

On Appearing before the Authorities

Jeremiah 5:14-17; 20:7-13; 23:29-32; Luke 21:9-19

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I want to think with you, dear sisters and brothers who preach, about the words you dare not speak from the pulpit, and what that “not daring” does to our hearts. Because when you preach, every time you do it, it is done as you “appear before the authorities.”

I.

As some of you will know, George Carlin has a list of seven words you cannot say on television. He is as hilarious about the list as he is obscene. All of his prohibited words refer to bodily or sexual functions, the kind that cause Junior High boys to giggle and blush. Carlin has a debate with himself about his list, because some of the words are hyphenated and so reiterate others on the list. But when he gets the list set, he can recite it in two nano-seconds.

The reason Carlin cannot say these words on television is because the censors will not allow it, the censors being the guardians of establishment power to keep things nice and therefore safe. He cannot say these words because they remind us of bodily functions that we cannot control. We do not speak them because they remind us that we are bodies and therefore frail and therefore mortal and therefore about to die. Arnold Toynbee has said that death is “un-American,” an affront to everyone’s right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The censors prefer matters nice and safe. They prefer that people like us talk of spiritual matters and not such topics as the body or the body politic or the economics of the body politic. The list censored and disapproved concerns the smelly and unsavory so that we do better to deny the body.

II.

Well, George Carlin is not the first to have such a list of things that could not be said in public. Already Jeremiah, in his frightened, jeopardized world, knew such a list of things not to be uttered in public in Jerusalem:

He could not say that the divine promise to David was sheer ideology.

He could not say that God’s perpetual presence in the Jerusalem temple was a priestly hoax.

He could not say that being chosen did not give Israel a pass on moral responsibility.

He could not say that Nebuchadnezzar, the hated superpower, was a tool of God to bring it all down.

He could not say that the Jerusalem network was under judgment and would not spared or sustained.

He could not say that God’s eternity did not extend to the little human

accomplishments that they loved too much with all their hearts. (Is that seven?)

He could not say these things, because he knew that saying them was inflammatory:

I am now making my words in your mouth a fire,
And this people wood, and the fire shall devour them.
I am going to bring upon you a nation from far away,
O house of Israel, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 5:14-15)

He knew he had to say these words because there were so many false words that needed to be countered in Jerusalem:

Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? See, therefore, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, who steal my words from one another [more than plagiarism!]. See, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, who use their own tongues and say, "Says the Lord." See, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, says the Lord, and who tell them, and who lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or appoint them; so they do not profit this people at all, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:29-32)

It was too dangerous to say what had to be said. And he did not say it. And it tore his guts apart. He risked saying it, but at the last minute he did not. And then he gets sick for not saying it:

For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak anymore in his name,"
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. (Jeremiah 20:8-9)

So finally he said it! He said it over and over! He was brought to trial for his words, because the "spiritual leaders," the priests, wanted him silenced for saying the prohibited words on television, uttering the unutterable. In that trial he escaped by the skin of his teeth because of some tough old witnesses who supported him and who stood by him (26:17-19, 24). But he was regarded as a traitor who "weakened the hand of the soldiers," that is, who "undermined the war effort" (38:4). It is no wonder that he cries out to God in pain and anguish: "You have seduced me." You have given me an impossible assignment. He prays in honesty for vengeance against his adversaries. Because he had to say what he dared not say. And all hell came upon him.

III.

Well, George Carlin is not the last one to have such a list of the unsayable. There is, for example, you, you preachers who pray and brood and study and know. And then mostly must retreat to the “nice” of denial. Or you preach your heart out, and the vestry or the session doubles the pain like a hammer, or a major donor stomps out in indignation. Or worse, you preach your heart out and the most you get is that someone reminds you that you forget the Lord’s Prayer...for God’s sake! I am led to this thought by the many preachers who have told me, almost in passing as though it were normal, that they could not speak about the Iraq war in their church or about immigration or about global warming. And I am, moreover, a member of a theological faculty that was not permitted to say something at the outset about the war because the institutional risks were too great! And my own daring preacher, on the Fourth of July Sunday, had a person walk out in a huff because he said something about U.S. arrogance and privilege.

I have been thinking about a list of things, give or take, that a preacher cannot say. Or if said, is dismissed as a gal who never met a payroll:

Some could not say that the war is stupid, and we are expending our precious young on the folly of the National Security State.

Some could not say that present day capitalism has failed in its excessive greed that devours the poor and now reaches into the middle class.

Some could not say that the oil-spill is simply the token of Western technological hubris at its extreme.

Some could not say that we have forfeited our democracy to a secret government that runs over the Constitution and shreds civil rights in order to defend the intemperate wealth of the few.

Some could not say that the frantic rush to get a child to the next soccer practice and next dance class is membership in the rat race that cannot be won.

Some cannot say that the technological fixes violate the neighborly fruitfulness of the creation.

Some cannot say that the immigrants are indeed sisters and brothers who come under the welcome sign.

Some cannot say that our penchant for violence is toxic for the heart of our common life.

Some cannot say that the experiment in greedy entitlement has failed, and we will have to find other ways to maintain our hummers. (Is that seven?)

Some cannot say things because the cocoon of denial claims us all, and we would

rather not risk so much. Well, maybe this is not quite your list. You can adjust. All I know is that there is a lot not being said, and we all know why.

