

New Students and Parents Worship  
August 28, 2010

## *Homesick and Surrounded by Weirdos*

### Psalm 137:1-6

- 1 *By the rivers of Babylon –  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.*
- 2 *On the willows there we hung up our harps.*
- 3 *For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of  
Zion!"*
- 4 *How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?*
- 5 *If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!*
- 6 *Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.*

### Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

*These are the words of the letter  
that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem  
to the remaining elders among the exiles,  
and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had  
taken into exile  
from Jerusalem to Babylon. . . .  
Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel,  
to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile  
from Jerusalem to Babylon:  
Build houses and live in them;  
plant gardens and eat what they produce.  
Take wives and have sons and daughters;  
take wives for your sons  
and give your daughters in marriage,  
that they may bear sons and daughters;  
multiply there and do not decrease.  
But seek the welfare of the city  
where I have sent you into exile,*

*and pray to the Lord on its behalf,  
for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

As Chaplain at Austin College, I am part of the school's Student Affairs and Athletics division. That division is made up of all the people and programs at the College responsible for the life of our students when they are not in class.

The average student is in class 12 to 15 hours per week. The other 150 or so hours are our responsibility.

It's important work and the College takes it seriously.

Although any college ultimately stands or falls according to what happens in its classrooms, the most successful colleges understand that the experience of their students outside the classroom directly affects their overall performance.

One of our primary concerns in the Student Affairs and Athletics division is to ensure that all students get involved in some sort of non-academic campus activity while they are at Austin College. We try to offer and encourage a variety of so-called cocurricular activities and we don't worry a whole lot about *which* activity a given student becomes involved in. Our concern is that all students get involved in something.

The facts are clear: the most successful students are students who are involved in the whole life of the college. A great deal of the learning that Austin College has to offer takes place outside the classroom.

The trouble is that every year there are a handful of students on this campus who simply refuse to believe that.

Year after year, we have a few students here who do nothing but eat, sleep, go to class, and go home on weekends. They occupy a bed and a desk during the week; they do what is required of them in class; and as soon as they can, they high tail it out of here and head home. They don't interact with other students any more than is absolutely necessary; they remain oriented toward their home town even though they are residential students at AC; and in so doing they rob themselves of much of what Austin College has to offer.

While it is certainly the case that occasionally a student who fits that profile will do well here, the plain fact is that the vast majority of students who fail to

become involved in life outside the classroom ultimately have a hard time at Austin College.

Our suspicion is that two factors tend to contribute to the failure of students to become fully involved in the whole life of Austin College.

For many students, plain and simple homesickness is a major impediment to becoming fully involved in campus life. For them, high school was a comfortable time in which they received a great deal of attention and support. Everybody knew them and they knew everybody; and that was good.

For these students, the move to college was a move away from everything that had come to be comfortable and familiar and right. They students get to Austin College and nobody knows them. The town is different, the school is different, the people are different. There doesn't seem to be much left that is comfortable or familiar. These students understandably begin to ask themselves why they should put up with all this new, weird stuff when they can simply endure until their last class on Friday and then go back home where everybody knows how to treat them and they know exactly how to act.

Other students seem to be uncomfortable with the diversity on our campus. Life at Austin College is life among Muslims, hicks, jocks, Roman Catholics, headbangers, radical feminists, atheists, Democrats, fundamentalist Christians, and *Presbyterians!* There are Asian students, African-American students, Hispanic students, rich students, poor students, openly homosexual students, and a disproportionate number of loud, opinionated, and obnoxious folks (and that's not even counting the faculty).

Some students are overwhelmed by this diversity and simply withdraw. They keep to themselves and retreat into the safety of the familiar as often as they can.

Part of our job in the Student Affairs and Athletics division is to help those students (and all students) develop some ties on our campus; to help them be fully present participants in the whole life of Austin College.

One of the things that makes me proudest to work for Austin College is the fact that this college believes that, if we're gonna cash your checks or your parents' checks (and we are), then we owe it to you to do everything we can to help you take full advantage of everything Austin College offers.

A big part of what we do in the Student Affairs and Athletics division involves trying to figure out how to help Austin College students who feel homesick and surrounded by weirdos.

Think about your whole life.

Hasn't "homesick and surrounded by weirdos" been an accurate description of your mood at some point? First day of junior high? Camp? Honeymoon? First fraternity party?

One suspects that most of us have felt like that at one time or another.

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Here's a big Austin College jump (you'll get used to these):

Between 593 and 587 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, conquered Judah and forcibly moved many of the Hebrew people to Babylon. This event, known as the "Babylonian captivity" or the "Exile," had an understandably profound effect on the way the Hebrews understood themselves, their relationship to other people, and their relationship with God.

