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Teaching and Learning as Character Formation

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Character formation plays a crucial role in enabling students to engage effectively in endeavors related to social justice and civic engagement. I have wrestled for a long time with how best to help students respond to societal challenges such as inequity, prejudice, and discrimination that they face or observe. As an ordained clergy of the Wesleyan Church, I fully embrace my denomination's rich tradition of social justice. In addition, I seek to live out the belief that humanity can experience deep spiritual transformation that leads one to embody Christlikeness.

I integrated these concepts in my teaching very early on in my career. However, I became even more acutely aware of the centrality of character formation to my teaching when I joined the faculty at Indiana Wesleyan University. The University's mission statement reads, "Indiana Wesleyan University is a Christ-centered academic community committed to changing the world by developing students in character, scholarship, and leadership." Every semester, I would teach one or two sections of the BIL102—New Testament Survey course as part of the General Education core. One of the purposes of the GenEd core is to help students begin to embrace Indiana Wesleyan's World Changing mission. In the course in question, I design the

learning in alignment with the purpose “to develop and articulate a Christian way of life and learning that enables virtue, servant leadership, and citizenship in God’s Kingdom.”

Since every student has to take BIL102, I relish the opportunity to have students from different backgrounds engage the biblical text. During the class, I am intentional about challenging students not only to engage the text but also to encounter the person about whom the text speaks: namely Jesus. In our reading of the Gospel of Mark, I focus particularly on Jesus’s encounters with the marginalized. I use narrative techniques to help students place themselves in the shoes of different characters, and challenge them to wrestle with the implications of reading the text from different vantage points. More particularly, I ask them to name an aspect of Jesus’s identity and character that they can emulate.

I remember the day a student described Jesus as “sassy.” I was shocked! I am not a native English speaker. The definition of “sassy” that I learned—rude, impertinent—did not match what I knew of Jesus, nor what I hoped my students would want to emulate. Thankfully, I managed to not voice my initial reaction, “How did you get that from the text?!” but instead replied, “Tell me more!” The student went on to describe Jesus’s direct and, in her words, “no-nonsense” posture toward people. The student used Jesus’ interaction with the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7 as a case in point. I conceded to the student that Jesus’s words seemed harsh, and I allowed the class to enter and dwell in the awkwardness and difficulties of the narrative. In the end, I was successful in encouraging the student to think of a different way of describing Jesus.

My success was short lived. As we journeyed through the Gospel of John, the student became even more convinced of Jesus’s sassiness. I realized that it was necessary for me to pause and grasp the way the student understood the word, and what they were seeing in Jesus’s interactions with people. It dawned on me that Sassy Jesus was appealing because of the balance of truth telling and deep compassion that he displayed. While I struggled initially with the concept, Sassy Jesus eventually became part of the New Testament Survey experience. As I helped students prepare for a lifelong commitment to service and engagement as world changers, the idea of being bold and courageous in telling the truth while showing deep love and compassion began to take root. They found Sassy Jesus to be a relatable person. They found it less difficult to emulate and embody the requisite balance to speak the truth in love.

To participate effectively in endeavors surrounding social justice and civic engagement, students need to be resilient and compassionate. It has become more and more difficult to maintain this balance in public and private life. On the one hand, people hesitate to challenge or call out another person for fear of being viewed as intolerant. On the other hand, there is a tendency to confuse love and compassion with conformity and/or compromise. Jesus mastered the art of welcoming and going to people with whom he disagreed, people who were outcasts, and even people who thought they had everything figured out. He knew how to show them unconditional love and how to challenge them to embrace a better way of life, the way of the Kingdom. One of the greatest challenges we face as educators is to help re-create environments where students not only learn the skills but also develop the character necessary

to engage in irenic conversation about difficult issues. We need to design learning opportunities that produce growth and maturity that lead to boldness. We need to construct experiential learning opportunities that build empathy in our students. This will enable them to stand against injustice, prejudice, and discrimination. It will empower them challenge others with the boldness and compassion that come from emulating and embodying the character of Sassy Jesus.

<https://wabash.center/2020/09/teaching-and-learning-as-character-formation/>