

AColyte

October 3, 2020

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



*Looking
at
Elephants*

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Early Autumn, 2020

Treading carefully among the Pachyderms

*Please, Papa, won't you let me go
Down to Richmond to the Traveling Show
Please, Papa, don't say I can't
I just want to see the elephant.
...I sure would hate it if I went
And never got to see the elephant.
--James McMurtry
"See the Elephant"*

*We just drink our drinks and laugh out loud,
Bitch about the weekend crowd,
And try to avoid the elephant somehow.
--Jason Isbell,
"Elephant"*

I was watching Book TV last week.

The comedian Judy Gold was on there discussing her new book Yes, I Can Say That.

She was talking about her career in comedy and about how comics can sometimes give us all helpful ways to face and think about big, sometimes uncomfortable issues that are clearly present in our culture. She had some interesting ideas about the way jokes and laughter can help release cultural tension.

At one point, she said

*An elephant in the room is a gift to a comedian.
It's a gift because you can have all of your audience thinking or focusing on the same thing.
There's no better set-up.*

She was saying that any time there is something in the culture that's on everybody's mind (the "elephant in the room" that everybody knows about) it's an opportunity for comics to make some jokes that will be accessible and relevant for the whole audience.

She went on to say that the jokes still have to be funny; but certainly a common context, an "elephant in the room," is useful for a comedian because it's something that everyone is already thinking about.

I thought about that quote as I was thinking about writing this *AColyte* this week.

I've written a lot of these (this one is #168 since 1993). And one of the things that I've learned about how to do this is that, to paraphrase Judy Gold, I think

An elephant in the room is a gift to Chaplains.

It's a gift because you can have all of your campus thinking or focusing on the same thing.

There's no better set-up.

I think there are at least three elephants among us as we go about the business of being Austin College in this strange season.

I'm fairly confident that, in the last week or so, everybody who is now reading these words has thought about:

- The Presidential Election;
- The COVID-19 Pandemic; and
- The issues, demonstrations, and protests related to Black Lives Matter.

Those are some big elephants.

None of us can completely ignore any of them in these stressful days.

We've all got opinions about all 3.

I think we're all pretty sure that we're right, about

The election,
COVID, and
Black Lives Matter.

But I doubt that we all agree about everything related to those issues.

And, since those big elephants are already here among us – and since I've been an unapologetic Bible geek since I wrote the first *AColyte* 27 years ago – I'm gonna invite y'all to spend a few minutes with me looking at those elephants through the lens of one of my favorite Bible passages: Philippians 2:1-11.

It's a really "Jesusy" passage, and I know that not everybody reading this is completely down with all the "Jesus" or "Christian" business. No worries.

But check it out.

I think Philippians 2:1-11 contains some interesting ideas that can help bring the elephants, and our relationship with them, into focus.

Full disclosure:
one of the reasons I like writing about this passage
is that I get a chance to show off my Greek skills.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Church in Philippi — a church that he had founded. Here in Chapter 2 he's giving advice to his Philippian friends about how to be a church.

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ,
any consolation from love,
any sharing in the Spirit,
any compassion and sympathy,
²make my joy complete:*

Paul's letters in the Bible always include this imperative element.

He wrote the letters that we have in the New Testament to encourage certain people to behave in certain ways.

Here's the behavior he's encouraging among the Philippians:

*be of the same mind, having the same love,
being in full accord and of one mind.
³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.
⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others.*

That's pretty clear so far, but then Paul gets a little squishy.

In verse 5, Paul writes:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

Paul is not necessarily telling the members of the Philippian Church that they have to agree about everything and always speak with one voice. He's not saying, "always have the same thoughts."

The Greek word that is translated as "same mind" is φρενοσις ("phrenosis").

By using that word, when he writes "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" Paul is referring more to a mindset than a set of ideas; more to a perspective than a list of correct answers.

It's like Paul is telling them

- "Think about yourselves the way Jesus thought about himself;" or
- "Look at yourselves and the world the way Jesus looked at himself and the world."

I think that's relevant advice as we deal with the elephants in our individual lives and our life together.

