



Questions, part 2

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Last week, I shared with you a random question that I found in my notebook: What is written on our canvas?

I remarked on my excitement for the Presbytery's journey in answering that question about its self-identity during the transition. What values and beliefs and positive events do we paint on our canvas for all to see?

Shortly after, a minister colleague shared a similar reflection that challenges the negativity of what we might allow to be written on our canvas. With thanks to Rev. Dr. Andrew Kukla, I offer his insights today with minor edits for clarity:

Years ago, at a [non-profit] Board retreat, social worker extraordinaire Jeremy Blades led the Board in an activity. Jeremy is one of my favorite people – not a bit of pretension and yet a person of deep insight and abiding passion to empower people and position them to thrive in ways they were told would never happen to them. In our activity he had us tie a long rope around our wrists, one person after another in what was a circle of rope. We were tied together. And then with a few steps over and turns around, we were all mixed up and tied together in a human knot. The activity (as he presented it) was to get ourselves untied without removing the rope from our wrists. You have done something similar, I'm sure. This was the presented activity. And with lots of jostling... talking... failing... fumbling... we finally got the task done. However. That wasn't the real task. It would have been if this had been a typical ice-breaker activity at youth group or a staff "team building" day. Instead, he then showed us the whiteboard in which he had written down all the things we said out loud to the room... to each other... to ourselves while we were doing the activity.

It was amazingly negative. It was full of harm. Yes, there was some constructive dialog in there... but much of it was talking over each other, berating ourselves, miring the activity in its "impossibility" and voicing defeat at multiple twists and turns. Our learning was just beginning -- this, he told us, is part of what deeply complicates the work of addressing systemic issues, particularly issues like poverty, addiction, and being unhoused. We become mired in the dialog of defeat. We begin to believe what people say about us... and what we say about ourselves. And our own internal dialog defeats our attempts to change because we convince ourselves that we fail – and we make it so.

I am remembering this as last week's scripture text and Lenten question, "who will you listen to?", continues to linger in me. Because we tend to imagine that the problems are always external. It is who we are listening to out there. It is what is being done to us. "They" are the problem. And if we can get them to stop, and we can stop listening to those external voices, we can be on firm ground again. But the problem with systemic change and transforming long patterns... is that we have internalized those voices. We cannot simply tune out of what other people say, because we have recorded those soundtracks and we have them on repeat in our own heads.

If you had someone follow you around today... this week... this season of Lent: what would they write on a whiteboard that you had said to yourself? How negative are you with yourself... with others? What voices



within you are painting your world in the perception that you will fail so it's not worth trying? What soundtracks are on repeat within your mind and heart even though you have removed the people who "gifted" you those voices?

Who will you listen to? And will we choose to begin to rewire our own rhetoric?

James Bryan Smith repeats often in his workshops and keynotes, "you are one in whom Christ dwells and delights". The Psalmist tells us that we are each fearfully and wonderfully made. John reminds us that we can love because God first loved us... and that this God abides in us in that love. This is the soundtrack we need to put on repeat. This is what we need to tune into – and affirm in others. This is how we realize that we do not "deserve our lot" and that we were not "destined to fail".

Who will you listen to?