

AColyte

Holidays 2011

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



There are varieties of gifts...

but it is the same Spirit who *activates* all of them in everyone.

— 1 Corinthians 12:4,6 (NRSV)

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

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Austin College AActivators

Spring 2012 Schedule

January 27-29, 2012

Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection
AC Campus

Wednesdays February-March 2012

Covenant Presbyterian Church WOW Program (Sherman)

March 23-25, 2012

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #1 (Gilmont)

April 20-22, 2012

Arkansas Presbytery Senior High Youthquake
Ferncliff Conference Center (Little Rock, AR)

April 20-22, 2012

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #2 (Gilmont)

April 27-29, 2012

Grace Presbytery Kidquake #3 (Gilmont)

“We are all talented.

We are all famous.

We are all powerful.

We must be the Chosen Ones.”

Contact jwilliams@austincollege.edu for more information

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

San Antonio, TX
Las Vegas, NM
Happy, TX
Chicago, IL
November 2011

Life's mostly attitude and driving.
--Jack Ingram

Charlie Brown and Linus got on my last nerve.

This week, I watched "A Charlie Brown Christmas" – or "Merry Christmas Charlie Brown," or whatever the heck it's called – for the umpteenth time. I've watched it for years. I love the Snoopy dance. I love how he taps his foot and plays guitar and jams with Schroeder and Pigpen (my band used to play "Snoopy's Theme" to kill time when somebody broke a string). I like the pitiful little Christmas tree that gets redeemed by the inept Charlie Brown and the sudden love of his transformed and enlightened comrades. And Linus' borderline condescending recitation of the biblical Christmas story. I've seen it all several times before and I love to watch it with my family.

But this year I found myself irritated by the number of times that Charlie Brown or Linus lamented about how "commercial" Christmas had become.

Maybe it's just the irony of having those laments about commercialism regularly interspersed with advertisements for computer games, smart phones, and department stores.

Or maybe it's that bemoaning the commercialism of Christmas has become cliché. It's kind of low-hanging fruit – easy to grab if you want to seem to be serious and reflective and a little more insightful than the unwashed masses (bless their hearts).

To be sure, as long as there are stories about the deployment of pepper spray in a Walmart line, I guess there will be some relevance for reminding each other that Christmas can, and probably ought to, be about more than just getting stuff.

You, know: "Remember the reason for the season;" and "don't take the Christ out of Christmas;" etc.

I don't especially disagree with those sentiments, but I've heard all that.

I've heard it a lot.

And I'm just not sure I have anything to offer to that conversation.

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I drove 4300 miles in November. That's a lot of time to think, and I thought about a lot of things.

My family and I went to San Antonio to watch my daughter and the rest of the Sherman High School Band compete in the Texas Class 4A high school band contest (she's in the Flag Corps). Sherman finished #10 in the state (go Bearcats!).

On November 8, I saw 27 bands perform a total of 37 times. I had a lot of time to think.

I thought a lot about marching bands – but more about that later.

The weekend after the band contest, I drove with five ACTivators (**Bryan Botello, Nicole Breckling, Bridgette Deem, Coral Kennelty-Cohen, and Katie Senior**) to lead the Santa Fe Presbytery Mid-High Youth Retreat at First Presbyterian Church in Las Vegas, New Mexico. We stopped in Amarillo and took photos of Sallie the Kangaroo at the Cadillac Ranch (see above). We read funky road signs in Adrian, TX (the exact middle of Route 66 – 1139 miles from Chicago and 1139 miles from Los Angeles), and ate dinner at the Route 66 Café in Santa Rosa, New Mexico.

Our retreat in Las Vegas ended with Sunday morning worship at the church in Las Vegas. AC student **Molly Salman** is from that church, and after worship Molly's mom gave us a *huge* box of cookies to bring back to campus for her. She told us that we were welcome to eat some of the cookies on the way home.

But Molly's name was on the box.

That raised some interesting questions for us. Was Molly's mom serious about our eating some of the cookies or was she just being nice? Did Molly expect a certain number of cookies? If we ate some, would she know how many? Would she care?

We were clearly responsible for transporting that gift to Molly, and we wanted to take that duty seriously.

