

A Broken Hallelujah
Luke 4: 14-30
February 14, 2010

My best friend in high school, Michael Ridge, majored in philosophy at Wake Forest, got his Ph.D. from Carolina, and is now teaching philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. From my freshman year in high school Ridge and I could talk a blue streak. Therefore by the time I graduated from high school I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I hated philosophy. I hated the whole silly hypothetical “if God’s an all-powerful God can [he] make a rock so heavy that he can’t lift it?” It makes me crazy. Who cares about that rock? Don’t you think that if God is real, then God has better things to do with God’s time than to lift or not to lift a rock? If you want to talk about God’s omnipotence, then talk about that. Skip the whole rock scenario. Maybe you’re familiar with the classic “if a tree falls in the woods and no one’s around to hear it, does it make a sound?” I just think that’s so stupid and so uninteresting. Sue me for being anti-intellectual, but I don’t give one fig about the relativity of sound. Then there’s the whole issue of the solipsism. That’s the idea that the only reality is the reality that we are currently perceiving. So this moment, this here and now, is the only real moment. When I go home to that moment then the only reality is the reality of my blue couch and my kitty cats and you all cease to exist. Although a de facto practice of solipsism actually explains much of today’s political and social problems, I just think that it is a deplorable way to interact in the world. In college when people wanted to have deep, philosophical conversations late at night, I just went to bed. I’d stay awake for the funny stuff and the life stuff and the imagine a better world stuff, but the crazy philosophical propositional stuff, I’d rather sleep.

Fast forward a billion years to La Palapa in historic Ellicott City. On a Friday night before Christmas Nora and I were eating and going over all of the last minute details for the Memorial Service. That is when the freakishly loud mariachi band wasn’t blasting in our ears. In one of the brief moment of quietude I told her that Jim Getz was in charge of the coffee and he said that one coffee cooler wasn’t enough for the service. Nora likes coffee. She also is quite pragmatic. She added up how much coffee one of the coffee coolers would hold and she agreed with Jim. We needed the other coffee cooler. The idea was that I was going to give the coffee making supplies, including the cooler, to Jim the next Sunday. Of course it snowed and that didn’t happen, but that was the plan. So Nora thought that we needed to go to Adam’s that night to get the second coffee cooler. Nora and Adam had already bonded over their Wisconsin roots in a conversation earlier in the day so she called him, got directions, and off we went. We got there and Adam fetched the coffee cooler, but I was pretty tired so I wanted to jet. Nora and Adam were freakishly chatty so I just stood there like a knot on a log holding the coffee cooler. At some point I made some effort to be social so I asked Adam what he was doing with his class the next morning. Adam entered Johns Hopkins as a graduate student with the intention of getting his Ph.D. in philosophy. Although he took another path he still likes to teach whenever he has the chance. Last semester he was teaching in Rockville or somewhere crazy like that on Saturday mornings. My little polite stab at being social was a bad mistake. It set him off. He had to tell us about the exam he had given his students in minute detail. Nora was being perky and polite so he felt encouraged. I still haven’t forgiven her. Anyway Adam described to us scenario #1: You’re an EMT worker and

there has been an accident. Six people are involved. One is severely wounded. The other five are seriously wounded. You're faced with limited time as well as limited resources. You have to choose between saving the five who are seriously wounded and letting the severely wounded individual die. Or, you can spend your precious time and resources saving the severely wounded individual but let the five seriously wounded patients die. It's a classic triage situation. What would you do? Who would you save? Most people would choose to save the five and allow the severely wounded individual to die.

Scenario #2: You're in a hospital. You have six patients. Five patients need transplants or they will die. The sixth patient, who came in for something elective like a tonsillectomy, is perfectly healthy and is a perfect match for all five individuals. Do you kill the perfectly healthy individual in order to save the five patients who need transplants? Or, do you let the healthy individual leave the hospital only to have the five patients needing transplants to die. Of course in this scenario most people decry the killing of a perfectly healthy individual. The whole philosophical conundrum is to reconcile the ethic that you use in the first scenario with the ethic that you use in the second.

I was ready to take my coffee cooler and go home, but Nora was still annoyingly pleasant and perky. She said "Oh! I was a medic in the army and I used to have to make these kinds of decisions all the time." My brain was thinking "don't encourage him." Adam asked me what I thought. I tried to decline. I mumbled something about being a theologian and not agreeing with the givens. Philosophers hate that. They hate when you want to deviate from the givens so he didn't like that. I tried to recall that wonderful line from *West Wing* where they're coached vice-presidential candidate Leo McGerry about how to handle the press. They kept saying "Don't accept the premise of the question." I kept trying to say that I didn't accept the premise of the question, but that line just didn't come to my tired mind so I muttered the bottom line of what I thought. I said very simply, "You have to save them all." Of course the resistance was immediate and fierce. No no no. You can't do that in these spiffy little philosophical conversations. You have to think within the perimeters of the situation and make a choice. But you know, those weren't acceptable choices to me so I said "well, that's my answer." Adam then emphatically declared that my answer was not philosophically interesting.

