

AColyte

Commencement 2019

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



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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

The Chaplain's Office
Preparing for the Wynne Chapel Renovation
Feeling the Usual Commencement Week Sentimentality
May 2019

The times, they are a-changin.'
--Bob Dylan

Every little thing is gonna be alright.
--Bob Marley

*When it all comes down, look for me.
I'll still be around.*
--B.B. King

I believe in the Promised Land.
--Bruce Springsteen

So a version of the poster above has been on the wall in my office for as long as I've worked at Austin College.



Have you figured out what it is?

Read the letters on the license plates phonetically and out loud.

Do you get it?

I love that poster.

In 51 license plates (including the District of Columbia), arranged alphabetically, that poster contains a phonetic representation of the Preamble to the United States Constitution.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

It's a piece of art created in 1967 by the artist Mike Wallace. My poster is from the National Museum of Art at the Smithsonian Institution.

I bought it at a fair in San Antonio years ago.

And I bought it for a very specific reason.

I think the Preamble to the Constitution can be read as a list of the values you have to have to be a good American. The values listed there (union, justice, domestic tranquility, common defense, general welfare, and liberty) are vague to be sure--and we don't all agree about what those words mean. But, historically, Americans who do things that are demonstrably at odds with those values tend to be invited to change their behavior or limited in their ability to interact with the rest of us.

I keep that poster on the wall in my office because I think it's possible to be a faithful Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jew, or Muslim and also to act consistently with the values articulated in the Preamble.

But it's also completely possible to live with Preamble values without being religious at all.

That's why I bought that poster and keep it on the wall in my office.

It lets me talk about values and communities,

about which things we say matter more than other things,

about separation of Church and State,

and about the Ten Commandments.

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[Here comes a big jump to the Bible.--ED]

I don't have a Ten Commandments poster, but I'm a pretty big fan of them as well.

I worry, though, that lots of us tend to read the Ten Commandments more like the "Ten Threats." I think we often tend to add an "or else" element when we read them.

"You will have no other gods before me."—OR ELSE

"You will not make for yourself a graven image"—OR ELSE

"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain."—OR ELSE

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy"—OR ELSE.

"Honor your Father and your Mother."—OR ELSE

"You will not kill."—OR ELSE

"You will not commit adultery."—OR ELSE

"You will not steal."—OR ELSE

"You will not bear false witness against your neighbor."—OR ELSE

"You will not covet."—OR ELSE

It's easy and tempting to read the Ten Commandments as just threats – ten excuses for God or other people to punish us when we slip.

Somehow that doesn't quite feel right.

I want the Ten Commandments to be more than justifications for punishing others who do what "God" told them not to do.

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Check this out:

*While Christians speak of ten **commandments**,
the Jews speak of ten **words**.*

*That is actually what the original Hebrew of the Bible calls them.
...I propose that we think about the Ten Words as the Ten Promises."*

*...Although Hebrew has an imperative,
the actual way to express a prohibition was not with a negative imperative but with a
negative future.*

*So our usual translation—"thou shalt not"—is entirely legitimate.
But a negative future can also express a promise.*

*--Albert Curry Winn, A Christian Primer:
The Prayer, the Creed, and the Commandments*

I know – that’s pretty arcane and academic.

But it blew my mind.

It’s a peculiar little feature of the Hebrew language, but it makes sense. Using a future negative as a promise is like--instead of telling someone “I promise to buy your dinner”, you tell them, “You won’t have to pay for your dinner.”

It’s just a different way to express a promise.

Albert Winn’s words completely changed the way I read the Ten Commandments.

*The Ten Words...are not a recipe for earning God’s favor,
Israel already has God’s favor.
They are not requirements for being delivered from bondage,
Israel has already been delivered from bondage.*

[Earlier in the Book of Exodus,
God delivers the Israelites from slavery in Egypt–ED]

*[The Ten Words] are a description of what it will be like to live as God’s own people. ...
They spell out the lifestyle of a holy nation.*

It’s like God saying to us: “By the time, I’m finished with you, here’s what’s gonna be true about you.”

What if we read the Ten Commandments that way?

It might look something like this:

and God said,

“By the time I’m finished with you...

Promise Number One

You will have no other gods before me.

Imagine a world

where everybody has a clear understanding of what really matters;
where nobody acts like there is nothing more important than money,
or nations, or economic systems, or denominations,
or “people like us.”

It’s a pretty amazing promise.

Promise Number Two

You will not make for yourself a graven image...you will not bow down to them or serve them.

Imagine a world where everybody knows who God is and where God is;
where everybody takes the right stuff seriously;
where everybody is more concerned with helping people who need help than with worrying where they were born,
or who sleeps with whom,
or whether they got dunked or sprinkled.

Promise Number Three

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Imagine a world
where everybody who talks the talk will walk the walk;
where nobody claims to serve God and then abuses
or takes advantage of other people.

Promise Number Four

You'll remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

Imagine a world
where nobody ever works so hard it makes them sick;
where "busyness" never gets in the way of loving God and neighbor.

Promise Number Five

You'll honor your father and mother.

