



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



“I’ll Get Fired!”

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Notes From The Field

November 15, 2018

Tags: student learning | social justice | liberation pedagogies

“Doc, if I teach what you are talking about I’ll get fired!”

“Talking about this in seminary is fine, but if I try to talk about white supremacy on my job -won’t I get fired?”

“If I talk about racism and oppression in my church-I’ll get fired.”

In classroom conversations that teach against domination, systemic hatred, violence, and social dehumanization, students begin to consider what it might be like to take these agendas to the places where they have leadership responsibility, authority, and obligation. Students become concerned about what might be at stake should they take up the lofty ideals of equity, liberation, and social holiness. The concern for personal risk is not pervasive, but it is certainly a concern which is voiced. Once students learn a bit about employing liberative pedagogies they become concerned about employment stability, the consequences of moral agency, and the backlash of courageous acts. Students feel inspired, intrigued, and curious about new approaches to the sins of xenophobia, white nationalism, racism, misogyny, Islamophobia, and homophobia, only to be halted by the personal fear of communal rejection, the possibility of shunning, and the chance that they will get fired.

After reading great thinkers like bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Katie G. Cannon, Parker Palmer, and Audre Lorde, students lean into the conversation of social transformation and church accountability. They “try-on” the ideas of liberation and the hope of systemic equity for minoritized, economically disenfranchised, and those seeking asylum. There is a thrill to these taboo and previously unconsidered notions of good community and spiritual maturity. Quickly though, too quickly, the thrill meanders into, or slams into, the reality of being a neophyte leader in an established system. Their questions wither into concerns of self-preservation and selfishness-“If I try to do this stuff, will I get fired?” Critical, prophetic wisdom shrivels. Rather than bringing ease, deep study plunges the student into discomfort, dilemma, and the promise of hardship, sacrifice, and possible loss of power, authority, and social stature.

In asking if they will get fired, I do not believe my students are having a crisis of conscience-their conscience is clear. They say they want liberation for all persons-and I believe them. Their dilemma is in falling victim to selfishness and the illusion of security. They are afraid that if they lead people toward change, and teach toward an ethic of compassion, love, empathy, and mercy, that this will be such a drastic shift away from the current norm of white supremacy and patriarchy that they will be punished. These genuine concerns must be considered in the seminary classroom if learning about justice is to be real and realized.

On the days I am impatient with their self-centered concerns, my answer to their genuine, albeit uninspired, concern is to quote science fiction writer Octavia Butler, “So be it. See to it.”

With this statement I am not so much trying to be callous as I am trying to portray what my grandmother told me: “We do not fight flesh and blood, but powers and principalities.” What she meant was that we are obligated to speak our truth then trust in the Spirit who would see us through the fight; our truth and trust must be in God. This is a hard lesson which sometimes takes a lifetime. My grandmother would also import Emily Dickinson’s advice to “tell the truth but tell it slant,” her version of “. . . be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

When I am more patient, I linger over the question of self-preservation. I carefully explain that the work of teaching to transgress, if done effectively, will likely result at some point in life with the loss of favor, friends, reputation, money, and yes, might result in getting fired. I want my students, even the young ones, to have more fear of the harm and violence of living in a racist society than fear of personal sacrifice. I want them to fear being unfaithful to what they say they care about and believe. I want their fear to motivate them rather than paralyze them.

When I ask the student who had the courage to voice their fear of being fired why they would want to lead a congregation or institution who would suppress their impulse to fight against the status quo, I am asking why would they want to squander the gifts they offer for the needs of the world to a people who are uninterested in, or unmoved by, the suffering of the world. Heretofore, my students have heard this as a rhetorical inquiry and no one has responded to this query - not yet.

I tell them that failure (like getting fired) is likely one of the better learning opportunities in

the teaching journey. Surely, few of us have the wherewithal to prescribe failure or to sabotage our own career, even for justice work. However, when the surprise of failure finds us, we must know this likely signals new opportunity, new fulfillment, the chance for deeper contemplation about the meanness of the world and our role of leadership. Some of my most creative teaching episodes have come from my failures. I must remember to tell my students more stories of when I have failed, what I learned and, most important, point to the fact that I have lived to tell about it. Failure, even when deadly, has not as yet meant my demise.

We tell students to live the question - or at least I do. But, they must live the deeper questions and not the shallow ones. If their best reflection question is "Suppose I get fired?" then this narcissistic inquiry will embolden the status quo. Shallow reflexive questions will only serve to undergird mediocrity and leave domination unchecked.

Living the big questions of life means, in the 21st century, coming to grips with the fact that there is "no place to escape the diversity of the human community" (P. Palmer). Our pursuit of the deep questions in the public view of teaching will help other people to do things they really want to do, but are too afraid to do by themselves. People want to be good neighbors, want to welcome the stranger, want to live in harmony with dignity, respect and peace. Our job, as learned people, is to provide them with excuses, rationales, and ways to honor these virtues of justice. Those of us who are privileged to have studied cannot retreat into small menial jobs of maintaining the status quo or regress into living quiet lives of desperation hoping to be rescued by the leadership of someone else. Those of us who are educated must take up the big, big, big jobs of life like teaching justice, spreading mercy, and modeling love. We must refuse to be seduced by shallow subsistence which promises a paycheck. Our job of justice is to enunciate so clearly that truth is unmistakable—the truth that there are no inferior people. This enunciation will likely get all of us fired.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/11/ill-get-fired/>