Contemporary Preachers As Prophets

Victoria Menning
Robert W. Bedingfield
Barbara Pekich

In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann writes, "Passion as the capacity and readiness to care, to suffer, to die, and to feel is the enemy of imperial reality. Imperial economics is designed to keep people satiated so that they do not notice. Its politics is intended to block out the cries of the denied ones. Its religion is to be an opiate so that no one discerns misery alive in the heart of God" (41). The prophet's task is to restore passion to the people of God, to cultivate it where it lies dormant, to give it voice when it is voiceless, and to confront its absence. The prophet frees the gospel to confront injustice and oppression.

To articulate the "contemporary" dimension of an issue focused on prophetic voices, the editorial committee invited three Reformed Church in America pastors to reflect on their understanding of a prophetic ministry and to share a sermon prepared and preached in the light of that understanding. Victoria Menning preaches at Trinity Reformed Church, an inner city congregation on the west side of Grand Rapids; Robert Bedingfield preaches at Central Reformed Church, a congregation in downtown Grand Rapids; and Barbara Pekich preaches at the Heartside chapel, a ministry on South Division Avenue in Grand Rapids. Their sermons follow this composite of their reflections on what it means to be a contemporary prophetic voice.

---

A prophetic voice always challenges God's people to reinterpret their lives in the light of biblical truth. "Biblical truth" means that the prophet senses that the source of the message delivered is beyond self. To that extent the prophet's stance is with God. Simultaneously, however, the prophet is also numbered among God's people. To that extent the prophet's stance is with God's people, that is, among those who are spoken to: "When I am most prophetic, I myself am the object of my words." It is a schizophrenic thing without the dilemma of loyalties. Truth is the *claimant*, and the consequence of truth telling is secondary to the telling. The message is the concern, not the messenger!

This prophetic message usually sets the prophet over against the dominant culture, and thus balances the traditional pastoral ministry. It challenges long-held assumptions and beliefs, asking people to wonder whether they have experienced the radical love of God revealed in the Word, and have responded to it in passionate, radical ways. That may mean rethinking lifestyles, attitudes toward those on the fringe of society and the church, and the use of resources and gifts. That surely means that God's people are expected to change, are expected to understand faith
in Jesus not only as privilege, but also as responsibility toward those who have little of the life offered by the death and resurrection of Christ, and are expected to "walk the walk," not just "talk the talk" of God's justice, compassion, and steadfast love for all people.

To be prophetic in the inner city is to listen to the voices which have been quiet for decades, and to attempt to empower them to speak. It is to be as vulnerable as they are, to suffer with them, to feel their pain, and yet not be consumed by it. Beyond this, it is to confront those in places of affluence and power so that they too will hear the cries of the denied ones. To be prophetic among street people is to remind the people of God's charge to build an alternative community, a community based on justice and compassion.

It is almost inevitable that such expectations and challenges will have implications for the growth of the church. There needs to be a conflict between growth for growth's sake and the prophetic. For the church can only be the church when the prophetic is present. If leadership shies from the tough and the hard, it panders. If fellowship follows because of a reticence to face reality, then it is cycled in a system of self-drivenness rather than self-determination. The call of the gospel is to carry the cross, and that metaphor is by definition anywhere that saving love goes out into the world and returns with the hot stab of a nail in its palm. To comprehend that is to engage the prophetic.

In other words, for the company of the crucified, being made to feel comfortable is not primary. The church is a place where people need to feel comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time. If we perceive the church as a place where people look for "comfort" and we experience the church as a place of sustenance, of hope, and of an easing of their griefs and troubles, then of course people need to be "comfortable" in their church. On the other hand, if we define comfortable as synonymous with complacent, then there is no room for prophetic ministry. If the church nurtures and provides, its peoples will emerge as butterflies; if we encourage complacency and an easy grace, we shall produce only slugs. God's call to God's people is difficult and radical.

Although it is true that people will not stay long in a place where they feel uncomfortable all the time, it is important to recognize that there are different kinds of discomfort. Some discomfort challenges, creating passion and growth in the development of the life of faith. To put the church's words and deeds alongside God's desire in order to see how they match up may mean confrontation with some hard truth. Some people will not be drawn to that kind of prophetic church. But not to address the injustice and lack of compassion toward those who are on the outside looking into the Christian community is to be unfaithful to God.

