

## “When Healthcare Gets Sick: Epaphroditus, the *Parabalani* and Broken Hallelujahs”

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### Introduction

“Rejoice in the Lord always; and again, I say ‘rejoice!’” Some of us hearing those words also hear music—a simple melody from Sabbath School classes and Vacation Bible School programs. Whether or not we knew that the words came from Paul’s letter to the Philippians (4:2), a letter written from prison, we enthusiastically sang the words often in a round (perpetual canon). But Paul did not sing that song while in prison.<sup>1</sup> He sang a different one which, although we do not have the melody, we do have its Christ-centered lyrics:

*though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross (2:6-8).*

Can you imagine the melody that might have accompanied the words of this hymn? How many times did Paul sing this song, including its second stanza (2:9-11), while in prison? As he shaped his letter to the Philippians around the hymn, was Paul perhaps also writing to himself? The example of Christ obedient unto death certainly gave Paul the strength he needed while waiting to see if he, too, would be executed by the Roman Empire. And there was yet another more recent example. Philippian Christian Epaphroditus (2:25-30; 4:18) seems to have also inspired Paul since in serving him in prison, Epaphroditus had also “risked his life” (παραβολευσάμενος τῆ ψυχῆ).<sup>2</sup>

After briefly exploring the witness of this early Christian, this paper will consider the contributions Christians made as they ministered to the sick and dying in cities of the Roman Empire. Christians developed a reputation of “risking their lives” in caring for the most vulnerable, especially during times of plague. However, by the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian organization known for its risk-taking on behalf of their city’s sick, called *parabalani*, are credited with horrendous terrorist acts in Alexandria, Egypt, including the brutal murder of Hypatia, a philosopher-scientist greatly respected for her wisdom and pedagogy. This reputation of the *parabalani* as terrorist assassins exposes the often corrupt “relation between power and philanthropy.”<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>The composer is listed as Anonymous. Dale Grotenhuis created keyboard accompaniment in 1985.

<sup>2</sup> *Paraboleuomai* is an aorist-middle-participle made up of the words *παρα* and *βαλλω* (“to throw aside”). It is often associated with gambling, as one “casts aside” the dice, risking one’s future. Christians during plagues voluntarily took on the role of those who “risked their lives” in caring for the dead and dying. By the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, the *parabalani* would take on a different meaning altogether.

<sup>3</sup> Glen W. Bowersock, “*Parabalani*: A Terrorist Charity in Late Antiquity,” in *Anabases* [Online], 12 (2010). URL <http://journals.openedition.org/anabases/1061>.

paper concludes by observing how brokenness characterizes all human systems, including philanthropic ones. How might the exposure and embrace of such brokenness provide new possibilities for wholeness and healing?

## I. Epaphroditus and Other Early Christians who “risked their lives”

In Paul’s relatively short letter to the Christians in Philippi, the amount of space discussing Epaphroditus is significant (2:25-30; 4:18). What had this man done that so forcibly struck Paul as an example of imitating Christ’s humility?<sup>4</sup> What did it mean when Paul said that Epaphroditus was a “minister to my need” (2:25) in the context of a first century Roman prison?

Historian Edward M. Peters writes that prisons in Paul’s world were often underground (or interior, windowless rooms within a building), dark, filthy places of abuse and neglect, and often overcrowded and therefore vulnerable to sickness and disease. While awaiting trials or trial verdicts, prisoners were typically chained with little ability to move or care for themselves. The incarcerated often died because of these conditions. Sometimes prisons were also used as the place of execution. Prisoners experienced the extremes of heat and cold, as well as constant darkness, the sounds of torture and perhaps even death. The physical needs of prisoners (along with a “fee” to the guards for access) had to be met by friends or relatives, or not at all.<sup>5</sup> For all these reasons, to regularly visit a prisoner was to risk one’s life.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, Epaphroditus did just that, bringing items from the Philippian house churches to meet Paul’s physical needs in prison. One imagines food and clothing, perhaps a blanket or two. While with him, did Epaphroditus have to nurse Paul through a fever or some other illness? Did he provide care for a sick prisoner chained near Paul? Did Epaphroditus, taking the form of a slave, clean Paul who, in chains, could not fully bathe himself? After an episode of diarrhea? Imagine how such an experience would have been humbling for both men as Epaphroditus ministered to Paul’s needs (2:25), whatever the embarrassing details.<sup>7</sup> Though

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<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Gorman (*Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 419-422, shows literary and theological echoes between the hymn (2:6-11) and the rest of the letter. He considers Epaphroditus’ near-death experience to echo not only Paul’s current experience (1:20-21), but also that of Christ’s (2:8; 3:10).

