

*On Breaking the Silence**

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Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.

Amos 5:13

This odd verse is clearly a misfit in the Book of Amos. It is a misfit because it *counsels silence* in such an evil, dangerous time, whereas Amos evidently *refused to be silenced* and continued to speak out in his dangerous, evil time.

- He refused silence because a prophet must speak when God has spoken (3:8).
- He refused silence condescendingly urged by the royal priest at Bethel (7:10-17).
- He refused silence until he had surveyed, in Yahwistic fashion, the inescapable destiny of neighboring nation-states (1:3-2:3).
- He refused silence until he had anticipated the divine ruin of both Israel and Judah (2:4-5, 6-16).
- He refused silence until he had moved through divine judgment and arrived at affirming constructive hope (9:11-15).
- He refused silence until he had likened the chosen people, Israel, to every other people (9:7).

It appears that our verse 5:13 is a scribal note added to the work of Amos in order to counter the danger of his relentless utterance by urging readers of Amos not to imitate his boldness. The key word in the verse is *skl*; it means to act wisely or knowing to bring forth advantage or gain. In the scribal insistence of this verse, one can readily observe that keeping silent is an advantage in a dangerous time—better not to call attention to one's self. Conversely, speaking out is unwise, dangerous, and risky, and unlikely to bring one any advantage or gain. This new advice, based on observation, helps us to see that Amos, in his relentless utterance, is taking huge risks that cannot possibly produce wellbeing for him. This is not, I suspect, a new insight for Amos from the scribe. Amos knew very well that it would cost less to be "prudent." He knew, likely from the outset, that his searing speech could only bring him trouble. But he spoke anyway. Indeed, he had to speak. He was compelled to speak by what was deepest in his faith and in his identity:

The lion has roared;
Who will not fear?
The Lord God has spoken;
who can but prophesy? (3:8)

It is easy enough to transpose this conflict between Amos and the more cautious scribe into our own "evil time." The benefit of safe silence is well known among us.

Political leaders know not to comment unnecessarily on dangerous risky issues and regularly find safety in “no comment.” Church leaders know, from hard experience, that it is easier and safer to keep silent about vex questions of church and society, justice and gender, not to say anything about economics. The collusion of silence in the face of great issues is roughly vote for the status quo, resistance to change, and rejection of the newly emergent that might indeed be the gift of God. But not so Amos, who had no interest in being “prudent”! Not so the brave leaders who run risks and make newness possible. Not so the prophetic tradition of covenantal faith. Thus Amos is not unlike the later Jeremiah who found that he could not keep silent, or he got severe heart burn (Jeremiah 20:8-9).

I had this verse from Amos in purview as I read the brief memoir of Roy Bourgeois, a long time Roman Catholic priest of the Maryknoll order. I got a copy of his memoir *Male Supremacy in the Roman Catholic Church: An Insider's View*, sent to me by my irascible friend Wendell Franklin Wentz. As a young man, Bourgeois volunteered to go to Vietnam where he served a year as a naval officer: “In my fourth year of military service, the leaders of my country and church told us we had to go to Vietnam ‘to stop the spread of godless communism.’ I did not question them. I volunteered for duty in Vietnam, believing that the cause was noble and I would be doing God’s work” (vi).

During the war he saw the violence and suffering that produced a great number of orphans in Vietnam that “opened my eyes to the concept of solidarity” (vii). After the war, he enrolled in the Maryknoll seminary in Ossining, New York, and was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1972. Upon graduation he was given a mission assignment by the Maryknoll community serving the poor in Bolivia. In his fourth year in Bolivia, he “made a decision to break my silence and join the poor in their resistance against the violence and brutality of the military dictatorship” (20).

He was arrested and deported. Upon the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980, Bourgeois joined the human rights delegation to El Salvador. He became acutely aware of the way the US military supported the local wealthy elite against the poor. He learned of “the School of the Americas” at Fort Benning, where soldiers from Central America were trained for combat against their own poor. He protested mightily and cunningly against the School at Fort Benning, was arrested, and after protest in prison was given solitary confinement, first in Terre Haute and then in Sandstone, Minnesota. After serving his sentence and after a stint as a Trappist monk, he was again sent to prison for his protest against military violence against Central American peasants.

