

July 14, 2013

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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A couple of years ago, I read an article in the Washington Post about a non-scientific experiment played out on the DC Metro. Uber-famous violinist Joshua Bell spent an hour in a DC Metro station playing his heart out to a mostly uncaring rush hour crowd. The violinist-- who makes upwards of \$1000 a minute on stage-- made \$32 that hour, which is actually not bad for a busker.

The point of the article, more or less, was that we are getting less and less able to recognize beauty when it is sitting right in front of us. Curiously, one demographic that gets particular attention in the article is parents with small children in tow. In the hour that Bell played, every single parent with a child walked by without stopping, often tugging their unwilling children along, hurrying off to those things that needed doing.

On one hand, I get it. The article makes me very sad, especially on behalf of our children who didn't and perhaps won't ever get the chance to see one like Joshua Bell in the subway station. It is a terrible state of affairs that we are in, too busy to appreciate music-- any art, really-- as we rush from one thing to the next, dragging our kids along with us.

On the other hand, the premise, that if music/beauty/art is offered freely and easily everyone should stop and enjoy it or else we're not paying attention, doesn't take into account some of the most basic and obvious factors of my daily life and the life of other people I know and love. The most primary factor that it doesn't take into account with its rather precious finger-wagging is that most of us are doing the best we can.

I would like to think that my kids and I would have stopped to listen to Mr. Bell. I certainly would have wanted to. We have stopped and listened, danced, and clapped to far lesser buskers before. But I also know that that morning might have been the one when I was on my third "strike" of the month for being late to my daughter's preschool class, an offense that could find us kicked out of the program. It might have been the morning when I was in charge of the early Eucharist, on my way to be a part of beauty of another kind, my rushing to get there a joyful one.

To say that I don't always have time is trite. I live a full, interesting and busy life. I have to make choices. Sometimes they are obvious, sometimes they are painful, sometimes they are self-serving. But the truth is there are simply enough hours in the day for all of the opportunities that life provides me. I know this is true for many of you, too.

We've all heard that familiarity breeds contempt. And if I am honest with you, friends, that's kind of the way I feel about the story of the good Samaritan. I have read and worked with it more times than I can count. It has more or less become the rallying cry for liberal Christianity. It has also become the backdrop for a lot of finger-wagging of its own. See the outcast, nobody Samaritan doing good work while the clergy haughtily pass right by. Put another way, "if you were a real Christian you would have stopped to help." I think the story has been abused every which way and I'm a little tired of it.

I am, in fact tired of anything from the Bible used to point fingers and cast aspersions. The root lesson from the story of the Good Samaritan is that we are to love one another, to be kind and gentle and giving. But that message risks being buried alive as a useless cliché if we piously nod our heads then sneer at the priest and the Levite. What then is the lesson: love one another so long as the other is always doing the right thing? Love one another only if the other is lovable?

I don't think so.

So here's what I want to offer you this time around: let's let those passersby off the hook. For today's reading of the good Samaritan, let's imagine for a little while that Jesus' lesson was not simply about being a good neighbor, but about judgment and how not to cast it about randomly.

And actually, this argument has been applied before. The story of the good Samaritan is the original "book by its cover" story. The title alone would have raised eyebrows: seriously? It is not POSSIBLE for a Samaritan to be good. They were a whole race of unbelievers, a blight to the faithful Jews. The Samaritan is the original marginalized. From a race of dirty rotten nobodies, the Samaritan would have been the LAST person expected to help. But Jesus is turning that upside down: listeners were supposed to learn how *not* to judge the Samaritan. Jesus' original audience would have been shocked that someone such as this could conceivably make a positive contribution to society.

For those in Jesus' day, the expectation is that the holy men would have run to the aid of the injured man and the no-good Samaritan would have passed by. But that's not how it happened. And we should learn from this not to judge people by background or race, but by action. Who is your neighbor? Yes, even the unexpected Samaritan is your neighbor.

Now we live in that time and place where in Christian parlance, the Samaritan is equated with the utmost goodness. The one who helps. The one who shows up in a critical situation and acts as a balm, a resource, an unexpected blessing. And that reputation is deserved, good and holy. We need those kinds of models in the church. We need something to look to and say: that is how to love one another.

What we do not need is any more targets for our contempt. Which is what the priest and Levite have somehow become. As the Samaritan has become the model for Christian behavior, the other two have become the paragons of unchristian behavior, they who walked by on the other side. They who did not stop to help. These two are hypocrites. They are cold, unfeeling, uncaring.

Textually, I want to point out that it is not Jesus who makes this distinction. Jesus simply lets us know that the two didn't help. That's all. Jesus makes no judgments at all about them. It is we who have pitted them against the Samaritan. It is we who need to make ourselves feel better, who need to point to a bad guy, who need to measure ourselves to something lesser-than, who have created in them the fall guys for Christianity.

And yet the lesson here is to love each other.

The story of the Good Samaritan reminds me of the social experiment with Joshua Bell in this way: We can stop and look at this story and think about all of those who have walked by, passing up the opportunity to better themselves. We can shake our heads and know, piously, that we certainly would have stopped, to appreciate that music or to help that person. Too bad they are not good Christians like we are.

Or.

We can choose to read this story and look at those who stopped and think: good for them! I hope God gives me the opportunity to stop and listen, or serve.

The article about Joshua Bell and the subway rubs me in the wrong way in the same way as the misinterpretation of the priest and Levite do. We are pinning motives to people we know nothing about.

We are not going to hell in a handbasket because 1,000 people walked by a master violinist on playing in the subway station at rush hour. I agree that we could all use a little more time to appreciate free beauty all around us. But subway stations are not concert halls, they are places of transit. Folks are often rushing because they lingered for one last kiss before going out the door or so that they can get home in time to go to the playground. Or perhaps to make it for the 8pm Joshua Bell concert at Symphony Hall.

The fact is, we don't know why people didn't stop to listen to Mr. Bell. We don't know why the priest and Levite didn't stop either. But to assume it is because they are cold and heartless and then judge them based on those assumptions is not a loving response. It is not a Gospel response.

The message of the Good Samaritan is to love each other. It means to stop and help those in need. It means to share beauty when we see it in action. It also means that we need to find a way to love those who are not obviously lovable, to

be gentle with those who may be struggling, to reserve judgment from those who, outwardly may seem to deserve judgment.

And here is an eleventh hour addendum. Literally. Late last night, after reading too much about the Trayvon Martin verdict, I came back to my sermon, wondering if I needed to change my sermon in light of that verdict, wondering if the Good Samaritan has anything else to say in light of the desperate and painful racial divide that continues to scar our great country again and again.

And I decided no. Except for this addendum, I didn't change my sermon. Because I still believe that the call of the Good Samaritan is for kindness, gentleness and, for God sake, LOVE above all else. Love to those who are weeping, love to those who are crying out for justice, love to those who see no problem with this state of affairs.

I am not calling you into being a doormat, for love, as we know, is the most powerful force on earth and beyond. I am calling you to answer hate with love, answer misunderstanding with love, answer injustice with fierce, abiding, unconquerable love.

No one ever said following Jesus was easy. Go. And do likewise.