<sup>5</sup> Edward M. Peters, “Prison Before the Prison: The Ancient and Medieval Worlds,” in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, edited by Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (New York: Oxford, 1998), 13-21. Morna Hooker, “The Letter to the Philippians,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume XI (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 520, states: “As a prisoner, Paul would have been dependent on friends and relatives for the necessities of life, including food.”

<sup>6</sup> This historical context gives a new level of meaning to the places in the New Testament that call for such ministry to those in prison (Matthew 25:36; Hebrews 10:34; 13:3). Charles B. Cousar, *Philippians and Philemon: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 66, notes that the participle παραβολευσάμενος “[makes] it clear that Epaphroditus was no coward, but a courageous person, willing to take enormous risks, to aid a friend in need.”

<sup>7</sup> If Paul wrote this letter under house arrest in Rome, the circumstances would be quite different from those just described. And there is much dispute as to the location of Paul at the time he wrote Philippians. However, the mention of Paul’s “chains” multiple times (1:7, 13, 14, 17) suggests a prison situation more like that described by Peters. Also, recall the experience Paul had while imprisoned in Philippi. According to Acts, he was placed in a windowless room, was tortured, and endured restricted movement (Acts 16:23-24). Wherever he was currently imprisoned, both Paul and the Christians in Philippi knew about such prisons and the needs of those imprisoned in them. We should also note that the Philippian believers had a reputation for taking care of Paul in a variety of situations (4:16; 2 Corinthians 11:9). If in this letter, Paul is wanting to contrast the positive role models of Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30) with the negative examples of the “evil workers” at Philippi (3:2), an interesting comparison might be the work Epaphroditus had

details are not specified, Epaphroditus' care giving for Paul made him sick; so sick he almost died (2:27). Paul writes of Epaphroditus' care as an example of having the "mind that is in Christ Jesus" (2:5), that is, humbling one's self to the point of death (2:8).<sup>8</sup>

The example of Epaphroditus helps inform a better understanding of the healing ministry of early Christians. In a culture where compassion toward the vulnerable was considered a character flaw, Christians took care of prisoners, the poor and the homeless. The destitute on city streets were welcomed into fellowship creating a new kind of kinship that included a desperately needed safety net for the homeless and the sick. It is more accurate to think of Christians taking the role of care givers of the bodies of their city's vulnerable than as miracle workers curing disease.<sup>9</sup>

In their care giving, Christians redefined "benefaction" in urban contexts. While the Greek and Roman elite of a city showed generosity in contributing to public works and services, the key to their generosity was expected reciprocity—their own increased honor and social status.<sup>10</sup> For Christians, however, generosity occurred at the individual level extended without the expected reciprocity.<sup>11</sup> Their convictions concerning the intrinsic value of human life (each person in the *imago Dei*) and the needs of hungry and hurting bodies, led to acts of charity. Widows and orphans "belonged" once again, and received the sustenance they needed. House churches organized deacons and widows to minister to the hurting in their communities. Christians cared for the physical needs of poor people, when sick and dying. This healing ministry addressed the crucial and very practical needs of people. Historian Gary Ferngren documents clearly that "owing to a combination of inner

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done caring for Paul's flesh, in contrast to those who "mutilate the flesh" (3:2). Imitating Christ, Epaphroditus took the form of a slave when he cared for Paul.

