

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C
Old St. Pat's, 11:15 (2018)

As some of you may have noticed
for of a variety of reasons
I have been away from OSP since early August.

While I missed being with this vibrant community of faith
I can't say I have missed preaching
In the midst of so much societal and ecclesial upheaval

With convictions of Paul Manafort and Michael Cohen
All the wrangling over a supreme court nominee
Leaked portions of the Woodward book on the Trump Whitehouse
The anonymous op ed piece by a Whitehouse insider
Rahm Emmanuel's announcement he won't see reelection
As the trial around the death of Laquan McDonald looms
Flooding in India
Earthquakes in Japan
Bombing of the innocents in Syria

And then of course there were the ecclesial earthquakes
And all their aftershocks
The almost nuclear report from the Pennsylvania grand jury
On the decades long sex abuse tragedy in that state
The pope's visit to Ireland
Where he apologized over and over again
For abuse by Catholic ministers and institutions
The resignation of a U.S. cardinal
For apparently long known abuse allegations
The charge that the pope himself knew of some of this
And then last week two local priests
Arrested for scandalous activity in broad daylight
On a major thoroughfare in Miami Beach

I missed you ...
But didn't miss missing preaching in the shadow
Of so much turmoil

And am glad to move on ...
And address safer issues
Like The gospel implications
Of the conviction of reporters in Myanmar
Or Colin Kapernick resurrected as a Nike spokesman
Or this week's Global climate action summit
Or the Cubs, or Bears, or even the White Sox

But then I like you get waylaid,
 ambushed, maybe even assaulted
By God's unrelenting word
Like an evangelical scalpel
 Intent on lancing the boil
 Clearing the infection
 Expelling the poison
So that the sickness might stop
And healing might begin.

At first glance today's gospel might seem more innocent than that
Jesus off on a field trip outside his home region
Meeting interesting folk
offering his usual gifts of insightful teaching
 And powerful healing

But to dismiss this Sunday's gospel and other lectionary texts
As simply a pleasant healing story
That beckons the comforting message
 That whatever ails us, Jesus heals
Is to miss the scalpel in the gospel
 The prophecy in the healing

The Jesus command to "be open" **ephphatha**
Is the same uttered at the baptism of every infant
In preparation for the initiation of every adult

To be open to the word ...
 An openness authenticated in speaking and acting
 What the first reading references
 As the singing of the mute
 And what the Jesus modesty of the gospel
 Cannot suppress
As the newly opened now speaks plainly

There is a story of a renowned biblical scholar
Teaching scripture to undergraduates at Notre Dame
She ran into some difficulty when one of them
Rebuffed her assertion that Jesus was not a Christian

She drew upon every academic and rhetorical tool
And let him have it

after her onslaught the undergrad yielded ... sort of
Saying, "Ok, Ok ... you've convinced me
Jesus wasn't a Catholic .. but his mother was!"

Jesus was definitely not Catholic, not Christian

And as a Jew he had an instinct for a God
Revealed in speech-acts more than visual signs

Judeo-Christian revelation
Is more like a phone call than facetime
More like twitter [God help us] than Snapchat

The word is an act of power and action
So God "said" let there be light ... and it was done
Speech is potent and creative

For Jesus the Jew to proclaim to another "be open"
Was demanding "be a new creation"
A new creation that hears what is true
And speaks that truth in words and deeds

From time to time I have the privilege
Of being invited by another institution
To review a candidate seeking an academic promotion

This ordinarily involves immersing myself in their publications
Scrutinizing their curriculum vitae
And considering their contribution to the academy

These days I am reviewing the material of a younger scholar
Though I am not sure he would put himself in that category
Who became a publishing rock star in his 20's
With a blockbuster book
That appeared even before he finished his Ph.D.
Showoff!

He is a fan of the celebrated French philosopher Michel Foucault
And many of his writings engage
This revolutionary and sometimes controversial giant

One of the pieces I was reading this last week
Was entitled "the struggle to speak truthfully"

In the introduction to that piece, he writes:

*I would like to someday become a Catholic who tells the truth, who speaks frankly, who represents himself at some risk, who knows what he can do, and do joyfully, with his faith and his suffering and the world's suffering, or who at least knows, joyfully, that he does **NOT** know what to do with his faith and his suffering and the world's suffering.¹*

As part of this exploration of Catholic truth telling
He explores the work of Foucault
Who lectured on the topic in 1983 in Berkeley CA

Spurred by my friends honest reflections,
I went back and read those lectures²
That pivot on the Greek work *parrhesia*

The term literally means “saying everything”
And although that could have the negative connotation
of a blabbermouth or gossip
More substantially it means speaking frankly, truthfully
Openly, fearlessly, boldly

