

New Students/Parents Worship
August 30, 2008

Phronesis of Kenosis

Philippians 2:5-7

*Let the same mind be among you
that was in Christ Jesus
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant,
being born in human likeness.*

A few years ago, I attended the Commencement services at a university not far from here. On the day I was there, the university gave an honorary doctorate to a man who is a world-renowned Latin scholar. As a way of introducing and – I guess – honoring the work of this Latin scholar, a Latin professor from the university stood up and began reading a proclamation – in Latin. I guess it was a little bit cute – reading Latin for the Latin scholar. But it went on and on and on. This guy talked for over ten minutes – in Latin. In an auditorium full of people who don't speak Latin.

It was perhaps the most pompous and pretentious thing I have ever seen.

I thought of that story this week as I began to think about what it might like to be y'all. In this room. On this day.

Have no fear--I'm not going to speak Latin to you today. I'm gonna do *Greek!*

Actually, I'm just going to use three Greek words. I hope it's not quite so ponderous and pretentious and pompous as ten minutes of Latin. But I really do think that three Greek words can be helpful for us as we spend a few minutes thinking about what you've gotten yourselves into by hooking up with this church-related college.

For centuries, Eastern Orthodox theologians have insisted that it is ultimately impossible to make meaningful statements about God in positive terms. Theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus Confessor, and Symeon maintained that – since God ultimately transcends all human language and even human thought – the closest humans can come to speaking meaningfully about

God is to talk about what God *isn't*. This “theology of negation” is known as “apophatic” theology – there’s the first Greek word. “Apophatic” theology means talking about God by talking about what God is not. (It’s similar to the *via negativa* of Thomas Aquinas).

At this point, I want to assure you that I have neither the ability nor the inclination to plunge us all into an in-depth and intricate discussion of apophatic theology (although we’ve certainly got some professors around here who could do that).

But I bring up apophatic theology because it has often occurred to me in recent years that – like many other church-related colleges and universities – Austin College has adopted a sort of “apophatic” way of talking about what we mean when we say we’re a “church-related college.”

We’re pretty good at telling the world what we’re not.

We’re not a public university.

We’re not taxpayer-supported.

We’re not huge.

We’re not dominated by graduate programs or the pursuit of research grants.

But – we hasten to add – although we are “church-related,” we’re not a Bible college.

Our primary mission is not to endorse and defend Christian faith in a diverse and sometimes hostile world. Our first priority is not to produce Christian lawyers, Christian bankers, or Christian dentists. A few years ago, I heard a representative of Dallas Baptist University talk about that school’s mission in exactly those terms (“Christian lawyers,” “Christian bankers,” “Christian dentists”). That’s a fine and respectable mission for that Dallas Baptist – but it’s not who we are at Austin College. It’s not what we’re here to do.

There are dozens – maybe hundreds – of colleges like Austin College who don’t want to completely disavow our historic and ongoing relationship with the church but don’t want simply or exclusively to be agents for the propagation and defense of Christian faith either.

And it would be good if we could figure out a way to articulate *our* understanding of what it means to be a church-related college in positive, indicative, unapologetic, non-apophatic terms.

Paul’s words in Philippians 2:5-7 offer some helpful language for us as we try to do that.

*Let the same mind be among you
that was in Christ Jesus*

That is, “try to think about yourselves like Jesus thought about himself.”
The root of the Greek word that Paul uses is “phronesis”-- “mindset” or
“attitude.”

*Let the same mind be among you
that was in Christ Jesus
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,*

that is, “poured himself out”
That Greek root is “kenosis” – “emptying” or “self-offering.”

*taking the form of a servant,
being born in human likeness.*

Puerto Rican theologian Eldin Villafane has said that this passage can be read as
an invitation to all who take the Bible seriously to adopt a “phronesis of
kenosis” – a mindset of emptying or self-offering.

I’ve used all that Greek this morning to get us to this question:

What if church-related colleges like Austin College read this passage as an
invitation to think about ourselves like Jesus thought about himself?