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>9</sup> John J. Pilch's work, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), calls for a "hermeneutics of healing" that locates Jesus' ministry and that of early Christianity within the contexts of first century Mediterranean cultures, rather than impose Western biomedical paradigms on the New Testament world. This meant that Christians were following the example of Jesus when they cared for and therefore "healed" the sick, rather than only when a "cure" had taken place.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), provocatively argues that elites who became Christians were committed to more traditional public works projects. Others argue that while there may have been occasional examples of elite Christians doing so (for example, the wealthy Corinthian Christian Erastus mentioned in Romans 16:23), it seems unlikely that the benefaction apparatus could be supported by those who became followers of Jesus. Wayne Meeks and Bruce Longenecker argue for the proportionally larger population of converts coming from mid-status levels of urban society. See Wayne A. Meeks, "The Social Level of Pauline Christians," in *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 51-73; Bruce W. Longenecker, "Socio-Economic Profiling of the First Urban Christians," in *After the First Urban Christians: the Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later*, edited by Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell (New York: T & T Clark International, 2009), 36-59. Paul asking the Philippians to receive Epaphroditus back with honor (2:29) might be Paul's way of contrasting the patronage system of honoring wealthy benefactors with the actions of Epaphroditus, with the latter truly deserving the honor of Christians in Philippi. Perhaps Paul is even challenging the Roman system of citizenship by calling the church community to live "as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27-30; 3:20), rather than to envy citizenship in their Roman colony of Philippi. While Paul will end his letter with values many local elites would find attractive (4:8-9), the Christ-centered letter had reshaped the content of such values. Bruce W. Longenecker, *In Stone and Story: Early Christianity in the Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 130, states: "Avoiding unhealthy competition and enacting self-giving concern for each member, those communities of character were to fully harness the diverse resources of all their members, as they leaned into new forms of relationality within the new creation." See also the caution by Jesus in Luke's gospel: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves" (Luke 22:25-26).

<sup>11</sup> Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 86-112, contrasts Greco-Roman and Christian philanthropy.

motivation, self-discipline, and effective leadership, the local congregation created in the first two centuries of its existence an organization, unique in the classical world, that effectively and systematically cared for its sick.”<sup>12</sup>

Since from the first, the primary location of such ministry was the local house church, its efficient organization and effective management would fall on the matron of the house and those assisting her in the home. New Testament professor Lynn Cohick shows how women “with means influenced their surroundings.”<sup>13</sup> It is possible that the names mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Philippians—Euodia, Syntyche and Clement (4:2-3), Paul’s “co-workers” (4:3)—might be those leading out in the care giving ministries of the house churches in Philippi. Furthermore, this is one of the few places (outside the pastoral letters) where Paul mentions “overseers” (1:1). Might these overseers have had both care giving ministry and liturgical responsibilities?<sup>14</sup>

New Testament scholar Kathleen Corley argues that women played a prominent role in funerary rituals in Ancient Mediterranean cultures.<sup>15</sup> Given this role, she observes, it would not have been countercultural for Christian women to care for the bodies of their deceased family members. What would have astonished the larger culture, however, was the inclusivity of their kinship groups; that people of very low (or no) social status were cared for and remembered even in death.<sup>16</sup> Sociologist Rodney Stark argues that it was the sense of belonging and the practical benefit of such an inclusive community that was a key factor in the growth of early Christianity.<sup>17</sup> This became even more dramatic, for example, in times of plague.

Beginning in 250 C.E. and continuing for approximately twenty years, a plague spread across North Africa and throughout the Roman Empire. Those who wrote about it, including bishop Cyprian of Carthage, seem shocked at its excruciating effects on the human body.<sup>18</sup> In Carthage, as those who could do so fled, Christians remained and took care of the sick and dying. Bishop Cyprian called on those of Christian faith to face death fearlessly, knowing their future was secure. With such assurance, they acted on behalf of their city

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<sup>12</sup> Ferngren, 114. He also states: “Wherever a church was founded (and the church was an urban institution), it became a focal point for the care of the sick” (145).

<sup>13</sup> Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 324-327. Cohick argues that women of means had much more public roles than has often been assumed. It seems reasonable to assume that such women, upon becoming Christian, would shift their focus to the building up of the house church and its local ministries.

<sup>14</sup> In a movement centered around house churches both for worship/eucharist as well as caring ministries, women would have taken significant leadership roles. Consider the accounts from the book of Acts on the homes where Christians gathered, including the house of Mary (12:12), Dorcas (9:37), Lydia (16:15), and Priscilla and Aquila (18:3; Romans 16:4-5; I Corinthians 16:19). Paul’s letters also include mention of additional house churches in Rome (Romans 16), Nympha’s house church in Laodicea (Colossians 4:15), and Philemon and Apphia’s house church in Colossae (Philemon 2).

<sup>15</sup> Kathleen E. Corley, *Marantha: Women’s Funerary Rituals and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Knapp, “Subjection and Survival: the Poor,” in *Invisible Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 105-124, considers the environmental and social uncertainties that made the poor particularly vulnerable in life and in death. Typically, their shameful burial meant placement in a mass grave or cremation in unmarked urns. Writes Knapp, 101, “Their treatment in death embodies their perceived worth in life.”

