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A Question of Pedagogy

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I like questions. Interrogatives entice me. Answers are low-hanging fruit. Social media lends towards making everyone an expert, and experts tend to have all of the answers. However, questions can change the course of a conversations. Inquiries make space for new ideas, new practices, new programs, and new ways of being.

As a biblical scholar questions from this text appeal to me. God asks Cain, “Where is your brother Abel? (Genesis 4.9)” The Lord inquires of Ezekiel, “Can these bones live? (Ezekiel 37:3)” Jesus quizzes the crowd, “Who touched me? (Luke 8:45)” Each question respectively provides a lesson on communal accountability, national atonement, and social acceptance.

Questions can change the course of a conversation. Questions allow one to pivot an approach to pedagogy.

Before I begin class, I often ask my students, “How are you? How’s it going?” There is no rush to exegesis, cultural studies, biblical interpretation, or any path to hermeneutics. I frequently start our sessions checking in and making space just to sit, hear, and be. It is challenging to process words and thoughts of people distant from us when we are wrestling with trauma and pain close to home.

Since March these moments have taken on more meaning. It is one thing to pause not knowing what is unraveling in another person’s life. It is quite another to stop when what stumps you, also stumps me. To begin class unaware of any individual difficulty presents one type of

challenge. However, when there is a communal, national, global vicissitude that is no respecter of persons, the classroom becomes a place where traditional pedagogical hierarchy is impudent and irrelevant. Yes, there is the professor, and of course, there are students. Yet, an invisible pathogen called COVID-19 has compromised all displays of visible power.

In our current context asking, “How are you?” takes on new meaning. As I ask my students about their well-being, it gives me the space to ask myself, “How am I doing?” Such fragile moments thrust professors to center stage of navigating self-care and classroom-care. In this pandemic when each day there is a startling increase in cases, a rising death toll, and still little progress towards a vaccine, pedagogy and pastoring have become strange bedfellows. Such times call for professors to tap into emotional reserves while discerning portals of spiritual connection. Our tasks before reading essays, facilitating conversations, or sharing our slides via Zoom, require that we don ecclesial attire, access priestly garb, and step into the role of professor-pastor-priest-rabbi-iman-cleric-shaman-spiritual sage.

I am not belittling these much-needed roles by suggesting they are easily or readily adaptable. These professions require much credentialing and processes. As an ordained National Baptist and Disciples of Christ minister, I know this from experience. I must admit that prior to this COVID-19 crisis, I kept “Rev.” out of the classroom so “Dr.” would carry the day. Today is a new day. Both must enter fully in light of this global disease and dis-ease.

Now I ask new questions before we dive into the gospels, epistles, Jesus, or the mother of James and John. Here are the inquiries from which my pedagogy now proceeds:

1. **What gives you joy?** Social media and health reports make it the default to dwell on the negative. To seek joy in a death-dealing context is fodder for educational reform. Our coronavirus-context focuses on the pessimistic. The classroom should be the place for cultivating the positive even when its opposite seems overwhelming. As a professor, I want my pedagogy to challenge the norm, even as we live during abnormal times.
2. **What worries you?** We do not teach in a socio-political or socio-economic vacuum. Students had worries and angst pre-COVID-19. But now, families, finances, challenges to faith, physical wellness, and friendships have all undergone some shifting. Our students’, and our, anxieties about these and other matters are more pronounced. While wrestling with this pandemic, students remain curious about finishing the semester.
3. **I wish . . .** Okay so these last two are not questions, but they seek information nonetheless. Fill in the blank queries offer a way for students to express how they feel. To engage in wishful thinking provides a forum for helping us see that things won’t be like this always. A pedagogical pivot to wishing helps us ponder and put into place what we project for the future.
4. **I am grateful for . . .** When the gravitas of sheltering in place can weigh heavily on all of us, finding something for which to be grateful is paramount. This should not be an exercise in comparison or competition, but an act of contemplative practice in chaos. This is a practice of thanksgiving in the center of turmoil.

Questions can change the course of a conversation. Questions allow us to pivot our approach to pedagogy. Questions help us pray through until we get through.

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