When our three pastors were asked to identify prophetic voices in the church today, their response was both personal and descriptive. One contemporary prophetic voice belongs to Mederdo Gomez, the Lutheran bishop of San Salvador. Since the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980, many church leaders have not dared to speak out against the actions of their government. Bishop Mederdo Gomez is a notable exception. Despite constant threats to his life, at each morning
worship he reads (as Romero did) the civil rights violations committed by the government against its people.

Another contemporary prophetic voice belongs to Jim Lucas, a Christian Reformed pastor in Grand Rapids, who continually calls the church to respond with love and compassion to people who are gay. The members of his AIDS support group tell their stories of rejection by the body of Christ, share their struggles to be "straight," express their frustration with the clergy, relate their dark times of hatred of themselves and their sexuality, and confess their feelings of rejection by God through God's instrument, the church. Jim Lucas is a prophetic voice simply because he calls on the members of his denomination to act in accordance with their own written policy.

Obvious prophetic models are all Christians who have confidence and courage, who hold to the vision of God's reign, who for the right reasons press on regardless, who refuse to quit and run up a white flag, who believe that God gets people out of nothing but through everything. Yet, prophetic ministry may not always be that obvious. There are people ministering in very traditional settings who may be unaware of the prophetic nature of their work. Wherever the values of the dominant culture are being called into question in light of the values of the Word of God, there prophetic ministry is happening. Wherever the poor and the disenfranchised are being loved, respected, and treated like the children of God, there prophetic ministry is happening. Wherever people with physical, emotional, or mental disabilities are given the possibility to be whole, to be contributing members of a congregation, there is prophetic ministry.

The Faithful and the Fire
Daniel 3
Victoria Menning

I love James Bond movies. Never mind the gruesome events leading to the dramatic conclusion. Those are all tempered by the final, thrilling escape of the hero. Enemy empires explode. Furious fugitives fire fatal weapons while clinging futilely to towering infernos as Agent 007 parachutes, slightly soiled, into a rubber raft with a beautiful woman and drifts dreamily away. I laugh, delighted by the ingenious escape of this hero, unscathed and victorious.

I had related in much the same way to the story of the fiery furnace in the third chapter of Daniel. Through the years, I had loved to hear the tale of the thrilling escape of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego out of the hands of the fuming King Nebuchadnezzar. I was amazed at our ingenious God’s ability to rescue, from the hottest of fires, these obedient young exiles. I marveled as they were presented before the most important of the Babylonians, completely intact, not even the smell of smoke upon them. I laughed, delighted by the escape of God’s faithful, unscathed and victorious.

Unfortunately, my enthusiasm for the story’s conclusion kept me from paying attention to the story’s center. The Book of Daniel was written to Jews during their oppression by Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C. To encourage his
readers to hold fast to the one true God, even in the face of death, the author offered stories of the young Hebrew exiles.

Nebuchadnezzar was ruler of the then-known world. The empire over which he reigned encompassed many peoples, nations, and cultures. His dream, interpreted by Daniel as a prediction of his eventual loss of power and complete humiliation, hung over his life like smoke over a fire. After many years, the smoke became a flame, and Nebuchadnezzar decided to pull his unruly kingdom together in the hope of thwarting Daniel’s prediction and establishing his power and immortality.

Nebuchadnezzar built a huge statue of himself, and commanded upon pain of death by burning, that everyone in the empire bow down to it. The storyteller uses the phrase "the statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up" nine times in the chapter’s first eighteen verses to underline this king’s desire to set himself up as the kingdom’s ultimate power. The most important people in the kingdom were summoned and told to bow down to the statue the king had set up. At the appropriate time, all did as they were commanded, with the exception of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Some of the empire’s lesser rulers, jealous of these young foreigners’ fast climb to fame, fortune, and favor in the king’s court, decided to put them on the hot seat. Knowing that the monarch sought power and immortality above all else, they gushed, "O king, live forever! These young Jews pay no heed to you. They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue you have set up."

