

AColyte

March 2019

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



*I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and **every living creature** of all flesh*
--Genesis 9:13-15

THAT MEANS ALL OF US.
NO EXCEPTIONS

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Grieving.

March 15, 2019

*Jesus don't like killing,
No matter what the reason's for.*

--John Prine

According to the Associated Press, a self-proclaimed white supremacist gunman killed at least 41 Muslims worshipping at Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand earlier today. (There were more than 41 fatalities, but shootings took place at 2 mosques and it is not year clear whether there was more than one shooter involved.)

As I sit here on what I had hoped would be an enjoyable last day of Spring Break with my family, I can identify 4 different emotions/responses that are possibly appropriate for a Chaplain to share with a particular, diverse, special campus community.

1. ANGER.

I am personally angry at this news.

The shooter was unspeakably arrogant and his actions are indefensible.

Period.

If God sanctions or desires the killing of any human being because of his or her religious faith, then I am an atheist.

I do not believe in that god.

And I remain committed to resisting any ideas, words, or behaviors that suggest that any person is more or less valuable than any other person for any reason.

That's absolutely relevant in the world where we woke up this morning.

2. SADNESS

My heart breaks for all the individuals and families affected by this senseless tragedy.

And my heart breaks for others who, understandably and reasonably, fear for their own safety based on their religion or ethnicity.

3. HOPE

I am reminded of, and encouraged by, a statement endorsed by the Austin College Muslim Students Association, as well as many other student groups, in 2017 that says in part:

Because we are, and have always been, formally related to the Presbyterian Church,

Austin College values and takes seriously the religious commitments, and practices of all members of our community – students, faculty, and staff.

Because we value personal growth,

Austin College strives to encourage, assist, and enable interested students to participate in religious communities they find to be meaningful and authentic.

Because we value justice,

Austin College resists all efforts based on religious identity or nationality to limit the ability any person to participate fully in the life of our institution.

Because we value community,

Austin College encourages and fosters respectful interaction between community members from various religious traditions as well as those with no religious tradition.

Because we value participation in community life,

The students, faculty, and staff of Austin College celebrate and affirm religious, cultural, and international diversity.

This is us.

Diverse and united.

By the way, those values – personal growth, justice, community, and participation in community life – are included in the Austin College Mission Statement. They are part of who we say we are.

That's relevant and important as long as incidents like

- the mosque shooting today in New Zealand,
- or the shootings at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pennsylvania last October,
- or the shootings at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015

- or any other incidents in which people are victimized due to their ethnicity, religious faith, or political ideas keep happening.

We know how to respect and care for and listen to each other.

That's always important.

Which leads to my fourth response to the events in New Zealand:

I wrote something for the AColyte in September 2001 that I used in my "Bible Stories, Liberal Arts Eyes" Jan Term this year.

I had been planning on republishing it this month because it's a piece that can invite and facilitate some interesting interfaith discussion.

It feels appropriate today.

Let me know what you think.

I think my last response today should be

4. MISCHIEF

*God wants to see
More love and playfulness in your eyes
For that is your greatest witness to him.
-A Poet*

Note—*The following includes a whole bunch of disjointed but voluminous Bible quotes. Bear with me, I think it'll be worth it in the end. It wouldn't have the same effect with just one or two references.*

In Luke 10:1-20, Jesus sends out seventy disciples to teach and heal in his name. They have incredible experiences and come back joyfully telling Jesus, "Even the demons are subject to us in your name!" Jesus warns them about being too cocky, but they are understandably excited and determined to continue to be instruments of God's love in the lives of others.

Those 70 disciples seem to have realized that they weren't just beloved, they were gifted as well. It's easy to imagine them people, many of whom were probably used to thinking of themselves as

helpless victims of forces they couldn't control, suddenly realizing that, not only could they stop being helpless victims, they could maybe help some other folks quit being victims as well.