Imagine a world
where everybody has respect for the people who came before them
and everybody who will come after them;
where there is less selfishness and more concern for everybody else—
past, present, and future.

Promise Number Six

You won't kill.

Imagine a world
where the people of God are champions of life in all its forms;
where it is no longer necessary to kill,
either in self--defense,
or in war,
or in capital punishment.
Imagine a world where those are just academic issues
that are never relevant to real life.

Promise Number Seven
You won't commit adultery.

Imagine a world
where everybody is faithful;
where everybody can be counted on, all the time;
where nobody makes promises they don't keep.

Promise Number Eight
You won't steal.

Imagine a world
where everybody is gracious and generous;
where all people recognize that they are gifted children of God;
where everybody has what they need.

Promise Number Nine
You won't bear false witness against your neighbor.

Imagine a world
where everybody has the courage to tell the truth
and to hear the truth—
even when it's inconvenient;
where it never occurs to anybody to doubt the words of someone else.

Promise Number Ten
You won't covet.

Imagine a world
where everybody pays more attention to what they have than to what they don't have;
where we think more about giving and sharing
than acquiring and keeping.

Those are some epic promises.

And I'd much rather follow a God who helps us get there than live in fear of a God
who will punish me when I slip up.

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Even though I don't know of any grammatical trivia related to the Preamble to the
Constitution, I wonder whether we can read it is a sort of promise as well.

Could the Preamble be interpreted as a list of promises from Americans to each other?

"As we set out on this whole new adventure as an on-purpose nation, we hereby
promise to each other that we will strive to construct a common life characterized by

- Unity,
- Justice,
- Peaceful interactions with each other,
- Efforts to protect each other from the things that threaten us, and
- Room for everybody to flourish
- Without unnecessary impediments from other people.”

That’s a pretty big set of promises.

Of course, all we good critically-thinking Liberal Arts people know that in actuality lots of Americans (indigenous persons, slaves, women, and others) were excluded from those promises from the git-go.

And we don’t all agree about which things really threaten us;

Or what justice looks like.

Or when it might be okay to limit the freedom of some of our neighbors.

But we haven’t torn up the Preamble.

We haven’t disavowed it or declared it to be irrelevant.

Like the Ten Commandments, the Preamble to the Constitution doesn’t really describe the actual, real world circumstances of an actual, flesh-and-blood community. It’s pretty hard to find unmistakable evidence of union, justice, or domestic tranquility in our culture today.

But the Preamble is an aspirational description of the kind of community we’d like to be.

I think it might be a promise from each of us to the rest of us to try to live that way together.

And I think that’s a good thing.

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The Austin College Mission Statement includes these words:

Austin College is committed 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.

Those are the values Austin College holds up to the world.

Those are the promises we make to every student.

And they are also the promises we make to the world every time we award a degree. We hope those are the values our graduates will carry into the rest of their lives.

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I've always been keenly interested in language that communities choose and use to talk about themselves.

I know the Judeo-Christian tradition makes some claims about the divine origins of the Ten Commandments.

I'd be happy to talk to you about that any time you want to.

But, no matter what one might think about where the Ten Commandments came from, what we know for sure is that Jews and Christians have preserved and studied them for thousands of years.

They wouldn't have done that if they didn't find them relevant and useful.

The same is true for the Preamble and the Austin College Mission Statement.

Those things didn't get written by accident.

It helps sometimes for communities to write things down as a way of announcing to the world who they are and who they hope to be.

So as this academic year ends and some of you graduate,

1. Don't hesitate to claim the promises made to you by the communities that have formed you;
 - by Austin College;
 - by the United States (whether or not you are a citizen);
 - and by the particular communities that have helped raise you.

You deserve to have those promises kept.

Remind the rest of us about that if we forget.

We're not finished.

You're still ours and we're still yours.

And

2. Play your part in keeping the promises made to others by your communities;
 - by your college,
 - by the nation in which we live and of which most of us are citizens;
and
 - by the other communities from which we have benefitted and to which we have committed.

That's not somebody else's job, it's yours.

It's ours.

Let's get busy.

There's hard work to be done.

Buy we've got this.

Until September, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Suddenly remembering Ambrose Bierce's version of the Ten Commandments in *The Devil's Dictionary* (see below),

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

*Thou shalt no God but me adore:
'Twere too expensive to have more.*

*No images nor idols make
For Roger Ingersoll to break.*

[Robert Ingersoll was a famous 19th Century agnostic.—ED]

*Take not God's name in vain: select
A time when it will have effect.*

*Work not on Sabbath days at all,
But go to see the teams play ball.*

*Honor thy parents. That creates
For life insurance lower rates.*

*Kill not, abet not those who kill;
Thou shalt not pay thy butcher's bill.*

*Kiss not thy neighbor's wife, unless
Thine own thy neighbor doth caress.*

*Don't steal; thou'lt never thus compete
Successfully in business. Cheat.*

*Bear not false witness--that is low--
But "hear 'tis rumored so and so."*

*Covet thou naught that thou hast got
By hook or crook, or somehow, got.*