

Preface

I HAVE ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE. Nothing to brag about, nothing to be ashamed about, and I see no reason to be silent about it. My brain served me well for eighty-five years, but now it has more and more difficulty remembering things. I decided not to spend the remaining days of my life dwelling on what I have lost. Instead, I want to give people resources that will help them think and act critically in an age of confusion and conflicting voices.

While I come from a Christian background, the points in this book pertain to people of all faiths, cultures, races, and genders. The main premises of *Silence Is Not the Answer* are for all people to read and act on.

I have read widely these past years about theology, politics, and suffering and its root causes. I cannot recall all that I have learned, but I can refer you to authors and spiritual leaders who I believe will challenge your preconceptions and give you hope for the future.

One of my favorite authors and theologians at this stage in my life is Marcus J. Borg. His book *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* is a masterful portrayal of the historical Jesus and emerging Christianity. He explores the way Jesus resisted the domination system of the Roman empire power of his day. For Borg, both the personal and the political dimensions of Jesus's message are important for understanding the revolutionary aspects of his life and teaching. I highly recommend Borg's book if you want to understand who Jesus is for Christians today.

Another theologian I find inspiring is Leonardo Boff, a Roman Catholic priest from Brazil whose speaking out about the suffering of the poor and the death of millions in Latin America made headline news. Despite attempts by the church to silence Boff because his speech was offensive to the establishment, his message made a difference. Boff's book *When Theology Listens to the Poor* is a call for the modern church to create a better option for the poor. He points out how Mark 26:11, "The poor you will always have with you," is used to support the status quo and creates an attitude of fatalism, pessimism, and cynicism that destroys any hope that things could be different. However, Boff argues that the true meaning of this verse is that the opportunity to help is always there. Boff reminds us that when Jesus offered a better option for the poor, he was making it clear that God acts to free people from the bondage of poverty and oppression. It is the prophetic task of the church to do the same.

Some people may say, "I don't remember George espousing such progressive positions in his previous writings. Has he changed his mind?" In the past, I sometimes felt that I didn't have enough information about an issue, that others had good points too, that I should wait to see what happened, and that my voice wouldn't make a difference. But these excuses allowed bad choices to be made that cause suffering for our brothers and sisters. As Brian McLaren says in his book *The Great Spiritual Migration*, we are all in the process of development. Sometimes new wine needs new wineskins, as Larry Rasmussen says.

I have a certain perspective. My education and life experience have shaped my thinking and analyses. Others will see things differently. I respect that. But as Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel says, "What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but

the silence of the bystander.”¹ We need to read and listen attentively and then speak out for causes that we think are important. John the Baptist is described in the Gospels as “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.”² He calls us to “repent,”³ wake up, and change. *Silence Is Not the Answer* is a collection of prophetic voices urging us to wake up, notice what is happening, and take a stand. Our world today is filled with fear, conflict, war, and confusion. I encourage you to read the writers in this book with an open mind and think about their urgent cry.

Some points will be made more than once. Some truths are worth repeating. When I say to my wife, “I love you,” I’m glad that Vivian doesn’t say, “George, you already told me that.”

When I began putting this book together, my wife said, “With your diminished hearing and eyesight and your memory problems, are you able to tackle another book?” Maybe not, but some things need to be said as we move toward the 2020 elections and beyond. So, with the help of Vivian and a professional editor, I collected some pieces written by myself and others to let our voices be heard and break the silence.

If we remain silent, then our leaders and fellow citizens will not wake up and change course. We must speak up and take action now before our society is beyond saving.

Appearing before the Authorities

≡ Walter Brueggemann ≡

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 nanoseconds.

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 censored and disapproved list 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 be 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. 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 got 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 “weaken[ed] the hands 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 forgot 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 US 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 the 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 to 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 cheerleaders 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 upon another.” It sounds like an oil spill or an economic meltdown. 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 a 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 bear 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 great 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 outline 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 Campolo, 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 heart burn 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 of 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!"

When Prophets Confront Kings

≡ Herbert W. Chilstrom ≡

A SPOKESPERSON FOR THE so-called evangelical conservative community was interviewed recently on the PBS *NewsHour*. He's an occasional guest at the White House.

When pressed about President Trump's personal moral behavior, he responded with only the most oblique concern. He suggested that the reason so many in his community support the president is because of his stance on "religious liberty" and "respect for the sanctity of human life."

It's not difficult to understand that the issues he undoubtedly had in mind regarding "religious liberty" are prayer in public schools, prayer at major athletic events, freedom for business persons to refuse to serve homosexual persons, and more.

"Sanctity of human life" is obviously a reference to support for more stringent abortion legislation.

Combine this with such things as the apparent strength of the economy, tax relief for some Americans, and hopes for Mr. Trump's conversation with the head of North Korea, and it's not difficult to understand why support for the president remains surprisingly strong with some Americans.

But now let's step back almost 3,000 years. Visit Israel in the time of King David. Yes, as in the United States today, the poorest were

being neglected and wealth was unevenly distributed. But, also like the United States today, the economy in Israel was strong, unemployment was low, the military was the most powerful in the region, and the borders and influence of Israel had never been so extensive.

Indeed, King David was very popular with many in the nation.