But apparently, we were also, to some extent, recipients of the same gift. How could we be sure that Molly got what her mom intended while also enjoying the gift that was given to us?

It was complicated. Gifts are complicated.

We lasted until about Childress, then we broke down and opened the box. The cookies were really good, and there were plenty left for Molly, her friends, and other people in her dorm (like I said, it was a huge box).

The weekend after the New Mexico trip, ACTivators led another youth retreat at the Ceta Canyon Conference Center near Happy, Texas. Due to some academic and respiratory conflicts, we ended up needing to add a couple ACTivators to our team at the last minute. In addition to experienced ACTivators **Nicole Breckling, Bridgette Deem, and Amanda Mayfield**, our team for the Ceta Canyon event also included first-time ACTivators **Hannah Dyer-Holzhauer** and **Katy Latham** (left and right below).



Hannah and Katy stepped up – on very short notice – when we needed them. They were lots of fun, good colleagues, and great leaders. Their presence and commitment were significant gifts to the other ACTivators and to the kids who came to that event.

But they kept acting like *we* gave *them* a gift by inviting them to join us – like they received a gift by getting to spend the weekend jumping around, acting out stories from the Gospel of Luke, and watching selected clips from Harry Potter movies.

As is often the case in ACTivators events, nobody was exactly sure who was giving the gifts and who was receiving them.

The week after the Ceta Canyon event, my family and I got up *very* early on Thanksgiving Day to go to the McDonald's Thanksgiving Day Parade in downtown Chicago.

Like many of you, we had seen parades like that on TV, but had never attended one. It was fun.

We saw floats, big balloon cartoon characters (like Garfield and Arthur, Bullwinkle and Rocky), acrobats (including guys on stilts doing *flips*), and marching bands.

We had VIP seats for the parade so we got to sit on the reviewing stand.

The organizers of the parade orchestrated things so that, at the end of the parade, Santa Claus would appear, get interviewed by a reporter, and respond to her question, "What do you want to do now?" by saying "I want to dance!"

When Santa said that, loud music would start and we would all reenact the "Twist and Shout" scene from the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, complete with the marching band from Butler High School in Butler, Pennsylvania.

(Here's the scene from the movie: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1rRrPXbMKM> Note especially the role of the marching band, and the reference above to the State Marching Band Contest.)

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I think, deep down, I've always believed that marching bands were kind of magical.

One of my earliest memories is playing in the front yard of our house in Odessa in the summer of 1968. I was six years old and imagining myself as a great football player performing in front of cheering crowds. Then, suddenly – and *not* just in my imagination – I very clearly heard the strains of a marching band playing their wonderful, thrilling, exhilarating music. If you'd have been there, you would have heard it too.

It was just magical. There was no band in sight. But the music was unmistakable.

I pretty much forgot that memory until one day not long after we moved to Sherman in 1993. As I walked across the Austin College campus on a late summer afternoon, I once again heard the music

of a marching band wafting softly on the breeze. It was just as surprising and unexpected then as it had been before.

Again—there was no band in sight, but the music was clearly there. That old thrilling feeling I had experienced in Odessa all those years before came rushing back.

Our house in Odessa was about a mile and a half north of the campus of Permian High School. And the Austin College campus is about a mile and a half north of the campus of Sherman High School.

Apparently, a strong south wind on a warm Texas day can easily—if a little mysteriously—carry the music of a marching band to the ears of somebody who is ready to hear and be enchanted by it.

So—as I said—I’ve always thought marching bands were kind of magical.

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There’s a story in the Gospel of Luke that makes me think of marching bands, but you’ll have to keep reading to see why.

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner."

Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins--which were many – have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

--Luke 7:36-50

This story about the woman and her alabaster jar of ointment reminds me of another old story. And this one involves a marching band. Remember her story as I tell you this one.

It’s from a sappy, melodramatic, tear-jerker of a movie that came out in 1999 called *The Other Sister*. A few of you may remember that movie—most of you probably don’t. But it’s famous in my house because there’s a scene at the end of *The Other Sister* that always makes me cry.