This poem makes me think of that story:

*I once had a student who would sit alone in his house at night
Shivering with worries and fears.
And come morning,
He would often look as though he had been raped by a ghost.
Then one day my pity crafted him a knife from my own divine sword.
Since then, I have become very proud of this student.
For now, come night, not only has he lost all his fear,
Now he goes out just looking for Trouble.*

Spend a minute with me roaming around inside the mind of this poet.

This guy describes himself as “a tambourine slapping against God’s leg” and he’s good. Look at what he wrote about love:

*Your love should never be offered to the mouth of a stranger.
Only to someone who has the valor and daring
To cut pieces of their soul off with a knife
Then weave them into a blanket to protect you.*

I’d offer my love to somebody like that. In fact, I did; and it’s turning out great.

The poet’s reflections about what it means to live in a world where:

- a. God loves us and
2. everything’s gonna be alright

are very interesting and entertaining.

It’s cool to read his stuff with the Bible in your other hand. Let me show you what I mean.

Starting with Leviticus 19:18, the Bible repeatedly tells us to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The Poet suggests that it’s a matter of etiquette:

*If God invited you to a party and said,
“Everyone in the ballroom tonight
Will be my special Guest.”
How would you treat them when you arrived?*

*Indeed, indeed!
And [I know]
There is no one in this world
Who is not upon
His Jeweled Dance Floor.*

The tenth chapter of Deuteronomy includes the recognition that God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the strangers, giving them food and clothing.” Then God tells the people of Israel, “Love the stranger, therefore, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Widows, orphans, and strangers were folks who had no one else looking out for them. It seems clear that God wants folks like us to look out for them.

Our poet guy said it this way:

*God blooms from the Shoulder
Of the Elephant who becomes
Courteous to the Ant.*

Psalm 19:1-4 includes recognition of theological truth in the world of astronomy:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.*

Our new buddy is more direct:

*Even after all this time
The sun never says to the earth,
“You owe Me.”
Look what happens with a love like that,
It lights the whole sky.*

In Psalm 36:8, a prayer of praise addressed to God, we read:

*[All people] feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.*

Our Poet puts it this way:

*Why just show you God's menu?
Hell, we are all starving—
Let's Eat!*

Psalm 118:24 is a call to recognize that every day is a gift from God and a cause for rejoicing:

*This is the day that the Lord has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

The poet has this advice as we approach each day:

*This is the time for you to deeply compute the impossibility
That there is anything but Grace.
Now is the season to know
That everything you do is sacred.*

Psalm 149 starts like this:

*Praise the Lord!
Sing to the Lord a new song,
His praise in the assembly of the faithful.
...praise His name with **dancing**,
making melody to Him with tambourine and lyre.*

Do you think that could somehow be related to this?:

*Every child has known God,
Not the God of names,
Not the God of don'ts,
Not the God who ever does anything weird,
But the God who only knows four words
And keeps repeating them, saying:*

(Before you read on, think about what four words folks think God repeats to all children.

“Follow all the rules”?

“Be Christian or else”?

Here's what four words the poet thinks God repeats to every child:)

*“Come dance with me.”
Come
Dance.*

Isaiah 2:4 includes a promise that the day is coming when

*[Nations] shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

In a similar vein, our friend produces the following advice:

*Let your
Intelligence begin to rule
Whenever you sit with others
Using this sane idea:
Leave all your cocked guns in a field
Far from us,
One of those damn things might go off.*

Later in Isaiah, God says this to the people of Israel as they face tough, nasty times:

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.
--Isaiah 66:13

Now check this out:

*Once I found a stray kitten
And I used to soak my fingers
In warm milk;
It came to think I was five mothers
On one hand.*

...

*Surely there is something wrong
With your ideas of God.
O, surely there is something wrong
With your ideas of God
If you think
Our Beloved would not be so tender*

Turning to the New Testament, we find some more interesting passages that can be illuminated by the poet's work.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5-7), contains several interesting pieces of advice and teaching from Jesus.