Unable to believe that these three young Jews, upon whom his favor had so generously rested, would deny him the acclamation of which he saw himself worthy, Nebuchadnezzar confronted them face to face. "Is it true?" he asked, and then graciously offered a second chance to prove their loyalty to him, by falling down and worshiping the statue. If they refused, they would be thrown into the furnace of fire. And then came Nebuchadnezzar’s taunt, "Who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?" Nebuchadnezzar has everything set up. He is the all-powerful: mercy and favor proceed from his hands; there is no one who will not acknowledge his supremacy. No God is a match for the cunning and conceit of this would-be god so determined to control the outcome of history.

Then at the very center of the chapter, the narrator positions the crux of the matter:

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.

"But if not . . . ." That is the message of the third chapter of Daniel to the persecuted people of God for whom it was written. The reader knows how the story of the fiery furnace ends, but the three young men did not know. There is no risk when the results are known. There is no need for faith when the outcome is
determined by careful planning, but the obedience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not depend upon the end of the story. It depended upon an uncompromising commitment to their God regardless of the outcome.

We focus on the end of the story because it is nice and neat. The faithful were obedient in the face of an impossible situation and God swooped down, James Bond style, and rescued them from danger. But the truth is that through the centuries even when the faithful have been obedient to God, tragedy strikes, disease disables, war maims, and many die the death of martyrs or live lives of poverty and persecution.

The message of chapter three, at the center of Daniel, is not the escape from the king’s fiery fury. The message is the commitment to be the people of God no matter what the outcome, knowing that in the middle of the fire our God walks with us.

Maybe the religious freedom we enjoy in this country has made us apathetic and unenthused about our God. Persecution seems to get the adrenalin flowing. Many of us have a kindergarten understanding of the stories of God’s activity in our lives and the world. We have not wanted or needed to know (that’s not know the facts about, but really know) the person of the God who made us. We squabble over points of doctrine or over the appropriate musical instruments to be used in a worship service, rather than set up our words and deeds around the creed "Jesus is Lord" and then live it as the life and death proclamation it is.

It is all too easy to get caught in the style of living our culture advertises, set up by those who seek power and immortality. We direct our energy toward accumulating more than we need, rather than distributing for others’ needs. We bow down to the god of the American Dream, rather than dedicating our life to the God of the covenant. And we live with the expectation that if we are faithful, God will make our stories turn out just the way we hope. We become bribers and bargainers, people disillusioned and cynical. How often, when something goes the way I hoped it would, I have jokingly said, "Well, I guess God loves me after all," as if the proof of God’s love is my life going just the way I always planned it. You see, I know that what keeps a lot of us going is the hope that our story will turn out with the happy ending we have in mind. The truth is, it may or it may not.

In response to God’s promise always to be their God, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego promised always to be God’s people. There were no conditions and when the trial by fire came, there was no question about loyalty or broken promises.

I wonder about our trial by fire. I wonder whether we dare to stand against the power of greedy rulers in our country, because we are committed to the God of mercy and justice. I wonder whether we refuse to bow down before the gods of wealth, prestige, and immortality, who so subtly entice our culture. I wonder whether we compromise our commitment when God disappoints us, when God doesn’t work life out the way we set it up. And I wonder whether the word risk ever enters our Christian vocabulary.

Everyday we make choices between bowing down to powerless gods or standing in the fire because we are committed to the all-powerful God. And God is faithful. God will not escape the enemies’ towering inferno, slightly soiled, nor drift dreamily
away from the powers of evil. No, the Lord our God stands in the heat of the fire
ith us, reigning with power and mercy forever and ever. Amen.

Standing the World on Its Head
Robert W. Bedingfield

Going home can be tough, even when everything is going well. Tougher when it’s not, to be sure. Once away, out there in the far country, home is never the same again.

An English novelist has made famous the line, "You can never go home," but that's not quite true. Going home is possible, but it takes some hard thought and even harder reflection.

In part, the problem is the one who has been away. Also, in part, it’s those folk who have never left. Homefolk are the routinized and the regulated. They tend to be caught up in the stuff of living, working hard and playing hard. That is for them a confidence, often confirmed by the society around them. Things like shopping, and sorting, and serving, and selling, and sleeping... a single cycle altered on occasion by birthdays or broken bones which jerk them about briefly until the routine takes over again with a sigh.

