

Filled with Rage

4th Epiphany, 1/30/2022

One of my favorite songs – again, signs of a misspent youth – is a lyric written by Don Schlitz, but sung most famously by Kenny Rogers, called “The Gambler.” I’m not alone in this judgment; it’s one of the most famous songs in the Anglophone world, and has been for decades, although few of us can remember all the words in order when we want to. I often refer in my teaching to one particular line from that song, “Every hand’s a winner, and every hand’s a loser,” in reference to source material. Anything you find can be good source, I explain to my budding researchers and writers, if you know how to use it, much as any hand can be played to win in poker, if you know how to play the game. You play not your cards but your opponent, of course, which I find easier to do when I accept the wisdom of the insight that forms the emotional climax of the song, that “the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.”

But it is a line from the refrain that comes to mind as I contemplate the gospel passage for this week: “You got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em, know when to walk away, and know when to run.” “What would you give to have written that line?” I’ve asked myself time and again. The answer is at least one of the aces up my sleeve, or that never-suspected pair of nines – clergy robes aren’t made like this just for show, you know – because it’s true. “Read the room” as they say nowadays, know where the exits are, and never sit with your back to a door. Also, take a word from one of the best preachers to ever play the game: “Start low, build slow, aim high, strike higher, and then sit down.” That is, know when to fold ‘em. Don’t be caught talking when you should be listening, or follow up saying all the right things with saying one thing that couldn’t be more wrong.

There's no other way for me to make sense of this gospel passage than to say that, by its own witness, Jesus appears not to have known that. He had the people – his own people, folks he'd grown up around and whose stories he'd known since he was a boy and even contributed to – he had the people in the palm of his hand. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He'd reminded them who they were and whose, what they stood for, what their Lord wanted to do about it, and what they wanted to do about it, too. “All spoke well of him,” Luke says, “and were amazed” at what he said – the grace of it, and the power. So they did what people tend to do when someone surprises them with wit and elegance and heretofore unappreciated insight and panache: they asked themselves, Who is this guy? “Is this not Joseph's son?” they rhetorically, and not unreasonably, ask. But when they do, Jesus, also rhetorically but quite unreasonably, begins to insult them and put words in their mouths. He accuses them of saying things they did not say and meaning things they did not mean. “Oh, fine. Now you'll want me to prove it by curing lepers and healing the blind, wining up your water for you, handing out signs of power like they were party favors. No way, my dudes. No frickin' way.”

Then, having just brought them one of the scriptures that most build them up, he throws at them two scriptures that, used this way, tear them down. “I will be like Elijah and Elisha, now, not Ezra and Nehemiah. I won't cure anyone here of anything, just to remind you that sometimes the Lord sends good things to other people and not to you. The people down the road got the good stuff. You lot need to be happy about that even if you get none.”

I repeat – Jesus says all these things when all that the people of Nazareth have done is listen to him, and all they've asked is, “Hey, isn't that Joseph's boy?” while being amazed at what he's just said to them. If anyone's at fault here, it sure as sugar isn't them – which, of course, leaves only one person left who to be getting it wrong.

Yep: Jesus. Read the words. Set the scene in your mind. Find where any of them says anything that would offend or even annoy a reasonable person. Yet Jesus goes out of his way in this passage to turn a roomful of friends into a mob of enemies, and I can't for the life of me figure out why he did that. Mary's firstborn son, that is, did not know when to fold 'em, and did not know how to play his hand for a winner *even though he'd already won with it*. Now all that he had left to do was not walk away, but run.

Why would Jesus do this?

It's important before we go any further to make it clear that Jesus really has done this, in the gospel as it's come down to us. He's picked a fight with people who've done him no wrong, and has insulted them without provocation. If he will be without honor in his own hometown, the fault in that will not lie with his hometown. As we've been learning in Bible study this month, the people of that hometown may well have had good reason to have concerns about Joseph's boy. Like it or not, the only stories that come down to us about what Jesus was like as a boy was that he was a brat, quite the little so-and-so, until he learned to use the power of God within him in a way that was both wise and mature. That is, being fully human like the rest of us, Jesus, like the rest of us, had to grow up. He had to learn how to make good judgments and good decisions, and that his choices had consequences. He had to learn that he had to choose, and then actually had to choose, what to do with the power that was given to him. Would he use it to wound or to heal? To build up or tear down? To show everybody how smart he was, or to listen to them and thereby show them how wise he was? Would he be selfish or selfless? Miserly or charitable? Honest or full of lies? Everyone has to face these choices, and the first time you face one, honestly have the power to make things go either way, what you do next will show you who you really are.