Foucault says that this frank speech has five characteristics

1. It is **frank** because it represents what someone believes;
2. such frank speech is bound up with one’s most authentic self, speaking what one knows to be **true**; the *parrhesiastes* is someone who has the moral qualities required to know the truth and then to convey such truth to others
3. Practicing *parrhesia* means **risking** something in such frank and truthful speech; it is not the truth telling that grammar school teachers tell to the children she teaches; it comes from “below” ... speaking truth to tyrants
4. Because it is **Criticism**; speaking the truth is capable of hurting or angering the interlocutor
5. Finally practicing *parrhesia* is both an exercise of freedom and an internal compulsion, a **duty** that comes from an authentic self

To summarize: such speech is **frank, true, dangerous, critical**, and ultimately a **duty**

Jesus was such a *parrhesiastes*
A dangerous truth teller
Who spoke unvarnished truth to those in power
a divine duty, out of critical love,
whose holy frankness
Got him nailed to the jib of a tree

Paul was such a *parrhesiastes*
That I am glad I did not have to live with him
His constant truth telling would have been excruciating

My young teacher reminds us, however,
That this is not just an individual gift
But that the early community
Was a *parrhesiastic* community
A truth telling, talk-back-at-power, duty filled community

No wonder they were so persecuted.

In his magical and upsetting book, *Telling the Truth*
Poet and Preacher Frederick Buechner writes

If preachers ... are to say anything that really matters to anyone ... they must say it not just to the public part of us that considers interesting thoughts about the gospel ...but to the private, inner part ... where our concern is less with how the Gospel is to be preached than with what the gospel **IS** They must address themselves to the fullness of who **WE** are and to the emptiness too, the emptiness where grace and peace belong but mostly are **NOT**, because terrible as well as wonderful things have happened to us.³

Terrible things have happened to us as Roman Catholics,
and to our most innocent
And some among us have even weaponized
our most sacred rituals
As vehicles of oppression and abuse

[O]n April 24, 1989, at the funeral of Father Joseph Birmingham in Boston Tom Blanchette saw Cardinal Law sipping coffee alone. 'There's a lot of young men in the diocese who will need counseling in the wake of their relationship with Father Birmingham,' Blanchette told him. He confided how the priest had molested him, his four brothers, other young men. Law drew him aside and asked him to return to the church. 'Bishop Banks is handling this, and I want you to make an appointment.'

*Placing his hand on Blanchette's head, the cardinal prayed in silence. Then he said; "I bind you by the power of the confessional never to speak about this to anyone else."*⁴

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Pastor, Theologian, Poet, and Resister
Who participated in plotting an assassination attempt on Hitler
And was martyred for that summative act

Helped establish what was called the "Confessing" church
A segment of German Lutheranism
That refused to allow the churches
To become an instrument of Nazi propaganda and politics

In that spirit ... in the spirit of evangelical ephphatha
we are renewed this day
In our journey to become a truly confessing church
Not a secret keeping one
A *parrhesiastic* community
And a first step in that journey towards such holy frankness
Is an admission of our collective sin
Societal and definitely ecclesial

Recently, an auxiliary bishop of Boston blogged:

"A couple years ago ... [when] I was informed that I had been named a bishop ... I was conscious of the fact that, I ... would have to accept whatever the future held with a complete openness to God's will ...

These days, I find myself deeply disturbed by what is happening in the Church. I know the bishops must act decisively and that the action needs to be thorough, transparent, professional and in cooperation with competent laypeople. But still, I ask the question: what can I do?

All I know is that I can pray and do penance. To that end, and as your pastor, I commit myself to a full day and night of public penance. On Monday, September 24... I will celebrate the 9 o'clock Mass as I usually do. Following that Mass I will expose the Blessed Sacrament and remain there in prayer and fasting until the next morning, concluding this period of prayer and penance with the celebration of the 9:00 am Mass on Tuesday ... You are most welcome to join me in prayer for a few minutes or for a full hour. In fact, I would welcome your presence as I do the only things I know to do in the face of evil; prayer and penance."⁵

Joncas Kyrie begins

Victims are not responsible for the sins of their abusers
However, institutions such as any government or society
perpetuating lies and abuse
and every and any church that colludes in secret keeping
they ... we are responsible

in these darkening days
I feel I am part of such a society
Such a church
Both wounded and still wounding

Admitting such puts me in solidarity with at least one bishop
Who understands at least one appropriate public response

[Change vestments from green to purple]

And so we assume the garb of penance
Don a Lenten mantle
Drape one clerical body in a public symbol
Of both shame and grace

And pray to an all merciful God
That the spirit of church and society
Might conform on the inside to this outward sign
That sin might be absolved, mercy bestowed
And the broken brought to wholeness and justice
Through Christ our Lord.

Joncas' Sung Kyrie ensues

¹ Tom Beaudoin, "The Struggle to speak Truthfully," in his *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Post-Modern Theologian* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 124.

² Online at http://www.cscd.osaka-u.ac.jp/user/rosaldo/On_Parrehesia_by_Foucault_1983.pdf

³ Frederich Buechner, *Telling the Truth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1977)p. 5

⁴ In Jason Berry and Gerald Renner, *Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 52 as cited in Beaudoin.

⁵ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/deaconsbench/2018/08/bishop-i-commit-myself-to-a-full-day-and-night-of-public-penance/>