For homefolk, rare is the new thought, new idea, or new way, that ferments inside, except for that occasional sound-bite on the 6:30 news, or that last, best book that somebody thought worth reading. Homefolk tend to suffer the tragedy of intellectual incest which produces a dulled, if not misshapen, perspective on the world, on life, and on what's important. Most of what is held to be important is rarely questioned; instead, it’s often reinforced by the data fed in and the filters used, by the accomplices chosen, by the church attended, by the newspaper read, and by the political party supported.

You see, going home after having been away for a time, is to face all that in another way. Perhaps with a sigh, hitching up the soul with a very determined step, and wading in boldly... knowing that the emotional tug to the familiar has a pull as strong as a magnet on iron filings.

In our Gospel text, Jesus goes home. He has been away as far as Overisel, out there in the scrub-dotted wilderness. Now, as a result of that time away, our Lord is sure in his soul of what he has to do and who he has to be. What better place to make all that public than back home? It is, today (in New Hampshire) what is known to every salivating candidate as the political opportunity: selecting the right place, choosing the right time, a bit of street theater, a smidgen of public relations, a coating of hominess. "Local Boy Makes Good" is the headline.

So, Jesus goes home. He goes to church. He is called forward as a celebrity. He is asked to read and preach. From Isaiah 61, he reads. When he is done and the scroll is returned to the ark, he slowly scans the congregation, as the homefolk lean forward just a wee bit. Pausing for effect and slowly savoring the words, Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."
From that point on, a pinnacle point, it's all downhill. For the homefolk are taken aback when this son of theirs holds them tight in his gaze, this one who had been stroked, and shaped, and spanked right there in the midst of the years they had shared in the village. This is the kid from down the street and around the corner at the carpenter shop. This one of theirs now claims that they had blown their agreement with God, that their track record was dismal, and their selfishness an embarrassment. For those good folk of Nazareth truly believed that they were the elect, the elite, while the rest of the world needed to stand in line to the right.

So Jesus, the hometown boy, stands their world on its head by citing a text they knew by heart, but somehow had refused to deal with.

[God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, . . .

And by his scan Jesus runs a straight line from a focus on the poor, the captives, the sightless, and the burdened, to those well-turned-out pew sits on that Sabbath morn.

In a flash, the indictment grabs hold. To say blithely that "God's ways are not our ways" as the writer of Ecclesiastes does, is only to touch tangentially a truth so radical as to be scary. The ways of God are light-years from ours. So far that our best faithful response is a great big gasp and an even bigger, "Wow!"

Nazareth is the example. When Jesus claims the Isaiah mandate for change as his own, as the motto for his ministry, he lays his full commitment on whom? The poor. Those in chains. The blind and the oppressed. Now stack them all into ranks. My sense is that in our Grand Rapids society, more heart smart than most communities, that crowd of the poor and their confreres rates a sign of sympathy from us, but hardly an ounce more. For us, as for those folk in Nazareth, they are marginalized, a classy way of saying that they are so far out that they are off the board we play on. The folk who have little, verging on nothing, hardly appear on our screen. In fact, all they can depend on from us is our good will which, as a mood, is virtually inconsistent.

Good will, over time, becomes a routine thing like much else. It tends to become patronizing, effecting a downward glance, an "us and them" mind-set that wears badly in the center. Our care and concern that chug out so well at the start become as regular as having blueberry pancakes on Saturday morning and, in their regularity, compete with every other routine for time and energy.

For example, it was reported this week that here in the land we love, those of us over 65 have never lived better. We have more substance and more resources in place than ever in our history. At the same time, our children are more under siege medically, educationally, and economically than ever in our history. Children don't vote, children have no power, and the sounds they make can be filtered out with just the turn of our heads.

The heroine of a recent best-seller, a woman in her 102nd year, speaks to an interviewer about what we do to others:
How soon the terribles become routine. We’ve all got this
dangerous built-in talent for turning horrors into errands. You
hear folks wonder how the Germans could have done it. I
believe part of the answer is that they made extermination to
be a nine-to-five activity. You know, salaries and lunch
breaks. The staff came and did their job and went home, ate
supper, slept, woke up, and came back and did their job.
That’s partly how you get anything done, especially a chore
that is dreadful. Dreadful. Honey, we’ve all got to be real
careful of what we can get used to . . . .