As we're organizing our thoughts and actions related to the election, the pandemic, and Black Lives Matter, we are invited in this passage to try to think about ourselves and the world like Jesus thought about himself and the world.

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In the verses that follow, Paul offers examples to his readers about how Jesus thought about himself and the world.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

Paul says,

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited...*

This is huge.

According to Paul, Jesus did not exploit his position as God's Son.

but emptied himself,

That is, “he gave it all up.”

The Greek word is ΚΕΝΟΣΙΣ (“kenosis”).

Paul’s point is that Jesus didn’t keep what he had or use it to his own advantage.

He didn’t try to monetize his position or defeat and humiliate his enemies.

He didn’t spend all his energy protecting his stuff.

He gave it all away.

taking the form of a servant,

I know your Bible probably says “slave,” but “servant” is a better translation.

The Greek word is ΔΟΥΛΟΣ (“doulos”).

“Slave” is a perfectly appropriate translation of “doulos.” But, in our current context, when we read the word “slave” we equate it with a form of involuntary labor done on behalf of a “master.”

That doesn’t fit Paul’s point.

Jesus didn’t do what he did because he *had* to (like a slave), he did what he did because he *chose* to (like a servant).

In this passage, “servant” is a better translation of ΔΟΥΛΟΣ than “slave.”

being born in human likeness.

*he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.*

Back in verses 3-4, Paul urges his Philippian friends to

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,

*but in humility regard others
as better than yourselves.
...[L]ook not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others.*

So it seems likely that when Paul says in verse 8 that Jesus “humbled himself” he means that Jesus

- Did nothing from selfish ambition or conceit;
- And that he regarded others as better than himself

By the way,

That “regarded others as better than himself” doesn’t mean that Jesus had a poor self-image. It’s more like, “He stepped aside so that others could get ahead”.

When Paul says that Jesus “humbled himself” he means that Jesus

- did not look to his own interests
- but instead looked to the interests of others.

So that’s Paul’s summary of who Jesus was.

Jesus was the one who

- Emptied himself
- Took the form of a servant and
- Humbled himself

And that leads us to the most important word in this whole passage.

Remember, verses 6-8 say

*though he was in the form of God,
[Jesus] did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant,
being born in human likeness.*

*And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.*

And then in verse 9 Paul says:

***Therefore** God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name...*

Therefore, God also highly exalted him.

Therefore.

The Greek word is Διό (“Dio”).

That is, there’s a reason that this happened.

God did not exalt Jesus because of his fearsomeness;

- Or his power;
- Or because he was a conquering warrior;
- Or a badass;
- Or a Winner.

God did not exalt Jesus because he humiliated his enemies;

- Or excluded people who weren’t like him;
- Or expected his followers to be hateful.

Paul’s message here is very clear:

God exalted Jesus because of his humility, sacrifice, selflessness, and service.

That’s why Jesus was and remains such a big deal.

And that’s how those of us who call ourselves Christians are meant to live in the world.

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Now, while Paul's words to the Philippians are fresh in our minds, let's turn our attention back to the three elephants in the room today that we discussed earlier.

Election,
COVID,
Black Lives Matter

This passage calls all of us to look at those elephants in the room through the lenses of Humility, Sacrifice, Selflessness, and Service.

I'm not gonna tell you what you should think about any of those elephants.

Unlike some other preachers out there, I'm not necessarily sure that God cares how right we are – about issues and controversies and political questions.

When we look at the elephants in the room through the eyes of Jesus we see that *all* of our thoughts and actions, individually and together, should be characterized by humility, selflessness, sacrifice, and service.

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I got pretty wound up and confident about urging us all to look at the elephants among us through the lenses on humility, sacrifice, selflessness, and service.

Then I showed this to my editor.

Here's part of what they wrote back to me:

A thought. When it comes to having patience and compassion for others - it's worth acknowledging the feeling that--for many people--the election is a moderately existential threat. For instance, my partner was hurt about their step mother voting for Trump because, to quote, "it felt as though she did not understand that Trump is an existential threat to people like me... she didn't care about supporting someone who would support conversion camps and people's discrimination against me."

Oftentimes the language of service leadership and loving others regardless of differences is something we think about when the difference isn't--to borrow a word from math--material.

