

# AColyte

Commencement 2015  
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things  
at Austin College



**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,  
the conviction of things not seen.**

*--Hebrews 11:1*

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# TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

The Real World  
May 2015

*I'm gonna miss you,  
I can't lie.*  
--The Manhattans,  
"Let's Just Kiss and Say Goodbye"

*The world is about to turn.*  
--Rory Cooney,  
"Canticle of the Turning"

Yep.

Here we are.

It's the end of another academic year.

And the beginning of Whatever Comes Next.

We've worked hard and sacrificed a lot to get here.

Actually, LOTS OF PEOPLE have worked hard and sacrificed a lot to help us get here.

And, for you seniors, it will all come to an emotional, soggy, thrilling climax this weekend.

But you already know that.

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One of the coolest things about my job at this time of year is that I get to deliver the Benediction at the end of the Commencement service.

That means that I will be the last Austin College person to officially speak to the entire Class of 2015 when you're all assembled together in your caps and gowns.

I don't want to get too puffed up and sentimental, but it's a job I take seriously.

I like being the last voice you'll hear as a class.

And I'll try to speak authentically on behalf of the whole institution.

We want to send you out into the world with a clear, affectionate, and serious endorsement of all you have done and real hope and support and excitement for all that you will do.

It won't be the main thing you'll remember from Sunday morning, and it certainly won't be the most important thing that happens at Commencement, but I wanted to write it down for you – along with a little unpacking of the ideas – just in case you or your loved ones might want to look it over later.

It's a version of the benediction that we say at many campus-wide events and every Sunday night at worship.

I'm usually the one who says it, but it's a collection of words and ideas that have come from Austin College students through the years as we have

- a. studied the Bible together and
2. tried to think usefully about the rest of our lives.

At the end of Sunday morning's exercises, I'll say something like the following:

## **Therefore**

That's a trick that the Apostle Paul uses in many of his letters in the New Testament. He spends the first part describing how things are, talking about things that he and his audience believe, and then he says "therefore" and issues a series of ethical instructions.

It's essentially, "since we believe this, we need to act like this."

At least to my mind, there's a similar relationship between all that has come before Sunday's Commencement and what will come after.

It's essentially, "since you've learned all sorts of things about yourself and the world in the last four or so years – since you've accomplished a certain degree of education – you need to act like educated people."

It should matter for the rest of your life.

And here's what we hope you educated people will do:

## **Go out into the world and be people of peace.**

We value peace around here. We don't necessarily want to encourage all of our students and graduates to be pacifists in all contexts, but we do want you to strive to live in harmony and right relationship within the communities in which you live out your lives.

We're not neutral about that. We think that's a better way for beloved, gifted, *educated* people to act in the world.

## Have courage.

We want the members of this community to face challenges squarely and act in accordance with their values—even when that’s difficult or unpopular. We recognize that there will always be situations in the lives of our students and graduates—as well as in the life of our College—that require courage.

We don’t want to pretend that everything will always be easy, but we do want to remind each other that we will always have opportunities to live out the principles that we say we believe in.

“Have courage” means, “Suck it up.” But I don’t think I should say that in front of your Mom.

## Hold on tight to all that is good.

We want our graduates to be people who can identify, cherish, and appreciate good things—good ideas, good habits, good behaviors, good attitudes.

It’s not all good.

No doubt about it, there’s ugly crap out there that needs to be named and resisted.

We all need to be rigorous and serious and careful people who try to operate without illusions.

But it’s not all bad.

It’s not all disappointing. It’s not all sub-par and tacky.

We need to work on holding tightly to all that is good, to watch for it, to cherish it, to talk about it, even as we:

## Return no one evil for evil.

This idea, which comes straight out of the book of Romans, seems like a no-brainer.

But--kind of like courage--the relevance of the call to return no one evil for evil often sneaks up on us.

We don’t usually *plan* to get even with people who wrong us.

We don’t set out intentionally to return evil for evil.

But we often face unexpected situations in which our knee-jerk reaction to being offended is to offend; when our response to being hurt is to be hurtful.

The call to return no one evil for evil is a call to maintain some sense of perspective and proportion and moderation even – especially – when perspective and proportion and moderation are absent in the behavior of others.

It's harder than it seems – but it's worth the effort.

To quote Delbert McClinton:

“It's hard not to argue with a fool;  
But it's wrong.”

It might help to practice on Facebook.

## **Support the weak. and Strengthen the fainthearted.**

The biblical tradition which gave rise to Austin College and has informed our life through 166 years includes numerous calls to look out for the people who are having a hard time.

Those calls take different forms in different contexts, but what they have in common is the claim that it is the responsibility of beloved and gifted people (like us) to be especially mindful of, and attentive toward, people who face difficulties; to look out for the ones that no one else seems to be looking out for.

## **Honor all people.**

That one's tricky.  
It seems all pious and grand and correct.

But the call to “honor all people” makes little sense unless it includes honoring racists; and homophobes; and book-burners; and “free speech” advocates who pick fights and dishonor others.