But then, after such a long ordeal on the political front, he began to break the silence closer home concerning the practices of the Roman Catholic Church that prohibited the ordination of women. He noticed the patriarchal monopoly in the church and in his own Maryknoll order. He spoke about the matter; it did not take long at all for the Vatican to notice him and his protest. He was promptly expelled from the

priesthood and soon after expelled as well from the Maryknoll community. While he received tacit support from many of his priest-friends, he was appalled at the general refusal to break the silence against the zealous exclusivism in the church. While he had protested governmental policy, it was breaking silence about church policy and practice that proved most costly to him. But he spoke out! And before he finishes his book, he speaks out concerning sexual abuse and ignorance in the church concerning homosexuality.

His book, however, does not end with an accent on the critical, as urgent and important as that is. Rather he speaks and writes of hope. He finds hope in a letter signed by fifty-one members of his Maryknoll community asking that he not be dismissed from the order. He finds hope in a letter of support from one hundred and thirteen nuns. He finds hope through his rich, energizing correspondence by a number of folk who write to him. He finds hope in his capacity, after the manner of Nelson Mandela, to relinquish his anger and move on in hope:

I find great hope and joy in knowing that men, no matter how hard they work at it, cannot keep doors closed forever....In the ongoing struggle for justice and equality in the Catholic Church, my hope is in women and youth. I am grateful for the women in the church who have educated and empowered me to break my silence about the hypocrisy and corruption of the all-male priesthood. And I am grateful to our young people, including my own family, who refuse to belong to any church or organization that does not treat all of its members as equals. (89, 91)

The finish of Bourgeois in hope is not unlike *the finish of the prophet Amos* who did not linger in “prudence”:

On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen,
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins,
and rebuild it as in the days of old,
in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,
says the Lord who does this.
The time is coming, says the Lord,
when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps,
and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,

and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant then on their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the Lord your God. (Amos 9:11-15)

Breaking the silence and evoking intense hostility did not, for Bourgeois, lead to despair. It rather led to anticipation for time to come, because God's power for life will not finally be shackled or controlled by fearful ideology. We do not know, finally, how breaking the silence ended for Amos. But we may imagine that Amos finished, not unlike Bourgeois, full of anticipation for time to come, because the God of the gospel is not yet finished.

Thus I write partly as a grateful salute to Bourgeois for his steadfastness and courage. Beyond that, however, I pose the question of the "prudence" of keeping silent as it may pertain to the rest of us. We are, in our society, set in a long and durable practice of white, male, heterosexual hegemony. Any loss or apparent loss of that hegemony evokes fear and hostility, often couched as virtue for old time values. The retrenchment to preserve white, male, heterosexual domination is operative everywhere among us, everywhere from *thuggery* that welcomes violence to *dark money* that is easily allied with thuggery. The success of the combination of *thuggery* and *dark money* depends upon the tacit support of *an unthinking public* that is readily won to the status quo. In such an environment, prudence is useful, practical, and roughly profitable.

Conversely, breaking the silence about racial matters challenges white supremacy; breaking the silence about gender challenges the hegemony of patriarchy; breaking the silence about gender difference evokes violent hostility. All of these acts of silence-breaking are markedly upsetting, inconvenient, and costly. We may be alert that there is a widespread inclination to keep things as they are, without change, by silencing alternatives as dangerous, unwelcome, unpatriotic, un-American, or unchristian.

Given that reality of social fear and social control, here we are as a community of truth-tellers linked to the God of all truth. It is no wonder that Jeremiah, the prophet most closely attuned to our context, at the break-point of his society, found himself deeply situated in falsehood that carefully distorted social reality:

From the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace" when there is no peace. (6:13-14; see 8:10-11)

The prophets are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds. (14:14)

I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceits of their own heart? (23:25-26)

In such an environment, the need for honest truth-telling is urgent concerning race, gender, sexual orientation, and finally economics. Such speaking out need not be confrontational or dramatic as has been the case with Amos and with Bourgeois. It can be quiet and practical, but nonetheless insistent. Silence is a collusion with hidden barbarism and exploitation. It is time now for speaking. The familiar words of Martin Niemöller, from his own experience under Nazism, have become almost a cliché among us:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--
because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

The fact that these words are familiar to us does not keep them from being true and pertinent for us. The repeated admission "I did not speak out," is readily at hand for almost all of us. This time it will not be different...before it is too late, before they come for us. In the very long run, "prudence" may not be as prudent as it readily appears. As we all saw and heard, one of the rioters at the capitol insurrection on January 6 said boldly, "We are coming for you."

*"Breaking the Silence" appeared first in "The Church Anew" blog.