But for my partner, and for many people [dealing with] the elephants in the room today, the threat feels existential. The threat really does feel like life and death - and, in the case of the pandemic, it very well can be. I think this needs to be addressed, in some capacity. Not specifically speaking to one side or the other, but acknowledging that maintaining civility isn't just about when the differences are ignorable, but even when it feels as though the differences feel like a fundamental threat to who one is. Forgive my ignorance, there has

to be a parable in which Jesus shows compassion towards someone who is a fundamental threat to him - reference that, tie into that, make people who feel scared, feel fearful anger, feel heard. Without that, it feels... a little cheap. Because it's an elephant in the room for a reason.

My editor is sensitive, wise, and articulate.

My editor makes me think.

Here's what I think:

First,

We have many fellow humans who fear the elephants among us for different reasons than we do. They feel vulnerable to different manifestations of the same elephants.

Some worry about what would happen if Joe Biden were elected President. Others fear what would happen if Donald Trump were re-elected.

Some fear the preventable spread of the coronavirus. Others fear real and irreversible economic damage to their lives and the lives of their families that would result from further lockdowns.

Some fear continued and unchecked institutional racism. Others fear destructive and chaotic social upheaval.

Some of those fears make perfect sense to us. Others seem completely irrational.

I know very clearly what I fear from all three of those elephants.

But I don't think I should dismiss people whose fears are different from mine.

Second,

Jesus says this in Matthew 5:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said,
'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
⁴⁴ But I say to you,
Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;
for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

*46 For if you love those who love you,
what reward do you have?
Do not even the tax collectors do the same?
47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,
what more are you doing than others?"*

"If you love only those that love you, what reward do you have?"

Ouch.

Then there's this in Luke 23:

*32 Two others also, who were criminals,
were led away to be put to death with [Jesus].
33 When they came to the place that is called The Skull,
they crucified Jesus there with the criminals,
one on his right and one on his left.
34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them;
for they do not know what they are doing."
And they cast lots to divide his clothing.*

That's Jesus praying for the people who are executing him.

I think execution counts as a "fundamental threat."

Those are some pretty profound examples ("...pray for those that persecute you:"
"forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.").

As a 58-year-old straight white man with a good job, good insurance, and a big, nice house—I am considerably less vulnerable than many of my fellow citizens.

I understand that the current elephants pose particular dangers to some of us.

I understand that the elephants are real.

And serious.

I'm not hiding from them.

I'm trying to look at them through the lenses of humility, selflessness, sacrifice, and service.

That's the reason God highly exalted Jesus.

And that's the example I endeavor to follow.

I'll close with Eugene Peterson's *Message* translation of Philippians 2: 3-4.

*Don't push your way to the front;
don't sweet-talk your way to the top.
Put yourself aside,
and help others get ahead.
Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage.
Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.*

Try that when you encounter the elephants.

You'll be okay.

Until Next Time, I Remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Irrationally Proud of Having Written over 2600 Words about Elephants without
Making Any "Trunk" Jokes,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

B.S. with J.W.

Weekly Zoom Bible Study with Chaplain John Williams

5:30pm Tuesdays

Every Tuesday evening, we will study the biblical passage that will be the focus of the next Sunday's Austin College Communion Worship Service in Wynne Chapel.

All interested AC students are welcome to participate.

Topic: Austin College Bible Study

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://austincollege.zoom.us/j/93915355672?pwd=UEdJNVlicC8vQ3lYVjJVcjE3VDBmQT09>

Meeting ID: 939 1535 5672 Passcode: 754977



WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

Austin College World Communion Sunday Service

6:00pm Sunday October 4

Grum Sanctuary in Wynne Chapel

Wear Your Mask

Bring Your Singing Voice

ALL INTERESTED STUDENTS ARE WELCOME

You can also Join the service on Zoom:

<https://austincollege.zoom.us/j/97600085209?pwd=ZEJoRHVmWWWhRNUhSVlg2MUlVRVpHZz09>

Meeting ID: 976 0008 5209

Passcode: 534112

Zoom participants are encouraged to use your own communion elements (Bread and Wine or Grapejuice) as you participate in the Service.