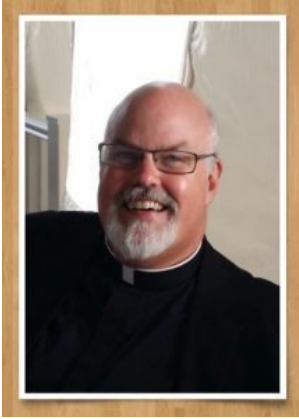




WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Training Students to Proclaim Justice Effectively

Patrick Flanagan, *St. John's University (New York)*

Blog Series: Social Justice and Civic Engagement

June 23, 2020

Tags: justice | teaching theology | injustice | teaching justice

What excites me about teaching theology to the Z-generation is their unabated courage. Admittedly, their actions online and public voices could get them into some pickles at times, but they model for previous generations the need to be concerned about things that matter, eternal things that matter to God. Issues of social justice, accountability, transparency, solidarity, lasting peace, and equity are important to my students even if they do not share the same commitment to organized religion their parents do.

Their fresh voices are critical, but they also need to be political, in the best sense of the word, to achieve results. When teaching a course on social justice, I encourage my students to reflect on three moves others have made to create social change. The first move is to study carefully the behaviors of ancestors who wished to communicate who God is and the divine plan. I invite students to study the prophets who call people back to the terms of the covenant. Prophetic voices direct people to see how their misery is a result of their deviation from the fundamental agreement between God and humanity. In fact, they are not only the inheritors of such horror, but in many instances, the perpetrators. Students recognize that they must be clear on how they understand justice and take responsibility for their own complicity in the evil of which they speak.

None of the prophets seem quite comfortable in their vocation. Their calling displaced them from comfort to speak on God's behalf. As they came to embody God's vision, however, their voices became clear, emboldened, and confident. Once students realize that their call to rectify injustice is part of an eternal effort, their voices are are similarly strengthened.

Next, I turn to the life of Jesus. Whether a student is a believer is not my concern. It is about examining Jesus' movements to invite people to inhabit the vision and values of the *basileia ton ouranon*. Four dimensions of Jesus' ministry strike me as examples of effective preaching. First, Jesus used vivid imagery to illustrate what God's justice demanded. These stories invited listeners into a process that captured their imaginations and hearts. Second, like the prophets, Jesus was unafraid to eat with his opponents and call out the leaders of his people and identify how they had strayed from their responsibilities. Third, Jesus made time to recharge through prayer and intimate relationships. Finally, Jesus was an individual of integrity. His actions supported his words. Students generally appreciate the need to communicate data and share narratives. They waiver on engaging their adversaries, taking time for themselves, and being models of authenticity.

The third move I point to is that of the prophetic missionary activity of Paul of Tarsus. In Paul's efforts to evangelize the world with the Christian message, Paul tackles the hardest reality first: he engages the Jewish community and invites them to conversion before moving onto the Gentiles. What Paul models for my students is a political maneuver that is generally not appealing. They are accustomed to building a support network primarily through crowdsourcing, but Paul's life and mission encourages to make their cases for social justice by going first to their staunchest detractors.

This strategy of Paul's is particularly troubling to my students. Why would someone with a vision contrary to the status quo engage opponents? When I hear this question, I remind myself that this is the generation that spends a lot of time and energy proposing their viewpoints online. Information communication technology becomes a platform then for them to enjoy supports or "likes." Their preference for social media allows them to restrict who they follow and who follows them; ultimately their worlds become echo chambers. They hear me, but I am not sure they fully understand.

Students are a sign of hope in our very troubled and uncertain world. In their nascent knowledge and youthful energy, they are eager to change the world. Unfortunately, they do not always recognize how complicated it can be. Many give up. Yet, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul all can provide models of effective engagement and hopeful transformation of the culture.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/06/training-students-to-proclaim-justice-effectively/>