Here’s how Wikipedia describes the plot of the movie:

After graduating from a special education school, Carla – a young woman with some developmental disabilities – falls in love with a young man named Daniel who faces similar disabilities. He is attending a polytechnic school associated with a local university. But Carla must try to escape the intentions of her wealthy, overprotective mother Elizabeth who tries to force her into tennis, high culture, radical change of décor in her bedroom, matronly clothing, and other pursuits. After Daniel drinks too much at a party and embarrasses himself as well as Carla, he is banished from the young girl's life.

Carla realizes how much she is still in love with Danny, as he does.

At Carla's sister's wedding, Danny surprises Carla by showing up and asking Carla to marry him. Everyone supports their wishes except for Carla's mother who is unsure that this is the right thing to do. Carla's mother has always been uneasy about Carla doing many things due to her exceptionality. Carla gets angry with her mom and tells her that she is sick of her trying to tell her (Carla) what to do. Carla's mother has a change of heart and she shows up at the wedding anyway and in the end she supports Carla's decisions and decides to no longer act as if she is ashamed of Carla.

They get married in the end and everything turns out wonderfully.

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That's a relatively accurate summary of the movie – even though it sounds like it was written by a group of junior high girls. But it leaves out one small but significant subplot.

When Carla finally goes to Daniel's house, he offers to put on some music. She tells him that she and her friends like the blues – Muddy Waters, Billie Holiday, stuff like that.

But Danny puts on a record of a brass band playing "Stars and Stripes Forever" and then he starts marching around the room waving a baton. They both smile and laugh. It's another in a long series of overly sweet, syrupy scenes in the movie.

Later, we learn that Daniel works as a sort of "manager" for the marching band at the university where he attends technical school. There's a scene in which he takes Carla to band rehearsal and we see that the musicians all know him and have great affection for him.

Still later, when Danny finally declares his love for Carla, he tells her, "I love you every day. I love you more than marching bands and making cookies."

Those are small scenes and they are easily lost in the tearful arguments and family melodramas that take up most of the movie.

But then –

at the very end of the movie
after Carla and Danny finally get married;
after Carla's mom tearfully embraces Danny,
and welcomes him into the family;
after their wedding has ended and they walk
out the door of the church to a waiting limousine;
suddenly Danny stops in the middle of the street and says,

“Wait, everybody, wait!”

And then we hear a drumbeat.

And Danny says, “Look, Carla!”

And the camera shows the drum major – “Walking Wally” – leading the whole band as they come marching up the street, playing “Seventy-Six Trombones.”

And Danny says, “This is my present for my bride!”

(Here’s the scene: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_tGTd_PBUU The stuff I’m talking about begins 5:20 in)

I get a tear in my eye every single time I see that scene (including as I’m writing this now).

On the whole, it’s a pretty mediocre movie – Roger Ebert called it “over-the-top maudlin” – but that’s a *great* scene.

In response to this big event in his life – this magnificent blessing; his marriage to the girl he loves – Danny offers the very biggest thing he can think of; the absolute grandest gift that he can offer.

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And that’s why that scene reminds me of that story from Luke.

This “sinful woman” crashes Simon’s party. She breaks open an alabaster jar of oil, anoints Jesus, and washes his feet with her tears.

Think about this story from her perspective.

Although we don’t know for certain what her back story is, it seems safe to assume that she is one of the women mentioned at the beginning of Luke 8 who Jesus had “cured of evil spirits and infirmities.”

If that’s true, it makes sense to see her as a little bit like Danny after his wedding. In response to a big event in *her* life--a magnificent blessing; being cured of evil spirits and infirmities despite her undoubted sinfulness – this woman offers the very biggest thing *she* can think of; the grandest gift that *she* has to offer.

There’s a real sense in which both the marching band scene at the end of *The Other Sister* and the story of the woman at Simon’s house anointing Jesus are stories about extravagant responses to extravagant grace – about big gestures to acknowledge big blessings.

Read this way – both of those stories invite us all to do three things.

First, they invite us to recognize our own abundant blessings. We all need to be disciplined about recognizing, acknowledging, and not taking for granted all of the gifts and blessings that really are part of all of our lives all day, every day.