In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus offers a long list of reasons not to worry.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...

Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?...

So do not worry about tomorrow,

for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.

Today's trouble is enough for today.

The poet guy has two poems that seem to be relevant as we consider that.

*I used to live in
A cramped house with confusion
And pain.*

*But then I met the Friend
And started getting drunk
And singing all
Night.*

*Confusion and pain
Started acting nasty,
Making threats,
With talk like this,
"If you don't stop that—
All that fun—
We're
Leaving."*

And also:

*Now
That
All your worry
Has proved such an
Unlucrative
Business,
Why
Not
Find a better
Job.*

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the problem of how to recognize whether God is actually at work in the people who claim to have had experiences of God's presence; people who claim to have been sent directly by God. In Matthew 7:15-17, he says

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inside are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul talks about how a life touched by the Holy Spirit looks.

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22-23a)

I think that's what our poet is addressing in the following verse:

*Once a man came to me and spoke for hours about
"His great visions of God" he felt he was having.
He asked me for confirmation, saying,
"Are these wondrous dreams true?"
I replied, "How many goats do you have?"
He looked surprised and said,
"I am speaking of sublime visions
And you ask about goats!"
And I spoke again saying,
"Yes, brother—how many do you have?"
"Well,...I have sixty-two."
...
"How many rose bushes in your garden,
How many children,
Are your parents still alive,
Do you feed the birds in winter?"
And to all he answered
Then I said,
"You asked me if I thought your visions were true
I would say they were if they make you become
More human,
more kind to every creature and plant
That you know."*

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46) Jesus suggests that all people—and particularly those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, or in prison—are members of his family.

Then in 1 John, we read:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are... (3:1)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. (4:7)

So the idea would seem to be that to be part of God's beloved family is also to be loving

*Love
So God will think,
“Ahhhhh,
I got kin in that body!
I should start inviting that soul over
For coffee and
Rolls.”*

According to the fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus began his ministry quoting Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...*

Much of Jesus' subsequent ministry can be seen as a matter of releasing people from the captivity of small-minded and legalistic (Pharisaic) notions of what it means to be part of the community of God's people. The society in which his ministry took place was one in which some people were ostracized (poor folks, women, Samaritans) and where many people had begun to take the rules more seriously than the God who the rules were supposed to help them remember and worship.

The poet addresses that state of affairs like this:

*The small man
Builds cages for everyone
He
Knows.
While the sage,
Who has to duck his head
When the moon is low,*

*Keeps dropping keys all night long
For the
Beautiful
Rowdy
Prisoners.*

In Romans 6:17-18, Paul says,

*[T]hanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin,
have become...slaves of righteousness.*

That whole “slaves of sin” thing was big for Paul. In his mind, a lot of what Jesus did was to help free us from that slavery.

To get the poet’s help understanding that, try this:

*Someone put
You on a slave block
And the unreal bought
You.
Now I keep coming to your owner
Saying,
“This one is mine.”
...
I will gladly borrow all the gold
I need
To get you
Back.*

Psalms 139 says a bunch of amazing stuff about the extent to which God loves and knows and cares for us.

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me...
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 [“wherever you go when you die”], you are there...*

*In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
When none of them as yet existed...
I come to the end—I am still with you.*

Later, in Romans 8, we read

...I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Exactly what might that mean? Maybe the poet guy can help.

*If this world
Was not held in God's bucket
How could an ocean stand upside down
On its head and never lose a drop?
If your life was not contained in God's cup
How could you be so brave and laugh,
Dance in the face of death?
...
There is a private chamber in the soul
That knows a great secret
Of which no tongue can speak.
Your existence my dear, O love my dear
Has been sealed and marked
"Too sacred," "too sacred," by the Beloved—
To ever end!
Indeed God has written a thousand promises
All over your heart
That say,
Life, life, life,
Is far too sacred to
Ever end.*

Some of us spend a lot of time studying the Bible and trying to figure out what stuff in there that might be particularly helpful for us as we try to figure out which things matter more than other things; as we try to live out our relationship with God and each other today. Reading some of these poems is a helpful way to do that.

