

Luke 101-11, 16-20
July 3, 2022

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In 2007, world-famous concert violinist Joshua Bell, winner of the Avery Fisher prize for being the best classical musician in American that year, gave a free concert in a busy Washington DC Metro station during a hectic morning rush hour. He was there to serenade the commuters, and it was a social experiment as well.

Gene Weingarten, of the Washington Post, wondered if people would stop on their way to work to listen to beautiful music being played by one of the best violinists in the entire world. Or, would they just hurry past? Would they be annoyed or pleased? Would Joshua Bell's genius ability to make the violin sing make a difference at all? Would anyone take the time to listen and enjoy some beauty in a subway station during a Friday morning commute?

The night before this experiment, Joshua Bell played at the Boston Symphony Hall where the cheapest seat sold for \$100. People would pay a lot of money to see him play. On that busy January morning in DC, Bell played six classical pieces which lasted for 43 minutes between 7:50 and 8:30am. He played them for free for the public to hear, although he did have a violin case open for donations. Almost 1100 people passed him on their way to work that morning.

What do you think happened?

The night before, the music director of the National Symphony was ask what he thought would happen. With a thousand plus people passing by, Leonard Slatkin thought that 75-100 would stop to listen and that \$150 would be left in the violin case. He was positive a crowd would gather, and that was before he even knew that Joshua Bell would be playing.

On his beautiful Stradivarius, Bell played for the crowd. Of the 1,077 people who passed him, 27 gave him money, equaling \$32, and only seven of them stopped to listen to him play for at least a minute. A beautiful free gift was given to the people on their commute and the vast majority of them just ran by without even acknowledging the gift that was being offered.

Weingarten says in his article – when you watch the video tape, you think that Bell isn't really there. That he is a ghost, and then you realize that he is the one who is real and the passerbys are the ghosts.

For millennia, Philosophers have weighed in on the debate of what beauty is. Immanuel Kant said, beauty depends on the observer's state of mind.

Bell noted that he was feeling the music deeply and then noticed people were giving him the side eye and others were purely ignoring him. He noted that in a concert hall if someone coughed he would be offended, but on that January morning he was grateful when someone would just throw a dollar in his violin case. This from a man who was earning \$1,000 a minute in a concert hall.

Mark Leithauser of the National Gallery of Art thought he knew what happened in the Metro station. He said that Bell playing in the Metro was like a painting without a frame. The context was all wrong. In order to appreciate beauty, it needs the proper conditions.

But, there were people who stopped. A young man who had a spare few minutes who didn't know anything about classical music at all, but he liked what he heard, stopped and enjoyed the gift for a bit.

There was a three year old who really wanted to listen to the music, but his mother hurried him away, which actually happened quite often. Children wanted to stay and listen, but parents always hurried them away.

The only person who heard the entire concert was at work at a bakery on the other side of the glass doors from where Bell was performing. As a musician himself, he recognized talent. He saw that Bell was really feeling the music, and he appreciated that.

A man in the line buying a lotto ticket said he heard the music, but wasn't listening. It sounded like generic classical music and he was focused on his numbers. When he was told what he missed out on, he asked if Bell would be playing in DC again. He was told yes, but he'd have to pay next time. His response – Damn. He missed out, and he didn't win the lottery either.

Bell noted a few weeks later that the thing that surprised him the most is that he was making a lot of noise, and yet no one was listening. He felt invisible. When surveyed, people said they just had other things on their mind. It wasn't that they were avoiding him because they didn't want to give him money.

One man said he had no memory of there being a musician there at all that morning. When he found out Bell was only four feet away from him, he was surprised. He absolutely had no recollection of it at all. He was too busy listening to his iPod. Even back in 2007 it was noted that technology was limiting our new experiences. Ironically, the man who didn't see Bell was listening to a song about a missed opportunity. The song on the iPod was about a man who didn't see the beauty sitting right in front of him.

Another woman looked at Bell, but didn't hear what he was playing. She was a lawyer who just finished a labor contract and she was trying to figure out if Bell was actually making any money there and then how he might get people to give him more.

Another woman who worked shining shoes at the station hated it when musicians played there, because she couldn't hear her customers. Normally she called the cops about the musicians. Bell was the first artist she didn't turn in, but he was still too loud. Being from Brazil, she wasn't surprised that people didn't stop. She noted that in Brazil, people would stop, but not in DC. A homeless man died in the same spot where Bell was playing and no one stopped, not even when the ambulance arrived.