- We have families.
- We have friends.
- We have communities that share our joy and our sadness, our frustrations and our triumphs, our highs and our lows.
- We are not alone.
- We have people to love and people who love us.
- All of our lives include times when we've clearly been treated better than we deserve to be treated.
- We have *things* that make our lives more pleasant and more joyful – ice cream, air conditioning, iPods, marching bands.
- It's good to be us.

All of our cups runneth over and we should never forget that.

The little details of our lives are never exactly as we wish they'd be, but that doesn't change the fact that we are beloved and gifted all the time. All of us spend our lives awash in a shower of abundant blessing – of truly *amazing* grace.

Danny the fictitious groom and the weepy, sinful woman at Simon's party knew that they really were gifted. And they encourage us all to remember that we are too.

Their stories also invite and encourage us to recognize, celebrate, and applaud big, sincere gestures made by others in response to abundant blessing--even if they seem excessive, impractical, or just plain sappy to us. In the last analysis, it's a good thing when people try to acknowledge and embrace their blessedness – even if sometimes the way they choose to do it seems a little odd to us. The whole Bible – and especially the book of Luke – suggests to us that gratitude is a good way to live in this world, a thing we should encourage, a posture we should adopt.

Finally, these stories invite us to consider how we might enact some big, extravagant response to the abundant blessings in our lives. They lead us to ask ourselves,

How should people who are as blessed as we are live out our blessedness?

Should we lock our doors and shut out the rest of the world so our gifts don't get messed up? Should we save every penny we have because we might need it later?

Should we, like Charlie Brown and Linus, simply snort and complain about the "commercialism" of Christmas?

Or should we strike up the band, march out into the world, and try to ensure that our abundant blessings are good news for everybody we encounter?

Those are relevant questions for a community of people who are as abundantly blessed as we are.

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There's a hymn written in 1758 by an English barber named Robert Robinson – *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing* – that we sometimes sing during Sunday night worship. We sing it a lot because it's easy to play on the guitar.

The second verse of the hymn begins with a peculiar line:

Here I raise my Ebenezer.

"Ebenezer" literally means "stone of help." It's a reference to all the times in the Old Testament in which people pile up stones to mark places where they were clearly aware of their giftedness; of God's providential, saving, abundant love.

That sinful woman's alabaster jar was a kind of Ebenezer – it was a way for her to mark and acknowledge the saving grace she had received from Jesus.

And the marching band at Carla and Danny's wedding is an "Ebenezer" too. It's Danny's way of responding to extravagant grace with extravagant gratitude – of marking and acknowledging his extreme blessedness.

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We're that blessed.

We should be that grateful.

We should give good gifts.

Not expensive gifts that we can't afford.

Not irresponsible gifts.

But not no gifts.

Gift-giving (maybe sometimes even *buying* stuff in order to give it away) ought to be part of our posture in the world.

Part of the point of this Christmas business that us Christians geek out about this time every year is that our individual lives and our life together include gifts. They just do.

I don't think we're being honest if we don't recognize that gifts are part of the whole truth. And I think it's good for us to try to stay in step with that truth.

Gifts are important.

We should give them intentionally and sincerely.

We should receive them graciously.

Charlie Brown and Linus should lighten up a little.

Until next time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy preacher,
Hoping You Give Something Cool to Somebody,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

THEOLOGIANS OF THE MONTH

I like the baby version best...

Dear Tiny Jesus...

--Ricky Bobby, the Will Farrell character, saying grace in *Talladega Nights*

Since I've already criticized Linus and Charlie Brown, I might as well defend Ricky Bobby.

I've recently encountered, or been reminded of, four texts that tend to focus my attention on the significance of Tiny Jesus.