I contend that the gospel, taken seriously, shakes us to the very core of our
being when we dare to sort out what we have gotten used to. Our Lord peers right
through us without a blink, allowing us neither to stammer nor stutter an excuse,
and says that if we dare so to identify with him that we carry his name as ours, we’d
better be ready to be citizens of the new way. For in the new way, in the new
world that’s called the kingdom, those who have trudged about waiting for the
crumbs are going to have the whole loaf, because God is going to make it so. If
that is not radical . . . .

You see, to hear the words of Jesus in your soul is to hear through a stethoscope
pressed against God’s heart. God has this queer longing that things, all things, be
right for all . . . . Apparently God has decided that since things are not right now,
his lot is going to be thrown in with those who never have a lot.

So, the best friend of those with no friends, the voice for the voiceless, the
muscle for those without power is God, by default. And the result? Well, rather
obviously because it’s going to be done God’s way, this old world is going to be set
upside down, which in truth is finally rightside up.

God’s premise is mostly primal. If no one else opts to side with those at
society’s edge, God will. If no one else will stand with the powerless, God will.
If no one else will confront our commonplace use of categories to confine people,
God will. God assumes by design a thing called “human dignity” that transcends the
boxes into which folk are shoved like leftovers.

For God, poverty, captivity, blindness, and oppression are conditions, not
curses. Those are situations, not legacies. They are happenings, not sentences. So
the task for Christians like us who are powerful, who are able, who are free, who
are right-hearted, is to step forward smartly . . . not to give power away or anything
else, but rather to share, for sharing is far more difficult.

It is not an issue of wallet or checkbook. It is not even an issue of time or
energy. It is an issue of identification . . . us with them.

Lack of power, or denial of power, is a form of social entropy . . . an insidious
thing, by which those without clout and muscle are moved from the center outward
until at last the only place allowed is at the edge.

What Jesus requires of us, who sweat to work out our salvation, is our identity
with those about us whom society would prefer to remain faceless and nameless.
Then, once we have for ourselves humanized those beyond the bounds, to attack the
cause, to change the system by opportunity, to confess our complicity with what we have done and what we haven’t, to commit our hearts and heads to setting this place we call home upside down, which in the end is probably rightside up.

Listen once more to the marching order: "To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, . . ."

That Christ who redeemed us, who gave everything for us, now bids us to lock step with him. So much for the old saw that faith makes everything smooth, straight, and simple. . . . and taste like vanilla. The call of Christ is to join him. And the promise? Only excitement, excitement of once and for all doing the right, and the good, and the true! What more would you ever want?

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

The Subtle Seduction of Silence
1 Kings 21:1-24
Barbara Pekich

In a history filled with horrors, few can compare to the Holocaust. During the reign of Hitler, six million Jews were exterminated, one-third of the world Jewish population, parents and children alike. There were no "innocents" to these purveyors of anti-Semitism.

While growing up, I had a large pictorial essay book of World War II. One picture was so horrible that each time I picked up the book I debated with myself whether or not I would skip "that picture." It held a strange attraction. Sometimes I felt I needed to look at it, other times to avoid it at all costs. It portrayed a mountain of naked, human bodies, some large, some small, some with open eyes, others with expressions of terror frozen on their faces, all in different stages of decay. It is forever etched in my memory. Once, after gazing on this horror, I asked my mother why no one did anything to stop the deaths. Her first response was, "We didn’t know." Then when she thought some more, she hedged, "Or at least, we didn’t believe it was true. No one could believe that there were humans evil enough to commit such atrocities against other human beings--no one wanted to believe it."

But knowledge of the death camps reached the West as early as July, 1942, when the New York Times reported that one million Jews had been exterminated by those bent on destroying Jewish life. Yet little was done over the next two years to end the terror. The world remained silent, preferring to believe that such outrages simply could not exist or that somehow these people didn’t matter. Looking back at that horrible evil, are we absolved of guilt by saying: "We just couldn’t believe it! We just didn’t know it was true!"?

