

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
February 5, 2012
Mark 1:29-39

Epiphany 5, Year B

"He emerged from the Metro at the L'Enfant Plaza station and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play.

It was 7:51 a.m. on Friday, January 12, the middle of the morning rush hour. In the next 43 minutes, as the violinist performed six classical pieces, 1,097 people passed by. Almost all of them were on the way to work, which meant, for almost all of them, a government job. L'Enfant Plaza is at the nucleus of federal Washington, and these were mostly mid-level bureaucrats with those indeterminate, oddly fungible titles: policy analyst, project manager, budget officer, specialist, facilitator, consultant.

Each passerby had a quick choice to make, one familiar to commuters in any urban area where the occasional street performer is part of the cityscape: Do you stop and listen?"

Those are the first two paragraphs of a Washington Post article by Gene Weingarten, who was so interested in that question that he created an experiment, and the article he wrote about it earned him a Pulitzer Prize. The musician in the DC subway station was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, Joshua Bell, playing some of the most elegant music ever written, on one of the most valuable violins ever made, a \$3.5 million dollar Stradivarius from 1713.

Weingarten writes, "The acoustics proved surprisingly kind. Though the arcade is of utilitarian design, a buffer between the Metro escalator and the outdoors, it somehow caught the sound and bounced it back round and resonant. The violin is an instrument that is said to be much like the human voice, and in this musician's masterly hands, it sobbed and laughed and sang -- ecstatic, sorrowful, importuning, adoring, flirtatious, castigating, playful, romancing, merry, triumphal, sumptuous.

So, what do you think happened?

Hang on, we'll get you some expert help.

Leonard Slatkin, music director of the National Symphony Orchestra, was asked the same question. What did he think would occur, hypothetically, if one of the world's great violinists had performed incognito before a traveling rush-hour audience of 1,000-odd people?

"Let's assume," Slatkin said, "that he is not recognized and just taken for granted as a street musician... Still, I don't think that if he's really good, he's going to go unnoticed. He'd get a larger audience in Europe... but, okay, out of 1,000 people, my guess is there might be 35 or 40 who will recognize the quality for what it is. Maybe 75 to 100 will stop and spend some time listening."

So, a crowd would gather?

"Oh, yes."

Weingarten adds, "Bell's a heartthrob. Tall and handsome, he's got a Donny Osmond-like dose of the cutes, and, onstage, cute elides into hott. When he performs, he is usually the only man under the lights who is not in white tie and tails -- he walks out to a standing O, looking like Zorro, in black pants and an untucked black dress shirt, shirttail dangling. That cute Beatles-style mop top is also a strategic asset: Because his technique is full of body -- athletic and passionate -- he's almost dancing with the instrument, and his hair flies."

The article goes on to describe Bell's musical genius from the age of four, his playing the soundtrack for the movie "The Red Violin," the colorful history of the 1713 Stradivarius, some Kantian philosophy about the nature of beauty, Weingarten's interviews with Bell, descriptions of the musical masterpieces. The most striking thing about the article is the answer to his question:

"In the three-quarters of an hour that Joshua Bell played, seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the performance, at least for a minute. Twenty-seven gave money, most of them on the run -- for a total of \$32 and change. That leaves the 1,070 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look.

No, Mr. Slatkin, there was never a crowd, not even for a second.



It was all videotaped by a hidden camera. You can play the recording once or 15 times, and it never gets any easier to watch. Try speeding it up, and it becomes one of those herky-jerky World War I-era silent newsreels. The people scurry by in comical little hops and starts, cups of coffee in their hands, cellphones at their ears, ID tags slapping at their bellies, a grim danse macabre to indifference, inertia and the dingy, gray rush of modernity.

Even at this accelerated pace, though, the fiddler's movements remain fluid and graceful; he seems so apart from his audience -- unseen, unheard, otherworldly -- that you find yourself thinking that he's not really there. A ghost.

Only then do you see it: He is the one who is real. They are the ghosts."

Weingarten writes about the few exceptions, the few people who hear beauty and actually pay attention to it.

"A woman and her preschooler emerge from the escalator. The woman is walking briskly and, therefore, so is the child. She's got his hand.

Her son Evan is 3.

You can see Evan clearly on the video. He's the cute black kid in the parka who keeps twisting around to look at Joshua Bell, as he is being propelled toward the door.

"There was a musician," Parker says, "and my son was intrigued. He wanted to pull over and listen, but I was rushed for time."

So Parker does what she has to do. She deftly moves her body between Evan's and Bell's, cutting off her son's line of sight. As they exit the arcade, Evan can still be seen craning to look.

There was no ethnic or demographic pattern to distinguish the people who stayed to watch Bell, or the ones who gave money, from that vast majority who hurried on past, unheeding. Whites, blacks and Asians, young and old, men and women, were represented in all three groups. But the behavior of one demographic remained absolutely consistent. Every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scooted the kid away."

"I was rushed for time."

And so, as the most glorious and exquisite aspects of our lives happen, we rush by, too busy to even notice. And when our children love what is glorious and exquisite, we train them to rush by too.

What intrigued me most about today's gospel was that right in the middle of the speed and activity of Mark's fast-paced gospel, when we are hearing about how at the end of a busy day, at sundown people bring to Jesus all who were sick or possessed with demons; as Mark tells us, "and the whole city was gathered around the door. And Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons" and then, in contrast with the crowds, and the clamoring for healing, and the busyness of all that activity, in the middle of all that we get a strikingly different sentence: "In the morning,

while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”

On the first Friday of each month, the Richmond Hill retreat center offers a day for people to get away for a day of prayer. I read about Jesus taking the time for prayer in today’s gospel passage, and figured it might be a good idea for me to try to practice what I preach. So I decided to show up for a day of quiet prayer there. I have had people tell me they are too busy to pray. I have said it myself. Our to-do lists seem so important. But it occurred to me that if the Messiah can set aside the demands on his time and energy so that he can pray, it would be a pretty extreme form of a messiah complex in me to say that I can’t set aside time to pray because my to-do list is more important than the Messiah’s. So I went, and spent most of the day in silence.

The people I sat with at lunch were people I didn’t know. One of them was a leader of youth ministries for his denomination, and had been for decades. When I asked him what kinds of things he did, he told me about going around to do consultations with youth ministers, and leading conferences, and providing resources for youth ministries in various congregations. Another guy at the table looked like a college kid, not much older than a youth. 19 maybe, maybe 22. When he was asked, he said he was doing a one-year internship at Richmond Hill, and living there. The youth ministry man asked him about what his focus was for the internship. He mentioned a few areas he’d been involved in at the retreat center. The man asked him more questions, about what kind of work this internship was for, what was he going to be doing? He said quietly, “Well, mostly I’m just listening for God.”

We sat in silence for a while after that.

I expect that this kid is listening to the music God is playing for all of us.