

Perspectives and Reflections Service
August 20, 2019
Ida Green Theater

The Hard Hat

The first scripture reading this morning comes from the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 10, verses 17 through 19.

*17 For the Lord your God
is God of gods and Lord of lords,
the great God,
mighty and awesome,
who is not partial and takes no bribe,
18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow,
and who loves the strangers,
providing them food and clothing.
19 You shall also love the stranger,
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

The second reading is from the Book of Hebrews,
Chapter 12, verse 1:

*1 Therefore,
since we are surrounded by so great
a cloud of witnesses,
let us also lay aside every weight
and the sin that clings so closely,
and let us run with perseverance
the race that is set before us.*

President O'Day, can you come to the stage for a moment please? Lois and Bridget have something to give you.

PRESENT HARD HAT

We think this will come in handy for you as we begin the 2019-2020 academic year.

As you well know, four different construction projects will take place on our campus during this school year –

- Renovation of Wynne Chapel;
- Renovation of Ida Green Theater;
- Construction of a new Flats apartment complex;
- And a NEW HVAC SYSTEM IN CRAIG HALL –

(By the way, if any of y'all don't think that last one is a big deal – that means *you* don't work in Craig Hall.)

We want you to be prepared – and safe – as you move from one project to another. So, with the help of Gillian Locke and Christopher Maniet in Institutional Advancement, we got you this specially designed Presidential hard hat.

For obvious reasons, it has a kangaroo on it. You can never have too many kangaroo hard hats.

And it also has the logo of our POWER Austin College Campaign. We put that on there to remind you of the fun part of Capital Campaigns. You and the rest of our Advancement staff have been working hard to raise money – and we know you'll all keep working on that – but these Construction projects can serve to remind you (and all of our Advancement team) that the College really does change as a result of your hard work.

We don't raise money just to have money. We raise money so we can continue to serve all of our students so they can all serve the world.

That really is why we go to all this trouble.

But hard hats like this one also remind us that this can be a treacherous time. We have hard hats at construction sites because sometimes things happen at those sites that are unexpected and potentially dangerous. There's a reason that insurance companies want people to wear hard hats where contractors are working.

We want you to be safe this year as we do all this building.

...

I'm gonna keep talking for a couple more minutes, but please feel free to return to your seat — or take mine if you prefer. Bridget and Lois wanted to give you this hard hat first thing--before everybody got distracted and I got all preachy.

That part comes now.

...

This summer, as I thought about this day and this year, I found myself returning to the verse from Hebrews 12 that Lois read to us earlier.

It's a simple and widely-known verse:

*Therefore,
since we are surrounded by so great
a cloud of witnesses,
let us also lay aside every weight
and the sin that clings so closely,
and let us run with perseverance
the race that is set before us.*

The three primary metaphors in this verse can be useful and instructive for all of us as we begin this year.

When the author of Hebrews talks about the “great cloud of witnesses” that surrounds the community to which this letter is addressed, the reference is to all the major Old Testament figures mentioned in Hebrews Chapter 11:

Abel
Enoch
Noah
Abraham
Sarah
Isaac
Jacob,
Joseph
Moses
Rahab
Gideon
Barak
Samson
Jephthah
David
Samuel

The author mentions all those significant figures in Jewish history and recounts brief examples of their faithfulness. And then, as Chapter 12 begins, the author reminds the readers that they are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

I think that was a good metaphor when this letter was written 19 centuries ago – and I think it still is.

I made my first visit to Austin College in 1978, when I was a high school sophomore. And I've been on one list or another around here non-stop since then--as a prospective student, student, alumnus, or employee – for four decades.

And in those 40-plus years, I have known a lot of people who

- are not in this room today,
- but who are nevertheless part of the great cloud of witnesses without whom our coming year of construction would not have been possible.

Without the generosity of Cecil and Ida Green – and now Sally and Jim Nation – and without the energy and creativity of

Bonnie and Paul Beardsley,
Dub Narramore,
Dan Setterberg,
Kathleen Campbell,
Andy Williams,
and others

there would be no Ida Green Theater as we know it and therefore no reason to preserve, improve, and renovate it.

Without them, we wouldn't be here.

Without the talent of

Wayne Bedford,
Bruce Lunkley,
Cecil Isaacs,
Dick Tappa,
and others

there might not have been any interest in adequately air conditioning Craig Hall for the twenty-first century.

But that's gonna happen this year.

Because we know it matters.

Without the wisdom of

Bob Bradshaw,
Todd Williams,
Nan Davis,
Wes Moffett,
and others

Austin College would have neither the need nor the ability to develop additional, high-quality housing in 2019.

And without the faith and vision of

John D. Moseley,
Toddie Lee Wynne, and
Dr. William E. Elliott,
Bernard Munger,
John Evans,
Allen Smith,
Tom Miller,
Bill Tiemann, and
Henry Bucher

Wynne Chapel would not have been the vital and transformative place that it has been for of hundreds of students in the last sixty years.

The stories that will come to fruition in this year's four construction projects depend significantly on the faith and generosity and intelligence of people who are not in this room today.

We will do well as we begin this academic year to pause, remember, and appreciate the real and significant contributions they have made to our life together now.

We are also surrounded by a Great Cloud of Witnesses.

(And, by the way, I believe with all my heart that 50 or 60 years from now, another Austin College Chaplain or President will be telling similar stories about people who are in this room today.)

The second metaphor in Hebrews 12:1 is a little less inspiring.

After reminding the readers that "we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" the author says

*let us also lay aside every weight
and the sin that clings so closely,*

Now I'm no more inclined to stand up here this morning and talk about sin than you are to hear it, but I do think there is value in our remembering – as we begin this academic year – that it's not all gonna be balloons and daisies.

This year of construction will almost certainly involve

- inconvenience,
- frustration,
- occasional disappointment, and
- unexpected mishaps

for President O'Day and for many of the rest of us.

That's why we wanted to get him a real hard hat. Not just some toy.

He may well need the real thing.

We all might.

But the advice from Hebrews to "lay aside every weight" can be a useful reminder for all of us to fight through whatever difficulties we face this year.

Because, like the readers of the letter to the Hebrews, there is also "a race that is set before us".

To be sure, for many of us, this year will actually involve working through and around the real and important construction projects that will touch our lives – and occasionally get in our way – in the coming months.

But I want to close by mentioning a different race that is set before us all this year.

The academic year that we begin this month – the 171st year of Austin College – will be the first year in our College's history in which we will have a Majority Minority Student Body. The Class of 2023 that enters this month is the third consecutive minority majority class to enter AC.

This year, the Austin College Student Body as a whole will comprise more non-white students than white students. And that's a big deal. That fact indicates that we are all part of a magnificently diverse community.

And I want to suggest to you this morning that the most significant construction project on our campus this year is not those buildings – as important as they are.

The “race that is set before us” – the construction project in which we all have a role – involves our opportunity to work together this year to construct and maintain a diverse community that is characterized by

- Empathy,
- Ethics, and
- Excellence.

I think that means we need to be intentional about attending to--and listening to--each other.

We don't all come from the same place – geographically, culturally, spiritually, or sexually. But we all have the opportunity this year to

- cherish each other,
- hear each other,
- respect each other, and
- love each other.

In the coming year there will be really loud voices beyond this campus that talk about diversity as something to be feared, resented, or resisted.

But we know better.

We have the opportunity this year to show the world that it's entirely possible for people from diverse backgrounds to live

- respectfully,
- graciously,
- patiently, and
- courageously

together.

That's a big job.

We might need more hard hats.

But we can do it.

Together.

That's who we are.

And that's what the world needs from us.

We got this.