King Ahab of Israel wanted the vineyard next to his palace for a vegetable garden (1 Kings 21:1-24). The vineyard, however, belonged to a peasant named Naboth. Ahab offered him another vineyard or money, whichever Naboth preferred, but the peasant’s reply was, "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." Naboth meant this literally. The sale of the paternal inheritance was
forbidden by Mosaic law. Naboth was bound by God’s command, and Ahab knew it. He did not argue but returned home, pouting, refusing to eat, and temporarily, at least, turning his back on life.

What Ahab recognized as a boundary in Mosaic faith, his wife Jezebel ignored. She taunted him, "Do you now govern Israel? . . . I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite" (v. 7). Subsequently, she arranged for Naboth to be falsely accused of cursing God and king, taken outside the city, and stoned. Jezebel informed Ahab of Naboth’s death and sent him to take possession of the vineyard. There Ahab met Elijah, sent by God to confront the wicked deed. The prophet accused him of selling himself "to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord" (v. 20).

In this story, Ahab’s wife appears to be the greater villain. She ignores the law and plans the murder of Naboth to satisfy her husband’s whim. But Ahab’s silence makes him as culpable as Jezebel. When she promised to secure the vineyard, did Ahab have any doubt that Naboth would forfeit his life? And when she informed him of the success of her plan, did he ever question how she was able to achieve it? Ahab is silent, preferring not to know her methods.

Throughout the chronicles of Ahab’s rule, his sins can best be described as those of omission rather than commission. While Jezebel actively pursued an evil course, Ahab, more often than not, simply neglected to do what he knew was right, or failed to confront his wife with her wickedness. He served his wife’s god and erected an altar to it. He permitted her to murder the prophets of the Lord. He allowed her to pursue Elijah with murderous intent. And finally, Ahab showed himself unprincipled and weak, when he allowed a cruel and faithless foe (Ben-hadad) to go unpunished in open opposition to God who had delivered him into his hand.

It is tempting for us to look at Ahab and absolve him of responsibility. We see him as weak rather than malevolent. After all, Jezebel was much more "active" in pursuing evil. She exploited Ahab’s weakness to support the cause of ungodliness. God, however, did not absolve him, for "Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him . . . . Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:30, 33). Ahab was a king in the line of rulers chosen by God, a bearer of the standard, so to speak: God’s expectations were high. It was Ahab’s silence in the face of great evil and his refusal to act that brought God’s judgment upon him.

It seems to me that we in the church, and particularly the clergy, have been guilty of Ahab’s sin. After years, even centuries of silence, an increasing number of voices have accused members of our profession of misusing their positions of trust and power for sexual gratification. Women and men long silent have found their voices. We are no longer surprised to pick up the newspaper and read about charges brought against a pastor for sexually abusing a teenage boy, or for raping a young woman, or for having numerous relationships with women parishioners.

Many books and articles have appeared on the subject, defining the abuse, detailing case histories of clergy misconduct, and identifying the boundaries. According to Marie M. Fortune, the ethical violations resulting from pastoral
misconduct are "exploitation of vulnerability, misuse of authority, absence of authentic consent, and creation of dual relationships" (Is Nothing Sacred?, 37). Healthy relationships, she argues, must involve mutuality, choice, full knowledge, equal power, and an absence of coercion or force. In his book Sex in the Forbidden Zone, Peter Rutter, a psychiatrist, deals with those times when lawyers, doctors, clergy, and psychiatrists abuse their positions of power and trust by engaging in sexual relationships with female clients. Rutter claims:

Most women who have had exploitative sexual relationships experience a deep wound to their most inner, sacred sense of self. This psychological injury--often felt as the death of hope itself--remains the greatest casualty of sex in the forbidden zone (51).

Although volumes have been written on this subject of late, clergy sexual abuse is not new. In 1812, no less a figure than Henry Ward Beecher, premier preacher, and pastor of Brooklyn's Plymouth Congregational Church for more than twenty-five years, was accused of having a sexual liaison with Elizabeth Tilton. As the story unfolded, it was obvious that Mrs. Tilton was not alone. The scandal rocked nineteenth-century religious America.

What is new is that, until recently, few victims have dared to speak. For years, many have lived with the guilt, shame, and fear of what happened to them. Finally, it has come spilling out. The Psalmist has captured their pathos:

I was silent and still;
I held my peace to no avail;
my distress grew worse,
my heart became hot within me.
While I mused, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue (Ps. 39:2-3).

