from Abraham Heschel at the end of all his e-mails:

“When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people.”

Yeah.

Until September I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Reminding you that it's possible (and preferable) to be clever *and* kind,
Let's work on that.

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain