

AColyte

Commencement 2012
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



Rev. Carroll Pickett
AC, '54
Honorary Doctorate, 2012

We're with him.



AColyte

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things at Austin College

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CONGRATULATIONS
TO THE 2012-2013
AUSTIN COLLEGE
SALLIE MAJORS
RELIGIOUS LIFE INTERNS

Cora Barraza
Jessica Carlson
Heather Farquhar
Jason Henry
J. P. Marshall
Amanda Mayfield
Jennie Nichols



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Among Giants and Legends
(past and future)
Gearing Up and Getting Ready
Spring 2012

*Decency is not news;
it is buried in the obituaries –
but it is a force stronger than crime.*
--Robert Heinlein,
This I Believe (1952)

So, this Sunday at Commencement, in addition to our usual commencement stuff like giving degrees to graduates and Honorary Doctorates to our Baccalaureate and Commencement speakers, Austin College will also give an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree to a man named **Carroll "Bud" Pickett**.

Let me tell you why.

Here are some basic facts:

- Bud Pickett graduated from Austin College in 1954.
- He attended Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary (all the best ones do) and graduated in 1957.
- He served as Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Sinton, TX (1958-1961), Associate Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Victoria, TX (1961-1967), and Pastor of first Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, TX (1967-1980).
- In 1974, two members of First Presbyterian, Huntsville were killed in a major prison riot, known as the "Carrasco Prison Siege."
- Bud Pickett's grandfather was murdered.
- In 1980, the Director of the Texas Prison System, who was a member of Bud's Church in Huntsville, asked him to come and spend a year working in the Department of Corrections. Bud agreed to become a prison chaplain and was assigned to the Walls Unit in Huntsville.
- In 1982, Texas began to carry out executions against men who had been convicted of capital crimes and given the death penalty.
- As Chaplain at the Walls Unit, Bud ended up accompanying 95 inmates as they were executed.

A 2008 interview for the PBS Documentary series “Frontline” includes an exchange in which an interviewer asked Bud:

You set out to do [prison ministry] for one year and you did it for 16 years. What kept you going?

Bud’s response is fascinating:

I didn’t set out to do executions. I set out to do a chaplaincy. At the time it was never in my job description. I think the one thing that kept me going was not only my faith but this was to me a great important part of ministry.

I made a commitment to a man in my first church.... [H]e asked me, “Would you stay with me when I die?” He was dying of cancer, and I made a promise to him, “[I]f it’s within my power to help you when you die, I will be there.”

So it’s part of my ministry to be with the person who dies who can’t have family there.

I’ve always felt like the hardest thing to do would be to have to die alone. If I can be with him for six hours, eight hours, 12 hours, 24 hours, and help him die not alone, then that’s what kept me going.

*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
--Psalm 139:7-8*

“Sheol” is the way the ancient Hebrews talked about where people go when they die. The point of the Psalm is that, wherever we go, before or even after we die, we are not beyond the reach of God’s love.

Later, the Frontline interviewer asked Bud:

Weren’t there times some evenings – seeing this man scared out of his wits, perhaps talking to members of his family who are grief-stricken – when you want to say, “Let him live!! Let’s not go through with it.”

Bud:

I could never say that.

The law was in control – the law of the State of Texas – and that was the thing that was told us at the very beginning: “This is going to happen whether you’re here or not.”

And I would prefer to stay with him and try to help him and listen to him. And if he needed a Dr. Pepper, I’d get him a Dr. Pepper. If he needed a particular song, I’d find him that song. If he wanted to sing, we’d sing (and I don’t sing well). I knew I never had the power to stop it.

In a 2011 interview with the Texas Tribune Bud described the last day with prisoners facing execution.

If they wanted to talk about the Bible, we'd talk about the Bible. If they wanted to talk about the Qu'ran...I had a friend in Dallas who gave me the very most expensive Qu'rans – a whole case of them – to be used only at the Death House.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.
--Psalm 23:4, KJV*

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On the day he retired from the Prison System in 1995, Bud announced that he opposes the death penalty and he has spent the years of retirement working to get capital punishment eliminated while counseling condemned prisoners and working with defendants in capital cases.



Introducing an interview with Rev. Pickett, in "Failure" magazine says

Originally a supporter of capital punishment, Pickett now claims that his firsthand experience with a seemingly endless parade of executions led him to come out against the death penalty, a bold reversal in a state infamous for its pro death penalty stance. He now characterizes the death penalty as "useless," a punishment that not only adversely impacts those involved with meting it out, but causes undue suffering for witnesses and victims' families. In this Failure Interview, Pickett recalls the executions of several heinous criminals and the circumstances that led him to dub the death penalty a failure.

In the "Frontline" interview he says,

As I look at the world, I can see that this process is not cutting down on what's going on in the free world.

It's not working.

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I doubt that Austin College is giving an Honorary Doctorate to Bud Pickett because he is a vocal opponent of the death penalty.

Maybe so. We definitely don't have a lot of folks around here who are vocally *pro*-capital punishment.

But there are hundreds of AC alums who oppose the death penalty, and we're not giving Honorary Doctorates to all of them.

I think it's the Dr. Peppers.

The unique and decisive part of Carroll Pickett's career has been the time he spent with men facing execution. And his work with them – accompanying them as they “walk in the valley of the shadow of death” --has been astonishing, amazing, inspiring, beautiful, and absolutely honorable.

We're honoring his care and respect for people – guilty, reprehensible, dishonorable people – because he believes they should have that care whether they deserve it or not.

During the Benediction at the end of the Commencement service, I'll say (among other things), “Honor all people.”

As much as anyone you'll ever know, Bud Pickett knows what that means.

Until September, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Wishing You a Summer Filled with Gifts, Grace, and Gratitude,,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

ONE MORE THING—

Let's end with this:

Last week, **Bryan Botello** sent me this quote from Robert Heinlein's book, [Time Enough for Love](#). It's a good manifesto for us Liberal Artsistas.

**A human being should be able to
change a diaper,
plan an invasion,
butcher a hog,
conn a ship,
design a building,
write a sonnet,
balance accounts,
build a wall,
set a bone,
comfort the dying,
take orders,
give orders,
cooperate,
act alone,
solve equations,
analyze a new problem,
pitch manure,
program a computer,
cook a tasty meal,
fight efficiently,
die gallantly.
Specialization is for insects.**

"It's a little bit of everything."