

# AColyte

November 2018

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



**REMEMBER WHO  
ALL THIS IS FOR**

AColyte

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

Rev. John Williams, Ph.D., Editor

900 N. Grand Ave.

Suite 61647

Sherman, TX 75090

903.813.2220

[jwilliams@austincollege.edu](mailto:jwilliams@austincollege.edu)

## WHAT IS THE AColyte AND WHY DO I HAVE ONE?

Welcome to the first edition of the AColyte for the 2018-19 school year.

This journal is intended to provide a forum for the Austin College community to discuss theological issues and keep up with what's going on in our various Religious Life programs.

We operate with a fairly broad definition of theology around here. As far as we're concerned, anybody who spends time thinking about which things matter more than other things is a theologian.

That probably even includes you.

The use of the term "AColyte" for our title is based on our hope that, like an acolyte who lights candles in a worship service, we can also be "bringers of light," or "bringers of flame," or instruments to help "lighten things up." If nothing else, we can promise to provide ample opportunities to practice the virtues of patience and forgiveness.

Feel free to reply if you have questions or comments or corrections.

### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Comfortably Ensconced in Wynne Chapel  
Winding up my 51<sup>st</sup> semester as an Austin College employee  
Refreshed and Renewed after a Long Post-Homecoming Nap  
Still Loving this Gig  
November 2018

*When the bow is in the clouds,  
I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God  
and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.*

-Genesis 9:16

As many of you know, one of the ways I try to keep myself sane is by occasionally sitting down and scribbling a few notes to the Austin College community about "faith, doubt, and other things."

I'm gonna begin with

- A Disclaimer,
- A Confession, and
- A Spoiler Alert

The **Disclaimer** is that I'm pretty sure that circus impresario P.T. Barnum was a dishonest, unethical, cruel, racist who made money exploiting scores of vulnerable people who were at the most extreme margins of nineteenth-century American society.

And, at least according to Google Images, he was nowhere near as pretty as Hugh Jackman.

To wit:



That's the Disclaimer.

Here's the **Confession**:

I really enjoyed "The Greatest Showman"—Hugh Jackman's highly fictionalized 2017 movie about Barnum and his career.

It's kind of a cheesy musical extravaganza with entertaining choreography, no mention of Barnum's racism or exploitation, and some really good songs.

And there's one particular line in the show-stopping song that comes at the end of "The Greatest Showman" that was worth all the vague historical liberties and omissions.

Now here's the **Spoiler Alert**:

The tension at the center of the movie is about Barnum's desire to transcend his hardscrabble roots and achieve financial success and recognition and approval from New York High Society.

In a telling and decidedly unsubtle quote, Jackman's Barnum says at one point:

*"New York Society will never stop from judging us.  
If they did, they'd actually have to do something  
legitimate with their lives."*

Subtle.

So that's one part of the movie.

An important and almost certainly fictitious subplot is Barnum's growing admiration and respect and affection for the marginalized persons who are the "Freaks and Oddities" that he displays for audiences at his "American Museum of Curiosities."

Those two themes—Barnum’s desire for recognition by New York Society and his affection for his marginalized performers—come together late in the movie when an angry mob burns down Barnum’s Museum while he is on the road seeking cultural legitimacy by promoting concerts by famous Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind.

At that point, Barnum comes to his senses, leaves the tour, and comes home to be with his family and circus performer colleagues.

Just in case the earlier plot points had been too subtle and understated, the climactic scene of the movie shows Barnum—whose personal and professional lives are in a shambles—drowning his sorrows in a bar.

Suddenly, General Tom Thumb comes walking up the bar.

He’s soon joined by the Bearded Lady, the Irish Giant, the Siamese Twins, and all the other members of his troupe of performers from Barnum’s American Museum of Curiosities.

Having realized the error of his ways—and recognizing the forgiving faithfulness of his *true* friends—Jackman’s Barnum looks at a photograph of his family and then he sings:

*I drank champagne with kings and queens  
The politicians praised my name  
But those were someone else’s dreams  
The pitfalls of the man I became  
For years and years  
I chased their cheers  
The crazy speed of always wanting more  
But when I stop and see you here  
I remember who all this was for.*

I know—that’s pretty schmaltzy.

