

Perspectives and Reflections Service  
August 19, 2014  
Wynne Chapel

## *Hopping on Snakes and Scorpions*

Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

*1 After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.*

*2 He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*

*3 Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.*

*4 Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.*

*5 Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!"*

*6 And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.*

*7 Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house.*

*8 Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you;*

*9 cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."*

10 *But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say,*

11 *"Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near."*

12 *I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.*

...

17 *The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!"*

18 *He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.*

19 *See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.*

20 *Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."*

It occurred to me last week that it might not be obvious to new members of the Austin College community what we're up to in this "Perspectives and Reflections" event.

Every year before new students arrive, we get together here in Wynne Chapel to distribute service pins to Faculty and Staff who have reached milestones in their service to Austin College.

That's enough reason to do this. It's always appropriate to recognize and congratulate our outstanding and dedicated colleagues.

But we figured out a few years ago that it's also a good time for us to think together for a few minutes about what we mean – and what we don't mean – when we say Austin College is a "Church Related" school.

That comes up from time to time in our dealings with current and prospective students, parents, and donors.

Some of those folks embrace our Church-Relatedness.

Some worry about what that means.

Some misunderstand it and make inaccurate and unhelpful assumptions about who we are.

It's an important conversation because we're not a Church. We're not out to convert anybody. And we certainly have no religious requirements of students, faculty, or staff.

We're a college.

But we're a college that was founded by – and remains formally related to – the Presbyterian Church. And it's

good for us occasionally to think about ways that our Church-Relatedness can be beneficial to the entire AC community – Students, Staff, and Faculty.

One of the ways we can do that from time to time is by spending a few minutes reflecting together about ways that particular stories or passages from the Bible can help us think about how and why we do what we do.

There are several images in the verses that Libby just read to us that can help us think about the distinctive nature of the work and mission of Austin College.

The story starts out as Jesus sends out 70 people with a job to do. We'll talk about what that job might be in a

minute. But first we should notice that Jesus doesn't send the Seventy individually. They're sent in pairs.

As we look at our life together through the lens of this story, I think it might be important for us to recognize that – like the seventy folks that Jesus sends out – we're not expected or intended to do our work by ourselves either.

To be sure, we've got important work to do here. And it's good for us to remember that we do it best when we do it together.

In verse 2, Jesus tells the Seventy,

*"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*

This “harvest” image is also helpful for us as we think about our work.

For centuries, Christians have interpreted these words to mean that Jesus sent out the Seventy to harvest souls – to make more Christians.

It’s not clear to me that that’s the best way for Christians to interpret these words. And it’s certainly not a helpful way for us to think about ourselves as a Church-related college.

We’re not here to harvest souls.

We’re not here to make more Christians.

But I think you could make a case that we *are* here to harvest gifts.

One way to talk about the distinctiveness of an Austin College education is that, as an institution, we commit to work with our students to identify and develop and share their particular gifts.

That's a promise we make every time we accept a student for Admission or cash a tuition check. We're all part of that enterprise and we're pretty good at it.

We're gift harvesters.

As the story continues, Jesus gives some specific instructions to the Seventy about carrying no purse and accepting wages and stuff. I don't think those verses are particularly relevant to our conversation this morning.

Although I have to admit that when I first started working



on these remarks I did have this great vision of Nan Davis calling a prospective student who has decided to go to Trinity or Texas A&M and telling them:

*"Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet,  
we wipe off in protest against you.  
Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near."*

"You were SO close!"

But that's probably not very helpful.

I want to direct your attention to verse 17.

The text says:

*The seventy returned with joy, saying,  
"Lord, in your name  
even the demons submit to us!"*  
[Jesus] said to them,  
*"I watched Satan fall from heaven  
like a flash of lightning."*

I know that sounds like weird language that doesn't have much place on the campus of a modern, first rate Liberal Arts institution, but bear with me.

These words were written in a context much different from ours and – significantly – long before Dante and John Donne and John Milton provided all kinds of very specific and not necessarily helpful literary images of “demons” and “Satan.”

The Greeks used the word δαιμονια, “demons,” to refer to any unseen force that had identifiable consequences. Reading these words 2000 years after they were written, we can recognize that many of the illnesses that we have subsequently identified and learned to treat

and sometimes cure would have been called demons in the context in which Luke was writing.

Similarly, it is highly unlikely that the original readers of this story would have thought of some red guy with horns, a tail, and a pitchfork when Jesus mentioned Satan.

“Satan” – “Ha Satan” – is the Hebrew word for “Adversary.” Those original readers would have known about adversaries. They would have been able easily to identify things, forces, even people in their lives that seemed to work against them.

So the mention of demons and Satan in this passage would not necessarily have had the same connotations for its first readers that they do for us today.

After the disciples joyfully report that the demons are subject to them and Jesus talks about Satan falling, he drives the point home in verse 19 as he tells the Seventy:

*See, I have given you authority  
to tread on snakes and scorpions,  
and over all the power of the enemy;  
and nothing will hurt you.*

That's a great metaphor.

I just don't believe that there's anybody in this room who has never, ever, been scared of – or at least scared by – snakes. Even the most intrepid herpetologist would admit, I think, that snakes can be scary. They just are.

And anyone who, like me, has ever been stung by a scorpion will tell you that it hurts.

It hurts bad.

“Snakes” and “scorpions” are great images for things that scare or hurt people.

And to be given authority to “tread on snakes and scorpions” is to be called and enabled to contend against those things.

As educated and dedicated professionals, all of us in this room today are called to recognize that there really are things in the world that scare or hurt people. Snakes and scorpions like racism and depression come easily to mind this week.

We might not all use theological or vocational language, but we all recognize and understand that sometimes we need to push back against snakes and scorpions.

Although we don't – and probably shouldn't – use language like that on our diplomas, isn't that essentially what we're doing when we give degrees?

I think the “rights and privileges thereto appertaining” might include both the authority and the expectation that an Austin College graduate is ready to stomp on some snakes and scorpions.

Not necessarily every snake and scorpion all the time.

But some of them.

Shouldn't we expect that from every student?

Every graduate?

Every colleague?

Isn't that part of the commitment we've made to this place? To contend against some of the things that scare or hurt others?

I think so.

So when you put all that together – joyful success, falling Satan, stomping on snakes and scorpions – I think relevant lessons for us from this passage might include the recognition that:

- It feels good to do effective work together with a clear and consistent sense of mission (“*the Seventy returned with joy*”); and that
- We all can and should contend against things in the world that scare, hurt, or diminish people.

So here's a closing image for you:

Kangaroos joining hands (or paws or whatever)

and  
gleefully hopping on metaphorical snakes and  
scorpions.

I know, I know – that 's almost indescribably sappy  
and cute.

But think about

- Patti Manning Courtney's research on autism, or
- Asil Yassine teaching Math to inner city kids in  
Chicago; and
- Sameen Wajid's work with Pakistani women; and
- Hailey Malcolm and Katy Walters both serving  
as hospital Chaplains this summer; and
- Current students Cody Meyers, Josh Dickerman,  
and Jeremy Swisher, and their newly formed



Extra Step Foundation helping families battle  
disease in Costa Rica.

And think about the dozens and hundreds and  
probably thousands of stories that the people in this room  
could tell about Austin College people – Roo Nation  
--doing amazing, visionary, courageous, selfless, gracious  
things in the real world every day.

I'm gonna stand by that image:

Kangaroos hopping on snakes and scorpions.

I think that's exactly who we are and absolutely who  
the world needs us to be.

So let's get hopping.

Amen.

But I think that's exactly who we are and who we're called to be.