The poet seems to be fairly clearly in tune with some distinct and important biblical messages and he expresses some truths about God and people and the world in a way that is refreshing and clear.

Now here's where it gets weird:

Those poems were written by a Persian (Iranian) Muslim in the 14th century. His given name was Shams-ud-din Muhammad, although he is better known by his pen name, *Hafiz*.

In Arabic, “hafiz” means “memorizer.” It is a title given to someone who knows the entire Qu’ran by heart.

Hafiz lived from about 1320 to 1390 (he was a contemporary of Chaucer in England). He was a “Sufi” Muslim. The Sufis are a group within Islam whose faith is expressed in mystical terms. Their focus is on personal and immediate relationship with Allah. This relationship is achieved and expressed through “sufi”, a word related to the Greek word “sophia.” It means something like “wisdom” or “truth.”

Through the years, the poems of Hafiz have been translated, admired, and endorsed by folks whose names are more familiar to us.

Goethe and Nietzsche were big fans of his work.

Sherlock Holmes quotes a Hafiz poem in one of Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories.

In 1858, Ralph Waldo Emerson called Hafiz “a poet for poets” and said, “He fears nothing. He sees too far; such is the only man I wish to...be.”

He is clearly a good poet. How is he as a theologian?

Does it make any difference to us Christians that this poet was not a Christian?

Should we Christians conclude that, because of his “Muslimness,” we should look more skeptically on, or pay less attention to, his insights about the nature of the divine/human relationship?

Are we prepared to argue with his claim that “there is no one in this world who is not upon [God’s] jeweled dance floor?”

Do we believe he’s wrong when he says “God blooms from the shoulder of the elephant who is courteous to the ant?”

Does his failure to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, mean that there is somehow less insight in his recognition that there is significance in the fact that “the sun never says to the earth, ‘You owe me.’?”

Can we conclude that he fundamentally misunderstands what he says when he suggests that divine love involves God’s going to the owner of a slave to unreality and saying “This one is mine.?”

Apart from Christianity, how could he even have uttered the suggestion that “Life, life, life is far too sacred to ever end.”?

Before answering, we Christians should probably remember these things that Jesus says:

Mark 9:40—

Whoever is not against us is for us.

John 10:16—

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.

Might it be that there is some useful wisdom, particularly about God and us, loose out there beyond the church?

In John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

There’s not anything in there that says, “Oh, and by the way, of course you, dear reader—in your feeble, limited, sinful state—are fully capable of recognizing every way that I work in somebody else’s life.”

How can Christians read the following poems, as well as those already quoted above, and conclude that Hafiz is a stranger to the God who has found addressed, and embraced us in Jesus Christ?:

*Love wants to reach out and manhandle us,
Break all our teacup talk of God.
If you had the courage and
Could give the Beloved His choice, some nights,
He would just drag you around the room
By your hair,
Ripping from your grip all those toys in the world
That bring you no joy.
Love sometimes gets tired of speaking sweetly
And wants to rip to shreds
All your erroneous notions of truth...
The Beloved sometimes wants
To do us a great favor:
Hold us upside down
And shake all the nonsense out.*

And, my personal favorite,

*God
And I have become
Like two giant fat people
Living in a
Tiny boat.*

*We
Keep
Bumping into each other and
L
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Maybe we Christians shouldn't pay much attention to Hafiz because he wasn't Christian.

But I can't figure out how that helps anybody.

In Micah 6:8 we are reminded that what the Lord requires of us is that we

Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with [our] God.

I think part of what "walking humbly with God" means is not worrying about what God thinks about non-Christians.

God can handle that without our help.