<sup>17</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 20-21, states: “The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a *structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments*” [italics in original]. Christianity remained an “open network,” thus allowing for continued growth and expansion. Gary Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care*, 138-139, agrees: “Christian charity was fostered in the closely knit community of the early church, which demonstrated its corporate concern practically.” This had no parallel within Greco-Roman society and is probably the most important factor in the spread of Christianity.

<sup>18</sup> Cyprian, “On Mortality,” especially section 14. See also Eusebius, *Eccles. Hist.* 7.22.1 – 7.22.10.

and its hurting people—giving food and water to the sick, and, most importantly, a sense of belonging amidst the widespread suffering and death toll.

Some historians consider this the time when a “medical corps known as the *parabalani*” was created, while others wonder if the designation of “risk takers” was associated with the larger number of Christians assisting during the plague.<sup>19</sup> Either way, the care given during such crisis times meant that the number of adherents to Christianity grew more rapidly in response to their own increased survival rates, and also through the drawing in of converts through their fearless and selfless witness.<sup>20</sup> Diseased and dying and dead bodies were cared for by Christians who risked their lives on behalf of others. The tradition of caring for the vulnerable by the women and men in early house churches intensified during times of plague. During such times of crisis, Christians became known for their willingness to risk their lives on behalf of the larger city of desperate and dying people. The example of Epaphroditus who had been challenged by Paul to “have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (2:5), was imitated by 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christians who saw all bodies as made in the image of God.

Then the record goes quiet. The next time we hear of Christian risk takers called *parabalani*, their reputation has changed dramatically.

## II. The Brokenness of Risk-takers

By the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, the *parabalani* was a type of religious order of men commissioned by the local bishop to act as ambulanciers relocating the sick and dying from the city streets to Christian communities who would care for them or provide an honorable burial. They also, at times, functioned as the bishop’s bodyguards and as a local militia.<sup>21</sup> In this role, they became tangled in the politics of Alexandria, Egypt, and with a major figure in the city, the philosopher-mathematician Hypatia.

Hypatia, whose birthdate was most likely close to the year 355 C.E. was a favorite teacher in the classical tradition within Alexandria, Egypt.<sup>22</sup> Letters written by her students reflect on her inspiring and challenging

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<sup>19</sup> Ferngren, 119-120. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1971), 62-63, reflects that within the church there came to be “an association of men and women called the *parabolani*, the gamblers. It was their aim and object to visit the prisoners and the sick, especially those who were ill with dangerous and infectious diseases. In A.D. 252 plague broke out in Carthage; the heathen threw out the bodies of their dead, and fled in terror. Cyprian, the Christian bishop, gathered his congregation together and set them to burying the dead and nursing the sick in that plague-stricken city; and by so doing they saved the city, at risk of their lives, from destruction and desolation.”

<sup>20</sup> See especially Stark, “Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion,” in *The Rise of Christianity*, 73-94.

<sup>21</sup> Bowerstock, 50, “their real job was to remove the ailing from the city streets into places of isolation,” but “the cause of Christian charity and philanthropy was effectively used to promote the political power of the patriarch in Alexandria.” While this paper focuses on the events in Alexandria, Egypt, Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1992), 103, mentions similar organizations in Antioch, Rome and Damascus. A more contemporary example might be the Muslim Brotherhood’s commitment to *zadat* (the right of the poor to receive from the wealthy). With a history of responding to public health concerns like epidemics, the charity side of the Muslim Brotherhood can be understood as an example of both acts of charity and political strategy that often includes acts of violence. See Jonathan Benthall, “Charitable Activities of the Muslim Brotherhood,” in *Journal of Muslim Philanthropy & Civil Society* II:2 (2018), 1-7.

<sup>22</sup> The 2009 film “Agora,” directed by Alejandro Amenábar and written by Amenábar and Mateo Gil, portray a younger Hypatia at the time of her death.

lectures on philosophy, mathematics and astronomy.<sup>23</sup> She was highly respected in the city where her public lectures as well as private tutorial sessions were popular. And she was known as a person of high principles, contributing to the overall welfare of the city. “Moving in high government circles, surrounded by imperial and town dignitaries and by wealthy, well-born, and influential students, Hypatia must have had some voice in town affairs and influenced political and social life in Alexandria.”<sup>24</sup> A contemporary writes that “everyone who wanted to study philosophy flocked to her from all directions.”<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps her prominence in the city made it impossible for her to avoid the tension and growing conflict between the Roman prefect of the city, Orestes, and the city’s newly appointment bishop, Cyril, whose leadership began in October 412. Tensions between Christians and Jews abated after Cyril saw to it that the majority of Jews left or were banished from the city. But then he fanned the flames of intra-Christian tensions between the well-off and the poor. Alexandrian Greeks and Romans like Hypatia, who were not Christian but also not antagonistic to Christians, found themselves pulled into the conflict.