A British author said that beauty has become irrelevant. People have the wrong priorities. John Lane asked - If we can't take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians on Earth play some of the best music ever written; if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that - then what else are we missing?

Of the 40 people who interviewed about that subway concert, only one of them remarked about how incredible Bell was. He found a seat a respectable distance away from Bell so that he wouldn't be in his space. He caught the last 9 minutes of the concert and it made his entire day. He was actually a fan of Josh Bell, but had no idea who he was listening to at the time. He was shocked that others didn't stop to listen. Of the \$34 in the case, he gave \$5, and he felt as if it weren't enough. Embarrassed he hurried off after giving his gift.

Prior to the free concert the Post was really concerned about crowd control. DC is considered to be a sophisticated place with people who would surely know Bell. They discussed a lot of "what-ifs" and what they should do.

But, only 1 person recognized Bell out of the 1,000+ people who passed him by, and the only reason she recognized him was because she saw him three weeks prior at a free concert at the Library of Congress. She put \$20 in his case, \$20 of the \$34. So, 2 people gave a total of \$25 and the other 25 gave \$9 – that's like 36c per person.

[Pearls Before Breakfast: Can one of the nation's great musicians cut through the fog of a D.C. rush hour? Let's find out. - The Washington Post](#)

Now – you may be wondering why I told you this long story. I just thought it was really interesting in how it ties in so well with the Gospel.

After reading the gospel for today on Tuesday, I couldn't help but think about gifts being rejected and what do we do when we and our gift are rejected. Jesus tells us – knock the dirt off your feet and keep going. Keep doing what you have been sent to do. Don't lament or curse, just move on.

That's coming from Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, the one who was so rejected that he was killed on a cross. You can't get any more rejected than that.

God's gift of love was murdered. But, in the resurrection, Jesus does not come back for revenge. Jesus comes back in forgiveness and continues the ministry of reconciliation. Talk about knocking the dust off your feet!

Today, that gift of right relationships is passed on through us. We are the disciples who continue to give God's gift of love away to anyone who wants it totally for free.

And, even though we are a heavily Christian country, not all people can hear the good news. There is too much noise. People's minds are on other things. But that doesn't mean we give up. Just as Joshua Bell kept playing in the midst of people rushing by and even getting the side eye from time to time, we continue to share the good news of God's love for everyone.

Joshua Bell's story just seemed to fit in so well with today's reading. If you go back and read this sermon again, I think you might see a lot of connections to the gospel in general. I didn't want to stop the sermon to point each of them out, but I'll be curious to hear what you picked up on.

And – here's something interesting. In Hebrew, Jesus' name is Joshua. So, is Joshua Bell a Christ-like figure? Sure, just as any of us are who follow Christ.

Joshua Bell was giving his gift of the peace to others, just as Jesus is giving God's peace to all of us. No, Joshua Bell wasn't killed on a cross, but he was rejected. His gift was rejected, but that didn't stop him from sharing his gift anyway.

So, I couldn't help but see a lot of connections between Joshua's story and the gospel reading for today.

Just keep on going. Don't give up sharing God's peace. Don't be dejected when you're reject. Some people really do need to hear the good news. Even if 1,070 people walk by and only 7 stop to listen, it's still worth the while.

When I was first thinking about gifts being rejected, I thought of Banksy selling his million dollar pieces of art for \$60 on the streets of New York City, and he only sold 3. That led me to the Washington Post article – Pearls Before Breakfast: Can one of the nation's great musicians cut through the fog of a DC rush hour?

Josh Bell gave his gift to the rush hour folks in DC. Some appreciated it, a lot did not, if they even heard it at all, but no matter what – he offered the peace he had to share in the music he loved. That's all any of us disciples can do.

We are Peace in Christ and we are called to share Christ's peace with the world. And it's really hard to share Christ's peace if we are angry. So, we just dust off the dirt from our feet and continue on the way.

Forgiven we forgive, knowing that rejection isn't usually about us at all, but about the other person and what they are dealing with. At the same time, we also remember that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was crucified and risen in order to continue the good news of peace, and then the Holy Spirit was sent to us.

So, we don't carry rejection with us. That does not bring us peace. Christ alone brings peace, so we just keep offering the gift of God's love as known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior in whatever way we can to everyone we meet along the way, knowing that not everyone wants to hear it.

But, we are disciples and Jesus is the way. Jesus is our way of being. He is not the end of the road.

So, just as he is our gift, we become gifts of peace for others. That is the way. And whether the gift of peace is accepted or not, the Kingdom of God has still come near and we get to be a part of it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.