After having spent generations as a nation whose worship of God was built around Jerusalem and the temple there, the Hebrews were surprised and bewildered to find themselves conquered and removed to a strange place. After having been led by God to the Promised Land, many of the Hebrews could not understand themselves as God's chosen people apart from that place.

This is the context in which Psalm 137 was written.

*By the rivers of Babylon –  
There we sat down and there we wept  
When we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
We hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
Asked us for songs,  
And our tormentors asked for mirth,  
Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."  
How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, o Jerusalem,  
Let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth  
If I do not remember you,  
If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.  
--Psalm 137:1-6*

Talk about homesick!

Like some Austin College students, the Jews exiled in Babylon could still vividly remember their comfortable and familiar lives back home.

Part of king Nebuchadnezzar's strategy for conquering nations was to take the "best and the brightest" from each place that he conquered and move them to Babylon. The Jews exiled in Babylon found themselves in a place where a variety of weird people prayed to a variety of weird gods.

Not only were the Babylonian Jews homesick, they were also surrounded by weirdos – surrounded by people who had vastly different ideas about what was important or even what was appropriate.

In the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter of Jeremiah, God has some stuff to say to the Babylonian Jews that might be useful for AC students who are feeling homesick and surrounded by weirdos.

In Jeremiah 29:7, God addresses some remarks to the Babylonian Jews. One could argue those words can be applied also to Austin College students who are feeling homesick and surrounded by weirdos.

Here's what God says:

*Seek the welfare of the city  
Where I have sent you into exile,  
And pray to the Lord on its behalf;  
For in its welfare  
You will find your welfare.  
--Jeremiah 29:7*

There are two important points in that verse for all of us who find ourselves homesick and surrounded by weirdos.

The first point is that God put us where we are. God tells the Jews in Babylon to "seek the welfare of the city **where I have sent you** into exile."

Whether we are comfortable here or not, it seems that God sent us here. At least for the time being, we are where God wants us to be. And that means that we probably shouldn't spend a whole lot of time and energy trying to recreate some bygone era or grumbling about the diversity in the midst of which we are living our lives.

**This** is our time – and we have no choice but to live out our relationship with God and each other in **this** context.

The passage also offers clear guidance for us as we try to figure out how to be the people of God at this time and in this place.

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you,” God says, “and pray to the Lord on its behalf.”

It doesn't say anything about convincing everybody else to be like us or to make others acknowledge that our way is the right way. According to this passage, our job is to be useful participants in the life of the city in which we find ourselves – to do whatever we can for everybody in this strange, diverse, unfamiliar, and often indifferent place.

Throughout the Bible, we are reminded that God uses people like us as instruments of divine love for the whole world. We need to be ready and eager to be useful in this big, strange world and to resist every impulse that would have us keep to ourselves or withdraw from the world into old familiar environs

We all face the temptation to complain because it is hard to be God's people in an environment that, if it isn't always hostile, is at least indifferent to our efforts and concerns. In seventeen-plus years on this campus, I often hear folks complain about the “apathy” of Austin College students. It's hard when you take something very seriously and the people around you demonstrate that they clearly do not. “Homesick and surrounded by weirdos” is not an uncommon feeling on this campus.

Throughout history, the people of God have reacted to their sense of being homesick and surrounded by weirdos by withdrawing from the world and focusing instead on themselves and their future life.

But Jeremiah 29:7 tells us that we've got work to do – that the place in which we find ourselves needs God and needs us – whether the folks among whom we are living realize it or not.

In the Student Affairs and Athletics division, we work hard to help all Austin College students understand that they have something unique and essential to offer to the life of our school. We try to help them understand that we are all poorer if any one of them withdraws and fails to participate fully in our life together.

God's message to the Jews exiled in Babylon was very similar: the place where you are needs what you can offer, so get busy sharing your gifts with the whole weird city.

And it doesn't take much to see that all of us who take the Bible seriously are in a somewhat similar situation. The place where we find ourselves needs what we can offer, so we need to get busy sharing our gifts with this whole messy world.

That's why there are Presbyterian colleges like Austin College. The Presbyterian Church does not expect this college simply to educate Presbyterians or to turn all students into Presbyterians. The point is that the world in which we find ourselves needs educated people. We can help with that. So we should. Period.

That's why Austin College sponsors the Great Day of Service and all of the other Service Station programs and why we generally emphasize community service. The place where we find ourselves desperately needs people who are willing to share their time and talents. The world needs people who are more concerned with what they have to offer than how much they deserve to get; people who recognize and embrace their amazing giftedness and work hard to be sure that their giftedness are good news for everybody else. We've got a campus full of people like that. Everybody in this room is on the gifted list.

Clearly, we're not all alike. But we're all gifted.

So let's get busy acting like gifted people act:

- creating,
- contributing,
- taking care of ourselves,
- taking care of each other,
- and taking care of this place.