One man saw things differently. His name was Nathan. When power and wealth went to King David's head, he thought he could have anything he wanted, including the beautiful Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, an ordinary soldier. After he impregnated Bathsheba, David tried to cover his tracks by having Uriah killed in battle. Now he had a legitimate right to take Bathsheba as his wife. Or so he thought.

Not knowing the intent of Nathan's request for an audience, David welcomed him to his palace—Israel's "White House." Like American presidents over the past half century, David no doubt thought it to his advantage to curry the favor of prominent religious leaders.

But Nathan had something else in mind.

He told David a simple story about a rich man who saw a prize lamb in the backyard of a poor shepherd. In fact, it was the pauper's only lamb. When the poor man refused to sell it to him, the rich man arranged to have him killed.

On hearing the story, King David flew into a rage. He declared that the rich man must be executed.

At that moment Nathan riveted his eye on David and declared, "*You* are the man!"

What about modern-day prophets? It's my strong impression that very few of them, especially in the so-called evangelical conservative community, have the courage to raise a prophetic voice of judgment.

With our president's own recorded comments about his immoral behavior and after the number of women who have brought accusations of sexual misconduct against him, is it not reasonable to ask a few questions?

- Were he a teacher of our children, the head of a school system, the CEO of a television network, the mayor of a city, or the spiritual leader of a religious community, would he still be in office?
- What kind of example is he setting for all of us, and especially for our children?
- In his role as Commander in Chief of our military forces, is he the role model they should have?
- Are there some things, such as honesty, personal integrity, and moral rectitude, that are at least as important as a president's stance on religious liberty and sanctity for human life?
- How long can this go on without consequences for all of us?

This is not merely a political issue. Two decades ago, when Bill Clinton, a Democrat, marred the office with similar behavior, I wrote an opinion piece for the *Star Tribune* in Minnesota. I suggested several reasons he should resign. Would the country have collapsed had Mr. Clinton done so, or been removed from office? Of course not.

Would it happen if Mr. Trump did so, or was removed from office? Of course not.

We are a nation of a Constitution and laws, not of men and women.

Why Justice Is Not Secondary

≡ George S. Johnson

THE BIBLICAL TERM *JUSTICE* needs our attention. It has become very popular—we hear about racial justice, environmental justice, economic justice, gender justice, global justice, and creation justice. But what do we mean when we use this word? What do people think and feel when they hear the word *justice*? We need to unpack this concept.

A review of the context of Reformation theology reminds us that fear of God and eternal damnation were dominant themes in European society in the sixteenth century. Works righteousness was strong in medieval Christianity, but grace, the unmerited love of God, became central to Protestant theology during the Reformation. Has our fixation on grace allowed justice to become secondary?

Our context today is different. Damnation is not our primary fear. Perhaps inequality, injustice, and violence are more dominant concerns in our time. What is good news in our context? By elevating grace above justice, have we missed something important in biblical theology? Grace is by no means secondary, but neither is love of one's neighbor. How do we integrate the two?

Was not love of one's neighbor central in the teachings of Jesus? Did Jesus ever suggest or act as though justice was secondary? Have

we assumed that those who experience forgiveness will do justice? Is there a cause-and-effect relationship between our understanding of faith and our ethics that merits reflection? Asking who our neighbors are is part of justice.

The biblical terms *mishpat* and *saedekah* (justice and righteousness) almost always center on love of one's neighbor and correcting oppression. Justice is more than charity or relieving pain; it includes the elimination of the causes that bring inequality and pain. If we truly want justice, we must be willing to let go of privileges, systems and policies that contribute to the pain and suffering of our neighbors. Marie Augusta Neal's book, *The Socio-Theology of Letting Go*, is helpful on this topic. In what ways does justice include the courage to let go? Nobody wants to lose one's job or friends or pension. How do we help people in danger of such loss?

Responding to the biblical summons to seek justice and correct oppression is not easy and can be dangerous. Shane Claiborne reminds us that "charity wins awards and applause, but joining the poor gets you killed."¹ Dom Hélder Câmara used to say, "When I feed the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why so many people are poor they call me a communist."² Jesus reminded his audience of what happened to the prophets when they called for justice: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."³ How can we help people understand this dimension of doing justice?

José Porfirio Miranda was well known for asserting that God can be known only through love of one's neighbor. How do we respond to this idea? In 1 John, we learn that whoever loves is born of God.⁴ How do we interpret and apply that?

Rolf Knierim, my former Old Testament professor at Claremont School of Theology, taught me that worship was the primary

setting in which ancient Israel experienced and celebrated justice. The advancement of justice and the proclamation of justice were the very function of worship. The psalms document this clearly. What is the role of justice in our worship today? Music is important. How do our liturgies, anthems, and hymns enable us to proclaim justice? Should an understanding of biblical justice be a consideration when hiring a director of music?

We hear more about justice today than we used to. Church schools and seminaries have found ways to include justice in their curricula and are making an effort to include experiential learning opportunities in the fields of social analysis and social justice. My alma mater, Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, has an endowed chair for justice and Christian community. Churches have formed committees to help members connect their faith to current issues of justice. All this gives me hope that we will stop putting justice second.