This is not a sermon about being prophetic or taking on the world or blowing the lid off the church in one loud binge. This is a pastoral reflection on what it does for us, alongside Jeremiah and George Carlin, to be silenced in ways that shrink and cramp our humanness. Such coerced silence is not benign. It makes us inordinately weary. It drives us to despair...or cynicism. It compels us to denial. It reduces us to managers and therapists and cheer leaders and entertainers and program directors. And all the while the word grinds at our guts because we know better. What we cannot say is that the body is fragile and smelly and cannot be made otherwise. What we cannot say is that the body politic now has a smell of death about it. What we cannot say is that evangelical faith is about bodily existence in the neighborhood, bodily since the creator called it "good," bodily since God freed the slaves from their pained bodily bondage, bodily since, as we say in the creed:

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became truly human.

Or as we know it more anciently, "and was made man!" Became human, fragile, vulnerable, smelly, about to die. Became man! When about to die, as "man" or as body politic or as us, then Carlin's "piss" or "fart" are not really objectionable or interesting, because such smelly regularity beyond our control belongs inescapably to our short-term creatureliness.

IV.

Well, I thought it was worth reflecting on the fix we are in. The preacher in our society is given words that cannot be uttered. And if not uttered, the preacher grows cold, plays it safe, and perhaps needs to be loved more. And as I ponder this, I am aware that not once in my life, in my tenured life, have I been in the dangerous place that many of you occupy every week. You are like the apostles in the book of Acts, sure to be called before the authorities and examined for your testimony to see whether your words are safe and acceptable or as dangerous and inflammatory as those of George Carlin or Jeremiah. The authorities sit before you and conduct your trial.

But then I came to this other text given me by C. S. Song, the great Korean theologian, who has indeed been before the authorities. In Luke 21, Jesus anticipates the coming debacle. You wonder how he knew about our coming debacle: "Not one stone will be left on another." It sounds like an oil spill or an economic melt-down. They asked him, "When?" He said, "I do not know." But then he says, before whatever time line in which it will occur: "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify" (vv. 12-13).

They will ask you to speak up. They will expect you to utter your truth. They will watch your words to see if any of your words are like those of George's list or the list of Jeremiah. Then I thought, even if Luke is anticipating the Roman destruction

of the Jerusalem temple, he is making connections to our time and place and danger. Now like then, the authorities are bewildered. They want some guidance or assurance for a dangerous time. So what do you have to tell us, Ms. Apostle, of the truth and nothing but? What have you got for us, Reverend?

And then Jesus says—or Luke says, or the Jesus Seminar says—these most stunning words: “So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict” (vv. 14-15). Don’t work it out logically and carefully or anxiously or with too much calculated caution, because that venue presses you beyond that. Trust the spirit of Jesus, he says, and receive wisdom that will admit you to new freedom. Imagine, on hard issues of the day before the Roman authorities, Jesus will be close at hand with a word. What he says is, “I will give you mouth.”

And then he says two things to his followers. First, this truth-telling will get you into a lot of trouble: “You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name” (vv. 16-17). Second, you will be safe: “But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls” (vv. 18-19). Big trouble...and you will gain your soul, your identifiable center of vitality. You will get yourself back in the process of telling the truth before the authorities. You likely will find allies among tough old witnesses. But for sure, you will have yourself in all your vocational freedom.

I do not give you advice. I give you only a text. I do know about the risk of the church budget and about the risk to one’s family (I am a PK!) and about being without tenure and the danger to one’s pension and medical coverage. Of course!

But I also know about the diminishment of self through coerced silence and the loss of freedom and courage and vitality and energy and joy. I crave for you an edge of freedom that will let you witness to the full truth that was entrusted to you. Jeremiah discovered, through his anguish, that he had allies as he ran risks, that he was kept safe in ways he could not have imagined. He could not know that before he bore witness. I have thought about what it means for us to walk close to the gospel. There is no doubt that greater freedom for the word is needed among us. It is needed by those who need to hear. But it is also needed by those who are called to speak. This is a gospel time. This is a time when the old reliances have failed, when autonomous, arrogant ways of life, in many manifestations, have been shown to be empty. This is a moment to line out an alternative. We have that alternative, and it must be uttered for the sake of the body politic.

The utterance is not only for the sake of the body politic. It is also for the sake of our souls. Imagine what it will be like to break out of fatigue and despair and resignation and gentle denial to be one’s self with the truth of the gospel. You do not need to be Jim Forbes, and I do not need to be Tony Campollo, with their bravado. We need only be ourselves with the word entrusted to us, with God’s word given us, with news that sets us free from heartburn or ulcers or anger with Jeremiah.

The word we will be given in gospel freedom is not a nice word about a nice world. It is rather a true word about our bodies and our body politic, the bodies infused with God’s truth, but nonetheless temporary, passing, fragile, mortal.

All of us in his gathering are in it together. So I thought, let us together hold this moment precious. Let us think about the truth entrusted to us, the truth of God, God

from God, true God from true God, the word that “was made man,” suffered and died, and was indeed raised to new life and new freedom.

It is not a wonder that Jeremiah, at the end of his struggle with speech and silence, finally, in verse 13, breaks out in doxology:

Sing to the Lord;
Praise the Lord!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hands of evil doers. (20:13)

He comes to joy by breaking his silence. I do not urge you to say more than you can say. I do not urge you to run risks in dangerous places that you cannot run. I do not lay a guilt trip on you. Rather I invite you to take stock of the truth you have been given and to ponder what it would be like for you to move to greater freedom. Finger your head; check your hairs. Imagine them all counted and guarded and kept safe. Imagine the way the hairs on your head are safe and the way in which *the freedom for your mouth* is connected to *the safety of our hairs*. And then imagine, as your silence is broken, “Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last!”