*Don’t regard your relationship with the church
as something to be exploited
through required Bible classes,
or mandatory chapel,
or dress codes,
or strict dating regulations,
but think about what your close and serious
relationship with the church
enables you to offer –
to your students,
to the church,
and to the world.*

If we think about ourselves and our relationship to students in these terms, we
might be able to identify some significant ways that Austin College’s relationship

with the Presbyterian Church enables us to serve our students – *all* of our students.

As you sit here in *Wynne* Chapel--or when you go to the *Wright* Campus Center or *Abell* Library--I invite you to think about the fact that the first contact the Wynnes, the Wrights, and the Abells had with Austin College was through our common connection to the Presbyterian Church. We can never know definitively, but it is likely that the Presbyterian connection played some part in those significant gifts that have benefited all Austin College students who have used those facilities.

We don't require much regarding religion at Austin College. We have an official commitment that at least half of our board members will be Presbyterian – and that is the only institutional religious requirement or restriction in the entire life of the college.

We don't use our covenant relationship with the church to enact requirements or restrictions. But we do spend some time and energy thinking about what that relationship lets us offer to our students.

Last year, our church-relatedness enabled Austin College to offer our students:

- weekly Sunday evening communion services that were planned and led by students from a variety of Christian traditions;
- weekly *Lectio Divina* Bible studies based on the common lectionary and tied to the following Sunday's worship service;
- weekly Midday Prayer Services based on the Presbyterian Church (USA) Daily Prayer materials;
- monthly "Lives of Faith at Austin College" sessions at which non-Christian students discussed their experience as Austin College students from their particular faith community;
- an opportunity for our students to meet Imam Yahya Hendi – the Muslim Chaplain of Georgetown University in Washington, DC;
- thirteen different Christian and non-Christian student religious groups;
- the Service Station program through which over 400 Austin College students were involved in some form of community service; and
- the ACTivators program through which 64 students traveled over 5600 miles to plan and lead 27 ministry events involving over 3500 children, youth, and adults.

Nobody was *required* to participate in any of those activities. But they were part of what we offered to the students to whom we have committed to offer a holistic educational experience.

Thinking about our covenant relationship with the Presbyterian Church in these “kenotic” – or “self-offering” – terms enabled us last year to offer the church:

- those 64 talented, energetic, and experienced ACTivators who planned and led regional and national Presbyterian events Texas, California, and New Mexico;
- over a dozen students who worked for local congregations;
- 15 recent Austin College alumni who are currently in seminary and 34 who have graduated from seminary in the last five years; and
- a 2006 graduate – Robert Quiring-- who will spend this year as a Presbyterian Church (USA) Young Adult Volunteer working in Kenya the thirteenth Young Adult volunteer from Austin College in the last seven years;

To the world last year, we offered:

- our third consecutive Alternative Spring Break trip to continue hurricane relief efforts near New Orleans – this year’s trip involved 42 students and three faculty or staff sponsors who worked with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to rebuild homes in New Orleans;
- Ongoing partnership with the Simbaredenga Newstart Children’s Home, an AIDS orphanage in Zimbabwe;
- A new Global Outreach program through which students raised over \$2000 for microloans in Senegal through the Tostan program; and
- Over 280 May 2008 graduates, 70% of whom spent at least one month engaged in formal academic study in a country other than the United States.

Obviously, I spend a lot of time and energy thinking about this part of the life of Austin College. But there are lots of folks all over this campus who play important roles in those stories. They are stories that are the result of our attempt to live out our church-relatedness with a “phronesis of kenosis” – a “mindset of self-offering.”

I also understand that our church relationship is a small part of the whole life of our institution. Our relationship with the Presbyterian Church should never inhibit the ability of Austin College faculty and staff to serve students in a variety of ways. But part of what we have to offer to our students is this formal, historic, and ongoing relationship to the Church.

I hope that, as an institution, we can continue to state – in positive, non-apophatic terms – that we think church-relatedness is best expressed by focusing on what that relationship enables us to offer.

And our commitment to every single student who comes to our campus includes working to ensure that our covenant relationship with the Presbyterian Church is an obvious benefit to *all* Austin College students.