In the song, *Cry of a Tiny Babe*, Canadian folk singer Bruce Cockburn sings the Christmas story like this:

*Mary grows a child without the help of a man
Joseph gets upset because he doesn't understand
Angel comes to Joseph in a powerful dream
Says "God did this and you're part of his scheme"*

*Joseph comes to Mary with his hat in his hand
Says "forgive me I thought you'd been with some other man"
She says "What if I had been - but I wasn't anyway and guess what
I felt the baby kick today"*

*Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever*

*Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe*

*The child is born in the fullness of time
Three wise astrologers take note of the signs
Come to pay their respects to the fragile little king
Get pretty close to wrecking everything*

*'Cause the governing body of the whole land
Is that of Herod, a paranoid man
Who when he hears there's a baby born King of the Jews
Sends death squads to kill all male children under two*

*But that same bright angel warns the parents in a dream
And they head out for the border and get away clean*

*Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe*

*There are others who know about this miracle birth
The humblest of people catch a glimpse of their worth
For it isn't to the palace that the Christ child comes
But to shepherds and street people, hookers and bums*

*And the message is clear if you've got ears to hear
That forgiveness is given for your guilt and your fear
It's a Christmas gift you don't have to buy
There's a future shining in a baby's eyes*

*Like a stone on the surface of a still river
Driving the ripples on forever
Redemption rips through the surface of time
In the cry of a tiny babe*

Frequent Theologian of the Month Steve Earle's Christmas song goes like this:

*Once upon a time
In a far off land
Wise men saw a sign
And set out 'cross the sand
Songs of praise to sing,
They travelled day and night
Precious gifts to bring,
Guided by the light*

*They chased a brand new star,
Ever towards the west
Across the mountains far,*

*But when it came to rest
They scarce believed their eyes,
They'd come so many miles
And the miracle they prized
Was nothing but a child*

*Nothing but a child
Could wash these tears away
Or guide a weary world
Into the light of day
Nothing but a child
Could help erase these miles
So once again we all
Can be children for awhile*

*Now all around the world,
In every little town
Every day is heard
A precious little sound
And every mother kind
And every father proud
Looks down in awe to find
Another chance allowed*

*Nothing but a child
Could wash these tears away
Or guide a weary world
Into the light of day
And nothing but a child
Could help erase these miles
So once again we all
Can be children for awhile*

In "God Became a Little Baby," Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen wrote,

God does not want us to be afraid, distant, or envious.

God wants to come close, very close, so close that we can rest in the intimacy of God as children in their mother's arms.

So God becomes a little baby. Who can be afraid of a little baby? A tiny little baby is completely dependent on its parents, nurses, and caregivers. Yes,

God wants to become so powerless as to be unable to eat or drink, walk, play, or work without the help of many people.

Yes, God becomes dependent on human beings to grow up and live among us and proclaim the Good News. How can we fear a baby we rock in our arms? How can we hide from or envy a baby who smiles at us in response to our tenderness?

A few thoughts about all that:

1. My friend Brenda Van Amburgh, grandmother of AC first year student Laura Van Amburgh, read the Nouwen quote at a meeting where I was this week. I hadn't thought about him in a long time. She spoke as though she and Nouwen were friends.
2. He was certainly a good guy. I taught him how to two-step in the Pouch Club in 1982.
3. Even though I'm no more comfortable with words like "babe" (Cockburn), or "precious" (Earle), or "intimacy" (Nouwen), than Ricky Bobby would be,
4. I still think that, as we spend the Spring preparing to welcome 2012 Posey Leadership Award winner **Marian Wright Edelman** – founder and Executive Director of the Children's Defense Fund – to visit our campus on April 12, we should be thinking and talking a lot about children.

It's worth asking ourselves

- whether we value children and, if so, why?
- Is our understanding of the value and importance of children influenced or informed by the profoundly peculiar notion of God coming among us as a little baby? How?
- Might that be relevant or helpful for some of us?

For my part, I think there's more going on in that funky story than Ricky Bobby understands.

Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man.
--Rabindranath Tagore, in *Stray Birds* (1916)

Is there anything more hopeful,
more significant,
more promising,
more important
than the birth of a child?

Before you answer that, ask your Mom.

Why would we look anywhere other than that to begin to tell our story about which things matter more than other things?

Bruce Cockburn, Steve Earle, Henri Nouwen, Marian Wright Edelman, and Rabindranath Tagore understand that.

And we shouldn't let the shallowness of Ricky Bobby (who – I realize – is a fictional character) and others of his ilk cause us too quickly to dismiss the notion of God among us as a dependent child.

I think that might be kind of a big deal.