While the sequence of events is not completely clear, it seems that Cyril was envious of the prestige of Hypatia, perhaps uncomfortable that so many of her previous students were being promoted to positions of power throughout the empire. Some suggest Cyril sought the support of the city’s elite and saw her as blocking that support. Others were of the view that he correctly conjectured that if he silenced Hypatia’s voice, support for Orestes would crumble. For whatever reasons, Cyril began a propaganda campaign against her, especially agitating the poorer classes of the city by saying that Hypatia was teaching ideas that they did not understand—astrology and witchcraft. Power and philanthropy joined forces in murky politics and the *parabalani*, the local order of healthcare workers, was galvanized. While there are varying accounts of the brutality inflicted on her, sources agree that in March 415 the *parabalani* kidnapped the sixty-year-old Hypatia. As a riot ensued, they stripped her, grotesquely murdered her, and burned her remains.

After a delegation from Alexandria went to Constantinople complaining of the terror, the emperor Theodosius II ordered a limit of 500 on the number of *parabalani* in the city of Alexandria. They were also only to be drawn from the poor classes unable to purchase their positions in the order. They were prohibited from gathering in public spaces.<sup>26</sup> They would continue to remove the sick from city streets, but they could not meet in crowded areas. Officials feared further rioting. These edicts show the emperor attempting to limit the dangers associated with the *parabalani*. They also document the case “that the cause of Christian charity and philanthropy was effectively used to promote the political power of the patriarch in Alexandria.”<sup>27</sup> For the *parabalani* of Alexandria, Hypatia’s body was not made in God’s image, but a thing to be destroyed. Embracing the mind of Cyril rather than the mind of Christ, the *parabalani* participated in her violent death – the dismemberment of her body.

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<sup>23</sup> Maria Dzielska, “Hypatia and Her Circle,” in *Hypatia of Alexandria*, translated by F. Lyra (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 27-65.

<sup>24</sup> Dzielska, 41.

<sup>25</sup> Socrates Scholasticus as quoted in Dzielska, 44. Remarkably, Hypatia’s written works most likely include significant editing of the extent text of Ptolemy’s *Almagest* (see discussion in Dzielska, 71-72).

<sup>26</sup> Cod. Theod. 16.2.42 (29 Sept. 416); Cod. Theod. 16.2.43 (3 Feb. 418). See also Dzielska, 95-96.

<sup>27</sup> Bowersock, 50.

What went so very wrong? The *parabalani* who might have carried weak bodies to Christian care givers that March morning, brutally despoiled Hypatia's body in the afternoon. How could this be? What were the conditions that had caused such a dramatic shift from Epaphroditus to Hypatia's murderers? How had the healthcare system become so broken? Any number of possible sociological, theological, and even psychological answers might be given.

Perhaps, in light of our conference theme, we should reflect on the brokenness of all human systems. While the treatment of Hypatia by the *parabalani* is a dramatic and tragic single episode, is it important to be alert to the ways all care giving is in some way broken, since it is made up of broken care givers. The care giving ministry of early Christians welcoming the poor and homeless to house churches was also broken. Epaphroditus' care giving was broken. No care giver is without flaw. No clinic is always altruistic. Power and power plays are always present. Pandemic protocols are imperfect. People who at times risk their lives for the poor, at other times act horrendously on behalf of the powerful. Front line workers and first responders can be recruited for destructive acts. Places of healing are also places of racism and homophobia and sexism.<sup>28</sup> All places of caregiving are broken – systemically. And all care givers are broken.<sup>29</sup>

The brokenness of care giving has become personal in the last few years as I have become a care giver to my parents. I have been a witness to brokenness—their failing, broken bodies as well as my own. Brokenness even at those very moments that may seem most thoroughly altruistic. The harshness of this sacred work is admitted when someone says: “remember, the care giver must take care of herself too.” I have heard this over and over, and there is important wisdom in it. One needs to self-care. But preparing this paper helped me see that care givers cannot avoid risk taking. We won't be the same after this. We shouldn't expect to be. Because true care giving is risking one's life—whether one's life in a plague, or mental or professional life in care giving. It is a risk. If it is care giving, it is a risk.

