

Worship and Perspectives Service
Austin College
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Seven Values

This “Worship and Perspectives” service is the time we gather every year, catch up with each other, and think for a minute about why we do what we do at Austin College.

And – probably because we have this annual gathering here in the Chapel – this service often includes some reference to what we mean when we say we’re a “Church-related” college.

Some of us feel pretty good about that phrase. It makes others of us a little nervous. There are probably as many opinions about what it means to call ourselves “Church-related” as there are people in this room.

I don’t think we should ever decide that we’re finished thinking and talking about that. Obviously, Church-relatedness is something that I think about pretty much every day.

In our mission statement, Austin College “affirms the importance of a non-sectarian education that fosters exploration and development of values through an awareness of the world’s religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions.”

That’s one way that we talk about being a “Church-related” college. As an institution that tries to “foster the exploration and development of values,” and as a college with a strong historical and ongoing relationship with the Presbyterian Church, we owe it to each other, to our students, to the Church, and to the world to keep thinking about what we mean when we say we’re “church-related.”

It certainly means that we have values as an institution. But it’s not really all that helpful just to tell the world *that* Austin College has values. Every school has values – whether they admit it or not. We need to spend some time talking to each other and the world about *what* we value.

In a sense, that’s easy. The Austin College Mission Statement includes a list of seven specific values that lie at the heart of our life together. If we are going to talk about values, we might as well begin there.

According to the first paragraph of the Mission Statement:

Austin College continues its relationship with the church and its commitment to a heritage that values personal growth, justice, community, and service. An Austin College education emphasizes academic excellence, intellectual and personal integrity, and participation in community life.

This morning I invite you to think with me for a few minutes about how we can build a bridge between that pretty talk that sounds like it was written by a committee and the real lives of real students, faculty, and staff on this campus.

In order to do that, I propose to look at the seven values listed in our Mission Statement, to refer to some stories from the Bible that give some texture to those values – at least in my mind –, and to use that discussion to sketch a picture of what Austin College thinks an educated adult looks like.

Value #1--Personal Growth

As we talk about “personal growth, I direct your attention to passages like Mark 12:30, where the Law of God is summarized in the claim that we are to

love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

That language presumes that people are multi-faceted. It presumes that we are all combinations of heart, soul, mind, and strength. A college that values personal growth is one that believes a truly educated person is a whole person – more than simply a paycheck stub; or a credit card limit; or even a college degree. It is a college that claims some responsibility to help students grow toward intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual maturity.

Value #2 – Justice

“Justice” is unquestionably a vague and complicated idea. Some claim that justice is a matter of ensuring that you get what you deserve. Others talk about taking “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But the biblical notion of justice involves doing the best we can to treat others the way God has treated us.

Passages like Micah 6:8, where we are told that what God requires of us is that we

do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God,
have been interpreted to mean that responsible people of faith should be more concerned with what they do *for* others than with what they expect *from* them.

In this context, a college that values “justice” encourages students not only to *do an honest day’s work for an honest day’s wage* but also to *pay an honest day’s wage for an honest day’s work*. To value justice is to educate students – and to be an institution – characterized by an approach to every situation with more concern about what we have to offer than what we deserve to get.

Value #3--Community

Austin College’s claim to value “community” can be interpreted to involve the way our students participate in all of the communities of which they are a part over the course of their lives.

In the 29th chapter of Jeremiah, that prophet writes to a group of exiles, telling them to

*seek the welfare of the city where God has sent you into exile,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

That passage has been interpreted to mean that those of us who take the Bible seriously should not simply “retreat into separateness.” It is used to contend that people of faith must be concerned about a larger community than just “people like us.” This way of understanding the value of “community” leads to a vision of educated people as people who embrace diversity and seek actively to be useful in all the communities in which they find themselves.

Value #4 – Service

We talk about service a lot around here. We work hard to encourage and enable students to become involved in community service. We are by no means the only college that values service – and we’ve still got a lot left to learn about how to do that well – but we do a decent job of delivering on our promise to exhibit a real commitment to real service.

In the tenth chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people of Israel:

The Lord your God...is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the widow and the fatherless, and loves the sojourner. Love the sojourner therefore; for you were once sojourners in the land of Egypt.

Austin College was founded by – and we remain part of – a community that understands itself to be addressed by those ancient words. The community with

whom this College is related has recognized in these words both that *we* have been rescued and cared for in the past, and that we have an obligation to show gratitude for all that has been done for us by seeking to serve those in the world – widows, orphans, strangers – that no one else seems to be looking out for.

An institution that values *service* believes that an educated person is someone who understands that we are all gifted people and that gifted people should always live in such a way that *their* giftedness is good news for the whole world. We strive to be a community of gifted people who act gifted.

Value #5--Academic Excellence.