So there's that. There's also the fact that he's been having a wonderful tour around Galilee, healing and preaching, calling disciples, and getting on well with people who wouldn't have known him from Adam the first time he got up and spoke to them. Coming home isn't much fun when you're having a good time on the road. Also, what happened before this inaugural ministry tour was that Jesus spent about six weeks being traumatized in the desert by none other than the devil himself. God had let Satan beat him up, as it were, tempt him to do it all wrong in order to get it all right for himself, use the power of God within him to make things right for him – make a world made free with him at the center. It would've worked, and he knew it. He could've done for all the people of the world what we learned last week the great king of Persia had done for the Jews: set them free and on stable political footing, at least for a while. Jesus could've remade the world in his image, but he couldn't have made it last after he was gone. The trauma of realizing that, which is what we call the Temptation, may well have broken something in him.

So we come back to Jesus standing there, having read from the scroll of Isaiah and having told the people he read it to that, "Today the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," having them in the palm of his hand, and then throwing it away, treating them like a Ming vase that he hurled to the ground and smashed to smithereens. We are told that his doing this filled them with rage – rage enough to want to hurl him off a cliff that Nazareth didn't actually have. (Come on; even Gospel writers can't be expected to get everything right.) That they were this easy to anger may be part of what led Jesus to anger them, however – to show himself and them that the dynamic he'd just created between them was false, made promises no leader or people could fulfill, as age after age has proved – that it was in fact a form of the third temptation Satan had tortured him with: to assume power over all the earth in order to set it free – that is, to do the right thing, but for the wrong reason. It would be to give humanity

its Golden Age, but for a limited time only, and in doing so deny them the chance to figure out how to give it to themselves.

I don't think that Jesus got up to read in the synagogue that morning intending to pick a fight and get himself thrown out of his hometown on rail. I think that something in the people's aching, attentive response to him, and his sense that he could inspire them to do anything, that they'd follow him to the gates of Jerusalem and then on to the gates of Hell, if he asked them, scared him. It provoked a post-trauma reaction in him, recalling something that the devil had used in the desert: the roaring adulation of the crowds he'd have set free, had he used the power of God within him to take power over humanity. He wanted to; with all his heart he wanted to. Does he not say, much later on, when he looks on that blood-soaked, occupied city on a hill, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I have longed to gather you to me as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings"? But for that very reason, he decided not to – forced himself to choose not to, to follow the stonier, more liberating path, the one that led to the betrayal and agony, a trial before some of the worst rulers who ever lived, to the agony and bloody sweat, the cross, the tomb, and the resurrection.

To get there, to get out of his hometown without a band of adoring fan(atic)s trailing behind him, Jesus did what traumatized persons often do: pick a fight with people who've done nothing wrong, break relationships with them, burn bridges, and flee screaming into the night in order not to let themselves get hurt anymore or to hurt those whom they now push so fervidly away. It's not the best way to behave – indeed, it's one of the worst and most pitiable – but it was all he could think to do at the time, flailing into comparisons to Elijah and Elisha as he did so.

It worked. Jesus never went back home again after this. If anyone from there had anything to do with him again, we have no record of it. If he ever preached a political messianism *ala* 3rd Isaiah again, we have no record of it. He healed, forgave sins, showed his power here and there, and became the man from everywhere and

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nowhere trying to get people to understand that the kingdom of God was within them, that it was up to them to call it forth and let it out, and that once he'd shown them how – had lived, died, and lived again to show them how – he was outta here, and it would now be up to them, to us, to make it happen in every generation, until the ending of the age.

Know when to fold 'em, indeed. *Amen.*