But here’s the thing:

That’s a *great* line.

*When I stop and see you here  
I remember who all this was for.*

EDITOR’S NOTE:  
Here comes the kind of random leap into the Bible  
that often occurs in the *AColyte*:

That line from the “From Now On” song in “The Greatest Showman” about “remembering who all this is for” makes me think of the first 8 verses of the 56<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Isaiah.

*1 Thus says the Lord:  
Maintain justice, and do what is right,  
for soon my salvation will come,  
and my deliverance be revealed.*

*2 Happy is the mortal who does this,  
the one who holds it fast,  
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,  
and refrains from doing any evil.*

*3 Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,  
"The Lord will surely separate  
me from his people";  
and do not let the eunuch say,  
"I am just a dry tree."*

*4 For thus says the Lord:  
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,*

*5 I will give,  
in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.*

*6 And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
to minister to him,  
to love the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants,  
all who keep the sabbath,  
and do not profane it,  
and hold fast my covenant—*

*7 these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called  
a house of prayer for all peoples.*

*8 Thus says the Lord God,  
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
I will gather others to them  
besides those already gathered.*

In the context of the great narrative of the Hebrew scriptures, Isaiah 56 comes as the Israelites have learned that—after decades of exile in Babylon—they will soon be returning to the land from which they had been forcibly removed.

And, not only that, now Isaiah is telling them that when they get there they will be able to rebuild the Temple that had been destroyed in 587 BCE by Nebuchadnezzar's invading army.

That's where we are as Isaiah 56 begins.

Isaiah is giving instructions to the Israelites as they think about returning to their homeland and rebuilding the Temple.

But in order to understand the significance of Isaiah's words and the context in which they would have been originally read and heard, we first need to see a couple other—slightly uncomfortable—biblical passages.

Here are two passages from the Hebrew Bible with which everybody to whom Isaiah was speaking would have been familiar.

They seem weird and wrong to us, but bear with me.

Deuteronomy 23:1-3:

*No one who has been emasculated  
by crushing or cutting  
may enter the assembly of the LORD.  
No one born of a forbidden marriage  
nor any of his descendants  
may enter the assembly of the LORD,  
even down to the tenth generation.  
No Ammonite or Moabite  
or any of his descendants  
may enter the assembly of the LORD,  
even down to the tenth generation.*

Leviticus 21:18-20:

*No man who has any defect may come near:  
no man who is blind or lame,  
disfigured or deformed;  
no man with a crippled foot or hand,  
or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed,  
or who has any eye defect,  
or who has festering or running sores  
or damaged testicles.*

These passages—and many others like them throughout the early books of the Old Testament—clearly indicate that there are some people, like foreigners and eunuchs and people with disabilities, who are simply not welcome in the Temple.

Leviticus and Deuteronomy make it clear that foreigners and eunuchs are clearly not “who all this is for.”

But in Isaiah 56—as the Israelites prepare for and imagine how their life after exile might be—God tells them to

*Maintain justice and do what is right.*

That’s not really a surprise.

God says stuff like that all over the Old Testament.

But then comes a surprise:

*Maintain justice and do what is right,*

God says, and

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,  
“The Lord will surely separate me  
from his people”  
and do not let the eunuch say  
“I am just a dry tree.”*

Wait a minute, I thought Leviticus and Deuteronomy said that’s exactly what God thinks about foreigners and eunuchs.

But now here in Isaiah 56, God says

*To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,  
I will give, in my house and within my walls  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.*

(By the way: former AC Religion Professor Roy Melugin once told me that many Isaiah scholars—including him—believe that Isaiah absolutely intended that pun:

*The eunuchs won’t be cut off.*)

We need to recognize that these words in Isaiah 56 are a jaw-droppingly radical change from the attitude toward foreigners and eunuchs found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

And God keeps going—describing this new situation within the post-exilic covenant community.