In today's scripture Jesus' hometown crowd gets so angry at him that they want to kill him. The odd thing is, just moments before they wanted to kill him, these same people spoke well of him. That's a quote from verse twenty-two, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." When the hometown boy made them proud, they affirmed him. But then Jesus, who also often refused to accept the premise of the conversations surrounding him, Jesus kept talking. Jesus began to teach them that his fulfillment of the Isaiah passage about bringing liberation might not appeal to them. Jesus reminded them that in a time of drought Elijah attended to the widow at Zarephath in Sidon. To those of us unfamiliar with the events in Elijah's life and with the geography of Palestine and surrounding areas, this sounds relatively innocuous. What's the big deal? Elijah's blessing only sustained one widow. The rub is- this widow was a foreigner. She wasn't a homegrown Jew yet God showed favor upon her. Then, lest they miss the point, Jesus added another event in Elisha's story. He talked about how Israel had many lepers, but how Elisha choose to cleanse Naaman, a foreigner, from this heinous disease. Not the homegrown lepers, but a foreigner. A pagan who worshipped other gods.

Such talk incensed the crowd. The crowd was fickle. Whereas they initially praised the neighborhood kid who grew up into a fine young man, they reversed themselves. When Jesus said that God's special favor might not apply to them, when Jesus said that the outpouring of God's favor might go to people other than them, they flew into a mob rage and tried to hurl him off a cliff. Not so warm and fuzzy.

I had a strange experience the other week. Tony, a client at Health Care for the Homeless, asked me to come get him because he needed a few items. I met him and James at HCH Client Advocacy Meeting where they're training for Lobby Day in Annapolis next month. Then we went to lunch. Tony was outraged that the coffee shop where we ate didn't have french dressing or ranch dressing. He ordered Caesar and he hated it. I offered to switch my sandwich for his salad, but he declined. In order to make his salad digestible he poured packets and packets of sugar on his salad. So that was interesting. Then we went to Wal-Mart to get a few things. The cardboard which he used to fortify his tent wouldn't stay duct taped to the nylon of the tent and he was trying to find ways to seal it up before that weekend's storm. We ended up buying the duct tape made by the people who make Gorilla glue and it worked like a charm. So Tony invited us back to his home behind Wal-Mart and he invited us into his tent, his home. He showed James and me every inch of it as if it was a regular house with rooms. "There's my drawers. This is my crib mattress. I put my head and my torso on that. This is how I hold up my feet. It stays dry, but people bring in leaves where you're standing and I have to clean that out." I've seen inside Kenny's tent. There's not much in there except a sleeping bag. Tony's tent is different. It's with other tents. These tents form a little cul de sac. These folks support each other. Rick, the old guy, keeps giving Tony tips about how to insulate his tent with cardboard so it will be warmer. When Craig and I went out the other Thursday to deliver the tarps, Tony had used the gorilla tape to finish sealing off his tent. It's his cozy little home. His permanent home.

So many times when it comes to homelessness in America, we hear people sadly say "I really want to help, but I don't want them in my backyard." NIMBY. Not in my backyard. Yet, already with this Haiti disaster, I've heard folks say "Why don't we take care of our own first? We can't be giving all of this money to a foreign country when we still have homeless people in America?"

This may not be philosophically interesting, but I say-- save them all. Save them all. All are precious in God's sight. God looks down on earth from heaven and there are no lines of delineation between countries. When Jesus' neighbors got angry, they got angry over the issue of God's activity with the outsider, the stranger, the foreigner, the different person, the person who they perceived to be less deserving. They became livid when they felt that their special status in the eyes of God was threatened. They believed that if God poured out God's best self to these other people, then there wouldn't be enough blessing, enough provision for themselves. So they closed their minds and hardened their hearts and clenched their hands and made fists.

See that's the thing. Whether you're a person who is more inclined to say "not in my backyard" or if you're a person who is inclined to say "take care of Americans first and everyone else second," you're missing the point of the text. You're missing the point of the exercise. You're missing the allocation of God's love. In God's economy there's provision for all. There's food for all. There's health care for all. There's love for all. There's shelter for all. There is no otherness. There's no need to be afraid of scarcity because God breaks that false dichotomy of us and them. It's only us and more of us.

After all is there really a difference between people living in tents in Haiti and people living in tents in East Baltimore? There are people living in tents. Whether it's here or there, it's immaterial to God's love. That's all we need to know. Save them all.

Today my intention is unequivocally to repudiate the idea that there's a surplus population. Or that there's somehow a morality in placing some great human needs in front of equally great human needs. That's a philosophical exercise and it has no place in the moral universe. What is made essential by necessity in a triage situation must be seen as fundamentally exceptional. The world isn't triage. We have the resources to save many, many, many people from depravity and many forms of violence and from squalor and from the many, many preventable diseases. And we should be smarter and we should be more dedicated and we should be so in love with God and with God's ordering of the universe which prioritizes the poor and the lowly that our hearts insist that we save them all.

Jeff Buckley's song wrote a song called, *Hallelujah*. If you can recall from Palm Sundays in the past, the word "hallelujah" means "save me." To say "hallelujah" means that you're crying out for God to save you. Here's the third verse of that song, the words of a skeptic have never sounded quite so faithful:

Well maybe there's a God above
But all I've ever learned from love
Was how to shoot somebody who'd out drew ya
And it's not a cry that you hear at night
It's not somebody who'se seen in light
It's cold and it's a broken Hallelujah

Elisha went to the widow. Elisha went to Naaman. Jesus went to Capernaum in response to that broken Hallelujah. You can be sure that wherever that broken Hallelujah is, there Christ is too. Beckoning us to all of these different places. Save them all. And should you find yourself alone in a tent and there's a faint chord of a broken Hallelujah, rest assured that Jesus is present too. Amen.