The distinction between rejecting and condemning some behaviors and rejecting and condemning persons who perpetrate those behaviors is often tenuous and uncertain.

But when we remind each other to “honor *all* people,” we proclaim a universal value that transcends any particular situations or details. When we're at our best, we refrain from deciding which people really matter and which ones don't.

There are times when that's really hard.

And at those times, we need to work really hard to honor *all* people.

## **Share what you have.**

Although our particular circumstances might differ greatly, we recognize that every single member of this community is phenomenally gifted. By almost any economic, hygienic, or political measure, we are all among the most fortunate, most able, most blessed people who have ever lived.

None of us should feel guilty about that.

But, as we recognize and claim our giftedness, we do need to work hard to ensure that our giftedness – this amazing panorama of things to which we have access – is good news for everybody else.

The call to share what we have is a call to live generously.

## **Speak truth tenderly and lovingly.**

When we're at our best, we recognize that sometimes it's more important to be loving than to be right.

We need to speak the truth.

But we need to do it gently.

## **Clean up your own messes.**

This is usually the most popular line of this benediction – especially among mothers of teenagers.

It's a call to live responsibly.

It might seem a little silly. But in a world of deflated footballs and religiously inspired violence and hatred, the notion of cleaning up your own messes seems both relevant and revolutionary.

## **Use the brains God gave you.**

Unfortunately, there are some who think that institutions like ours who embrace and proclaim our Church-relatedness, should somehow limit the range of inquiry and discussion that we encourage or allow.

We need to think about all of it.

All the time.

In terms of discussion, nothing – no topic – should ever be out of bounds.

We encourage and embrace diversity and pluralism around here. And that's not in spite of our Church-Relatedness, it's because of it. *Because* we're Church-Related, we're for studying, and examining, and asking, and listening, and thinking.

The real world where we really live is full of opportunities to articulate authentic faith in a multi-faith context.

But to do that, we have to think and not simply to recite inherited truths from others.

There's more to learn than we know so far.

## **Act like gifted and beloved people because that IS what you *are*.**

This is a call to be people who approach every situation with more concern about what we have to offer than what we deserve to get.

It is also a reminder to each member of this community that – whether or not you or anyone else in your life remembers or knows it – we know that you are gifted and beloved.

Never doubt that.

We know.

## **And go with the full confidence That the grace, mercy, and peace of Almighty God ARE with us all; Today; Tomorrow; And forever. Seriously. Amen.**

This last part is a little bit of full disclosure.

Austin College was the Presbyterian Church's idea. And we're still a Church-Related college. We work hard to be sure that that relationship is good news for all our students – regardless of their religious affiliations.



And we hope that heritage informs our understanding of what an educated person looks like.

Our fervent and sincere hope is that, when our graduates look in the mirror, you see what we see:

Someone who is beloved  
and gifted  
and capable.

That's a sacred and worthwhile mission for each of us and for all of us – to see that in the mirror and to see that in each other.

At dinner last week, as she reflected on her four years here and about graduating and going on to the next thing, senior **Jordan Meredith** said,

***The fifteen-year-old me would have liked and wanted to be friends with the me that I am now.***

Yeah.

That's a really profound endorsement of an Austin College education.

She gets it.

She's ready to graduate.

That's who we are.

That's what we do.

That's what the world needs.

And that's why those of us who come to work here every day get up in the morning and do it.

It's good to be us.

Thanks.

Until September, I remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Clinging tightly to Genesis 9:11

*(I establish my covenant with you,  
that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood,  
and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.)*

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain

P.S.—Here's the full Benediction (including some helpful “Be ROOsponsible” advice) with Bible references:

**Therefore, Go out into the world and be people of peace.**

*Acts 16:36*

**Have courage.**

*Acts 27:25*

**Hold on tight to all that is good.**

*Romans 12:9*

**Return no one evil for evil.**

*Romans 12:17*

**Support the weak.**

*Acts 20:35*

**Strengthen the fainthearted.**

*1 Thessalonians 5:14*

**Honor all people.**

*Philippians 2:29*

**Go to class.**

*Isaiah 46:10*

**Manage your time.**

*Ecclesiastes 3:1*

**Get some sleep.**

*Exodus 23:12*

**Share what you have.**

*Luke 19:8*

**Speak truth tenderly and lovingly.**

*Isaiah 40:2; Ephesians 4:15*

**Clean up your own messes.**

*Luke 19:8*

**Use the brains God gave you.**

*Genesis 2:19*

**Act like gifted, beloved, capable, safe people.**

**Because that really IS what you really ARE.**

*1 John 3:1; 1 Peter 4:10; Genesis 2:19; Psalm 139:7-8; Romans 8:38-39*

**And go with the full confidence**

**That the grace, mercy, and peace of Almighty God**

*2 Corinthians 13:13*

**ARE with us all;**

**Today; Tomorrow; and Forever.**

**Seriously.**

**Amen.**