Plus, we start broken. And there's brokenness all the way through. The experts often do not have answers. Doctors give contradictory advice, or stop returning calls altogether. Hospice help sometimes makes things worse. Dying happens in a thousand little losses mourned alone. Care givers—even while doing their very best—sometimes make the losses more heart breaking. But exposing and embracing brokenness might just be our salvation. Something can happen when as with Epaphroditus, and the women and men of the early house churches—one's hands are occupied with the cleaning of bodily fluids or combing hair or gently dressing another person, and one glimpses the face of God. This is not to belittle in any way the exhausting slog that is care giving; the never-ending physically demanding, brain-numbing aspects of the reality of cleaning and caring for people. But somehow the unavoidable nature of the brokenness of the one receiving care along with the brokenness of the one giving care create a “thin” place, a liminal space, where the divine breaks through. The twisted, arthritis-suffering hand of my dad is the hand of God. Or God smiles at me through the grateful smile of my mom who can no longer use or make sense of the words she always loved.

Since the covid-19 pandemic started, the celebration of 13<sup>th</sup> Sabbath Communion has been just the four of us—dad & mom, Gil and me—with emblems supplied by Azure Hills Church and delivered to our doorstep

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *Nazi Doctors* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> In spite of brokenness in systems, health care can be better. Systems can be improved. If not made whole, they can be made more whole and more inclusive of all who need care, even if they cannot afford it, or we may think they don't deserve it.

by elders Sue and Tom Smith. On Sabbath afternoon, April 9, 2022, Gil and I sat close to my parents' beds. I read the passage in I Corinthians 11, and Gil handed the communion bread to dad making sure he didn't step on the oxygen tube dad has needed 24/7 since early 2019. Dad said "thank you," which was an effort to say since eating even a small square of bread takes energy and preserving energy for the chewing and then drinking of the cup was necessary. Then Gil handed the bread to mom, who didn't know what to do with it. Supper was already over, she wasn't hungry. Since I can remember, Mary Haloviak has played the organ for untold numbers of communion services over the years. (I always loved the hymns she chose to play quietly during the serving of the emblems and the quiet times following the prayers.) Now she didn't know what to do with the bread. I was physically and emotionally exhausted, praying this wouldn't be my parents' last communion. All of us clearly broken, taking the broken body of Christ. The phrase "Rejoice in the Lord *always*" meant something much deeper in my parents' room that day than it meant in Vacation Bible School.

But that was not the hymn Paul sang in prison. He sang another one about Jesus emptying himself and taking on human form. Not only does Paul's phrase "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (2:5) provide an entrance into the hymn, it is also the conclusion of the first section of Philippians 2: "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (2:1-5).<sup>30</sup> Then, after the Christ hymn, Paul talks about the witness of Epaphroditus as one who had "the same mind...that was in Christ Jesus." It is a high calling, to be sure. It is risky. Every one of our students planning to go into the health care professions should pause over Paul's letter to the Philippians.

## Conclusion

Leonard Cohen spent over 60 years writing about human brokenness. In a recent book on Cohen's theology and theodicy, Marcia Pally sees the motif of failure (before God and before each other) reverberating throughout his work.<sup>31</sup> Humans break the covenant between God and us, and the covenants we make with each other. We are violent in our relationships, and in our interactions with God. We long for God, yet keep failing. God doesn't leave us, but we keep choosing to leave God. Cohen's songs invite us to keep choosing covenant, however much we mess up our end of it. He holds onto the song writer's words from a much earlier era: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (51:17). Given the goodness of God, perhaps our brokenness is our best hope. And in our exposed and embraced brokenness, we recommit ourselves to the struggle to care for people made in the image of God; bodies immensely valuable to those seeking to "have the mind that is in Christ Jesus" (2:5).

*If it be your will  
That a voice be true*

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<sup>30</sup> Monya A. Stubbs, "Philippians," in *True to Our Native Land* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 363-379, argues that to live one's life in a manner worthy of the gospel (1:27) is to show concern specifically for the "invisible poor."

<sup>31</sup> Marcia Pally, *From This Broken Hill I Sing to You* (New York: T & T Clark, 2021), 2.

*From this broken hill  
I will sing to you  
From this broken hill  
All your praises they shall ring  
If it be your will  
To let me sing<sup>32</sup>*

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<sup>32</sup> Leonard Cohen, stanza two, "If it be Your Will," released 1984, *Various Positions* album.

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