Everywhere, mute tongues have been loosed. But the price is very dear. Recent cases have divided church members, split staffs, torn families, ripped at marriages, triggered alcoholism, and resulted in further exploitation of the victims. Because it is right and because the price is so high, we have an obligation, as clergy and as the church, to respond and act when allegations are made. Our actions as individuals and institutions are significant to God. The story of Ahab has taught us that much. God notices and cares how we respond, and God's expectations are high.

Too often, I fear, God is deeply disappointed. Too often the response of the church and those of us who claim to lead it is silence. Is it because we cannot believe ministers are capable of such things? Is it because we just do not want to believe it? Do we look at the incidence of clergy sexual abuse and dismiss it with a weary nod and an indulgent smile? After all, most cases involve two "consenting" adults. Do we put our friendships with the perpetrators before the needs of the victims? Are we simply unwilling to risk our own security? Is faithful speech too risky? Does it require too much?
What to us seems wearying, often inconsequential, and unbelievable creates a silence within us. To the prophets of old these incidents would be outrageous. Our prophetic tradition calls for a far more meaningful response than silence. In *The Prophets*, Abraham Heschel wrote:

> We and the prophet have no language in common. To us the moral state of society, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim; to the prophet it is dreadful. So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency radiates day and night; yet to the prophet satiety of the conscience is prudery and flight from responsibility. Our standards are modest; our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent; yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent (I, 9).


The price of silence is even greater than the price of speech. I speak from personal experience. For two years I had reason to believe that a beloved colleague and friend had indulged in numerous liaisons with women in his parish. Though many confided to me their suspicions and some, their firsthand knowledge, I refused to believe it. I didn’t want to think that someone I cared for deeply would do that. I was afraid for myself, afraid for the church, and I didn’t know to whom I should turn. But most of all, it was just too difficult to confront someone I loved very much for fear of losing his love and friendship. Keeping silent was never what I intended to do; it was just a very subtle seduction—the recognition of evil and the failure to do anything about it.

Soon, I felt like a hypocrite. I felt unfaithful when I was with people who knew I ignored their stories or, worse yet, failed to believe them. The prophetic voice was silent, the God within a distant memory. Walter Brueggemann writes of the need for the "poet" to speak in all areas requiring prophetic witness.

Where our lives are reduced to silence, either in fear or indifference, communion likely does not happen. . . . We have been intimidated to speak only what is approved, what is expected, what is safe. Because of seduction and intimidation, we say much less than we know, much less than we hurt or hope, much less than we crave to say (*Finally Comes the Poet*, 44).

Silence had seduced me.

My story is that of countless others in the church. For years we have overlooked, covered up, and buried the dysfunctions and addictions of ministers, priests, bishops, and others. We have dealt with the malady by hiding it. Out of a misguided attempt to protect our reputation as a profession, and a need to keep the
secret within individual church "families," we have chosen to deny that it's happening, and when faced with irrefutable evidence, to keep silent.

Silence hurts everyone, but silence is most destructive to the victims. When they risk coming forward and are met by our silence, they read it as indifference, or worse, disbelief. Several times I have been confronted with what was interpreted as indifference. One woman asked why I didn't act sooner. "Was it because the women he hit on was all black? They wasn't as important as white women?" An older, African-American woman assumed I was indifferent. She reminded me of a story she had once told me of her grandmother's escape from slavery, pregnant and afraid. The father of her child was her master, and she feared the wrath of her mistress when she discovered his unfaithfulness with a slave girl. "So you see," she said sadly, "white men have always used black women." In her eyes, my silence spoke of consent to centuries of racism and sexism.

Another woman whose story of sexual abuse at the hands of her grandfather was well known to me said, "Do you know what hurt me the most? I told my mother and she didn't believe me for years. Not until my sister told too. Do you know what it's like to tell and not be believed? I told you, and your silence said you didn't believe me. I lived my nightmare all over again." Another woman confronted me, "You hurt me so much because I knew you would do something if I told you. When you didn't, I knew you didn't believe me."

God does not look at our silence indulgently. Ahab's silent acquiescence was a greater sin in the sight of God than those of all his predecessors. Our silence is evil. God requires a response that is faithful to our call and that voices the outrage of the prophet.