

Austin College
Worship and Perspectives Service
August 23, 2011

Benediction

Romans 12:9-18

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.
Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the
lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are
Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the
sight of all.
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Like many of the rest of you, I became familiar over the summer with Kathryn Stockett's novel, *The Help*, and the movie based on that novel.

I've seen and heard all sorts of opinions about *The Help*. Some people object to its depiction of African-American domestic workers in Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960s. They say that the extent, severity, and brutality of systematic racism is inadequately portrayed in the story. And they point out the irony that the central character in the story is a wealthy, educated white woman.

Others argue that the strongest, most courageous, and most exemplary characters in the story are two remarkable African-American women – one of whom is the story's narrator. They point to the story's overarching theme of the recognition and celebration of basic human dignity even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Personally, I tend a little to the sentimental side, and I like *The Help* – excessive scatological references notwithstanding.

Those of you who know me will not be surprised to learn that my favorite part of the story has to do with a line that occurs two or three times through the narrative.

The narrator, Aibileen, begins by talking about her ability to “take care of white babies.” And soon we see her taking care of a little white girl named Mae. Aibileen tells her, and Mae repeats back:

You is kind.
You is smart.
You is important.

To be honest, I’m not sure whether that colloquial grammar is historically accurate or a crass caricature. But the portrayal of a caregiver helping a child develop a positive self-image is compelling. I like the image of an older, more experienced, caring person inviting, empowering, and enabling a younger person to think of herself as kind, smart, and important. That’s an especially poignant scene because it occurs in an environment in which the value of some people is clearly not recognized and celebrated.

It’s not all that much of a stretch to get from Aibileen’s affirmation to Mae that she is kind, smart, and important to Paul’s words to the Roman Christians urging them to be loving, patient, ardent, and peaceful.

Paul begins his letter to the Romans by revisiting and re-stating some theological affirmations that he and they have in common.

Then comes a “therefore,” followed by a series of ethical exhortations.

A few verses before the passage that Katie just read to us – in Romans 12:1 – Paul says, “I appeal to you, *therefore*...” and then he begins the list of exhortations that include the passage we’ve just heard.

After eleven chapters of
“This is what we believe;” and
“This is who we are;”

Paul concludes:
therefore this is how you should act.”

Like Aibileen talking to Mae, Paul is inviting, encouraging, and empowering his readers to see themselves as beloved, gifted, and capable participants in a great and important narrative.

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When Oscar was out of town and I was in this building by myself this summer, I did a lot of thinking about “therefores.”

In just a minute, after Coral prays, I'm gonna deliver the Benediction. We use more or less the same benediction in most campus-wide services. I'm usually the one saying it, and folks around here seem to like it. Students sometimes ask me to send it to them so they can include it in their weddings or graduation announcements.

At least in my mind, there's kind of an implied "therefore" between the day-to-day life of this campus and the Benediction that we normally use.

As we gather on the eve of another academic year, I invite you to think with me for a couple minutes about the words that have become known in some circles as the "Austin College Benediction."

Our typical Benediction usually begins with the call to:

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 to be pacifists in all contexts, but we do want them to strive to live in harmony and right relationship within the communities in which they live out their lives.

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

The next line is,
Have courage.

We want the members of this community to face challenges 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 – 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.

We also encourage each other to:
Hold on tight to all that is good.

We want to be a community that helps each other identify, cherish, and appreciate good things – good ideas, good habits, good behaviors, good attitudes.

We don't want to be uncritical Polyannas, and we don't ever want to conclude that we're finished talking about what matters and why. But it doesn't ultimately seem all that helpful simply to point out how nothing ever really measures up to our high standards.

We want to attract and nourish and *be* rigorous and serious and careful people who try to operate without illusions.

But it doesn't seem sufficient simply to condemn ourselves and our students to lives of perpetual disappointment.

We need to work on holding tightly to all that is good, even as we:

Return no one evil for evil.

This idea, which comes straight out of the Romans passage that we heard earlier, 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 moderation even, and especially, when perspective and moderation are absent in the behavior of others.

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

The Benediction continues with the call to:

Support the weak.

and

Strengthen the fainthearted.

The biblical tradition which gave rise to Austin College and has informed our life through 162 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 gracious toward, people who face difficulties.

The next call, to:

Honor all people.

is tricky as well.

Stories like *The Help*, legitimately point out the reprehensible and ultimately unacceptable nature of the racism that characterized everyday life in Mississippi in the early '60s. The racist individuals, and racist structures, portrayed there are clearly to be condemned and excoriated precisely because of their failure to "honor all people."

But the call to "honor all people" makes little sense unless it also includes honoring racists; and homophobes; and book-burners.

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.

The Benediction goes on to call us to:
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 might be 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 is a call to live responsibly. It might seem a little silly.

But in a world of BP oil spills and bank bailouts, 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 want to be clear that there is nothing that anybody in our community can utter or suggest that is 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 thinking.

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 they or anyone else in their lives remember or know it – we know that they are gifted and beloved.

**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 relationship is good news for all our students—regardless of their religious affiliations.

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

It doesn't hurt for us occasionally to get together and remind each other of our character and culture as an institution.

Our grammar should be better than Aibileen's. But our message should be similar.
Let's spend this year working hard to invite, encourage, and empower our students to see
what we see when they look in the mirror:

Someone who is beloved
and gifted
and capable.

That's a sacred and worthwhile mission for each of us and for all of us.

That's who we are.

That's what we do.

Let's get busy.