*[T]he foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,—  
these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
...for my house shall be called  
a house of prayer for all peoples.*

Again, that's a complete departure from the cut & dried, exclusive and dismissive attitude toward foreigners and eunuchs that we see in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

There's no way around it: this picture of God's community in Isaiah 56 is *bigger* than the one in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

As we follow the narrative

- from the articulation of the holiness laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy
- to the ruminations of the Israelites in Isaiah 56 about how to live faithfully in their life after exile

we see the development of a bigger, more diverse, more inclusive understanding of “who all this is for.”

Over centuries—as they sought to live faithfully together in an increasingly diverse context—the Israelites' understanding of who belonged in their Temple and in their community grew. It got bigger.

The people who had been welcomed and included for centuries continued to be welcomed and included. None of them were forced out or told that they no longer belonged.

But Isaiah 56 makes it clear that others who had previously been excluded and dismissed are now welcome and included as well.

That's huge.

Here's why I want to write about this now:

Wynne Chapel, was dedicated on September 15, 1958—sixty years ago this Fall.

And now, as I sit in Wynne Chapel sixty years after its dedication, I think Austin College is kind of like the Israelites in Isaiah 56.



We have a much bigger understanding—on this campus and in this Chapel—of “who all this is for.”

Sixty years ago,

- Austin College had never had a black student or faculty member;
- All students were required to attend two Christian Chapel services every week; and
- There were no non-Christian religious organizations on this campus at all.

Six decades later, we have a much bigger, more inclusive, more diverse understanding of

- who is welcome here;
- of who belongs at Austin College;
- and in Wynne Chapel;
- of “who all this is for.”

In the coming months, we will be doing some renovations in the Chapel.

We will take out all the bolted-down pews, replace them with comfortable, portable chairs, and put in a new, durable floor.

And the reason we are making those changes is because we have a different and bigger understanding of “who all this is for” than we did in 1958.

To be sure, we will continue to do what we’ve always done in here.

We will continue to have campus events in Wynne Chapel like:

- weekly Christian communion services,
- and Opening Convocation,
- and Homecoming Worship,
- and the Lessons and Carols Service,
- and the Presbyterian Christmas Eve Service,
- and the All Saints Day and Ash Wednesday masses,
- and the Posey Leadership Award Assembly,

and all the other concerts and recitals and that have been a regular part of the life of Wynne Chapel since its dedication.

We'll continue to host weddings and funerals in here.  
And all sorts of summer conference activities.

Wynne Chapel will *continue* to be for who it has *always* been for.

But by making a few changes, the Chapel can become a more flexible space—a space available to other student groups and other constituents who have previously been overlooked or excluded.

I don't know exactly what else we will be able to do in here and I certainly don't want to dictate that.

But imagine having our annual, Jewish Seder Dinner in Wynne Chapel,  
Or our annual Hindu festivals: Masala and Diwali,  
or the Muslim students Eid festival.

Imagine the Kangaraas Dance Team and the Aussies rehearsing and performing on the Chapel stage.

Imagine a situation in which our beautiful Chapel doesn't sit empty as much as it does now.

In Isaiah 56:7, God says, "My house will be called a house of Prayer for all peoples."

Our goal in the Chapel renovation is to make Wynne Chapel a house of prayer and welcome for all Roos.

We'll probably face some inconveniences as the Chapel renovation begins in the Spring.

There will certainly be some noise and some messes.

But whenever that happens, I invite you to pause and remember this:

Austin College was founded in 1849 to educate white men to become Presbyterian ministers. That's who the men who founded Austin College thought "all this was for."

In the last 169 years, our understanding of who all this is for has grown and changed in significant ways.

Austin College is no longer just for preachers;

- or just for men;
- or just for Presbyterians;
- or just for Christians;
- or just for white people.

So when you see all the trash and all the ruckus that will accompany the Wynne Chapel renovation next Spring, I hope it will lead you to remember and celebrate the fact that--here at Austin College--our understanding of “who all this is for” continues to grow and become more and more inclusive.

That’s just how Roos roll.

Until Next Time, I Remain,  
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,  
Remembering that Genesis 9:16 says the Rainbow is a Sign of God’s Covenant with “Every living creature”—not just some of us.

JOHN WILLIAMS  
Chaplain