In 1 Peter 4:10, the author tells his readers,

*As good stewards of the manifold grace of God,
serve one another with whatever gift you have.*

In the light of this verse, Austin College's commitment to academic excellence may be seen in our claim that an educated person is someone who is in the process of identifying, developing, and sharing her gifts. Regardless of specific academic disciplines, particular forms of study, or the individual goals of the students involved, everything that goes on in a classroom on this campus – and much of what goes on outside class – relates in some sense to our commitment to help students figure out what they do well, help them learn to do it better, and call them to do what they do for others and not just for themselves.

In terms of our picture of what an educated person looks like, Austin College's valuing of "academic excellence" leads to the notion that an educated person is someone who works hard to identify, develop, and share his or her gifts.

Value #6-- Intellectual and Personal Integrity

When I consider the concepts of intellectual and personal integrity, my mind is drawn to the eleventh chapter of 2 Samuel. That's where we read the story of David and Bathsheba.

David's up on his roof. He sees this good-looking woman bathing next door and has her come sleep with him. Later, she tells David she's pregnant. This causes some concern on the part of the king, so he sends for Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. Uriah, a general, is away fighting a war. David wants him to come

home and spend the night with his wife so that, when she has her baby, everybody will think Uriah is the father.

Uriah comes to see his king as directed, but he won't go home and sleep in his own bed. As a general with soldiers in the field, Uriah refuses to violate the commitment that he has made to his troops. He tells David, "When my men can sleep in their own beds, then I will sleep in mine."

Since he can't trick Uriah, David simply has him killed. And then he tells Joab, who carried out his orders to have Uriah killed, "Do not let this matter trouble you."

In this way, the Bible draws a clear distinction between David and Uriah. While David sold out the values that he espoused and made decisions based on his immediate, naked self-interest (so to speak); Uriah stayed true to his commitments – even if his fudging a little might not have made much difference to anybody else.

A school that values intellectual and personal integrity believes that an educated person is someone who doesn't sell out, even when remaining true to values and commitments is inconvenient or difficult.

Value #7--Community Life

Earlier, we talked about the college's claim to value community in general. This separate value of "Community Life" has more to do with our life together on this campus. Here, I direct your attention to John 20:26. That easily overlooked verse in the Doubting Thomas story has much to say to us as we think about how and why we should try to live together as a college community.

The story begins on Easter night, with ten of Jesus' disciples huddled together behind a locked door because they were scared of the people who had killed Jesus (Judas had been run off and Thomas wasn't there – we're not told why).

Jesus shows up among them, and the first thing he says is, "Peace be with you." Later, those ten disciples tell Thomas that Jesus – who had been dead for three days – stopped by to see them. Thomas, understandably has some doubts.

That's where we are when we come to John 20:26. That verse says:

Eight days later, the disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them.

That's huge. It means that for eight days, there was not unanimity among Christians about whether or not Jesus had been raised from the dead. That's a fairly significant theological issue for some of us.

The "peace" that Jesus gave to the disciples in the first part of the story is evident in the fact that they had sense enough to stay together, even when one of them had a very different understanding of things than the others. They understood that loving each other was more important than agreeing with each other.

In this context, our claim to value *community life* may be seen to include the notion that an educated person is someone who is more concerned with loving other people than with fixing them, defeating them, or winning arguments with them.

As an institution related to the Presbyterian Church, we have no duty or desire to try to change students or only to employ people who have certain faith commitments. But I submit that we do have some obligation to base our life together on values that are consistent with those of the tradition out of which our school arises.

Austin College was the Presbyterian Church's idea in the first place. We don't belong to the Presbyterian Church, but the values that lie at the core of our life together at Austin College are in fact influenced by, and consistent with, those of the Presbyterian Church.

We fulfill the commitment contained in our Mission Statement to "foster exploration and development of values" when we structure our life together around the values of personal growth, justice, community, service, academic excellence, intellectual and personal integrity, and community life.

As we move forward into the Hass years, we will be true to the values that we espouse to the extent that we do everything we can, in all our different capacities, to educate students:

- who are whole people who continue to grow intellectually, physically, socially, and spiritually;
- who approach every situation with more concern about what they have to offer than what they deserve to get;
- who seek actively to be useful in all the communities in which they find themselves;
- who work hard throughout their lives to identify and develop their gifts;

- who understand that gifted people have a basic responsibility to be sure that their giftedness is good news for the whole world;
- who remain true to their values, even when that's inconvenient or difficult; and
- who are more concerned with loving and serving other people than fixing or defeating them.

From classrooms to training rooms, from residence halls to the Dining Hall, in formal and informal contexts, we will all have opportunities over the course of the coming year to live out and make real those pretty ideas from our Mission Statement.

And if we're going to continue to cash the checks we get from students, parents, and donors – and we are – then we all need to keep thinking about and talking about and showing the world what really matters to us as we encounter, embrace, and accompany our students.

That's who we are. We're all people who take each student seriously.

That's why we're here.

It's a great gig.

Let's get busy.