

Spiritual Blindness

July 15, 2012

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John 9:1-41

Most of the time I choose scripture readings from the Common Lectionary for my preaching. Today is an exception. I chose a powerful story from John's gospel where Jesus encounters a man who was born blind.

According to Jewish law in those days, blind people were sinners. So when Jesus and his disciples came upon a blind man that day, they immediately thought he or his parents had sinned.

Jesus' response to him sets the scene for the rest of this story. He said to them:
“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.”

Jesus, the one God sent to bring light into the world's darkness, had compassion on this man and gave him his sight. Here was God's merciful, transforming work, bringing wholeness and inclusion to the healed man.

The man couldn't wait to share his good news! But what he got from his neighbors was a good grilling. No one would believe his story. Could you blame them? Never in the history of that world, had anyone blind from birth been healed of their blindness. They couldn't understand, let alone believe something so totally out of their experience.

So they took the man to the Pharisees in the synagogue for more questioning. His answer was the same. He had been miraculously healed by a man named Jesus. Not being satisfied with his answers either, the Pharisees summoned the man's parents. They affirmed the fact that indeed he had been born blind, but they had no idea how he received his sight.

The Pharisees concluded that since Jesus healed on the Sabbath he was not from God as this man had said. Furthermore he was challenging the way the world was ordered. They were blind to the reality of anything outside of their belief and understanding. When the man's answers to their questions revealed a growing understanding of Jesus' identity, they threw him out.

There is far more to this story than physical healing. Jesus had not only opened this blind man's eyes, but also his heart. He had been healed of his spiritual blindness. He had become a true *believer* in Jesus, the Son of the living God, who had not only given him sight but opened a new life for him. He could take his rightful place in society.

Unfortunately, the people in his village remained blind; blind to seeing God at work in their midst; blind to the miracle that had just taken place; blind to the transformation that might have occurred in their own lives had they believed his story about Jesus. They refused to see or

accept anything outside of their experience or understanding of how the world worked.

I want to share with you an amazing story that was published in May 2007 by the Washington Post. (Think how this could have happened in New York City.) At 7:51 a.m. on Friday morning, Jan. 12, 2006, in Washington, D.C., in the middle of the morning rush hour – a nondescript, youngish man in a long-sleeved T-shirt, jeans and a baseball cap emerged from the Metro at L’Enfant station and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket.

He took a violin out of a small case, and with the open case at his feet (after tossing in a few coins to “prime the pump”), he began to play. For the next 43 minutes, he played six of the most elegant pieces ever written, on a \$3.5 million dollar Stradivarius. The performance was arranged by the *Washington Post* as an experiment in context, perception, and priorities. In the next three-quarters of an hour, 1,097 people passed by– caught on videotape by a hidden camera– almost all of them on their way to government jobs: policy analysts, project managers, specialists, facilitators, consultants....

Not even for a second did a crowd gather: they all raced past, ignoring him like some nuisance to be avoided – except for twenty-seven people who tossed a total of \$32 into the violin case, most of them while on the run. With such glorious music being played right in front of people, only seven of them actually stopped. Seven.

One thousand and ninety simply hurried by him, oblivious, few even turning to look. Just across the arcade from where he stood was a newspaper kiosk, where people were lined up, sometimes five or six at once, to buy lottery tickets. But in the entire 43 minutes, none of them turned around to look at him; “they just shuffled forward toward the ticket dispenser....”

The videotape of this astonishing event, wrote one journalist, “never gets any easier to watch.” It records “a grim *danse macabre* to indifference, inertia, and the dingy, gray rush of modernity.” The busker began with Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Chaconne” from Partita No. 2 in D minor– said to be one of the most difficult pieces to master, and “a celebration of the breadth of human possibility.”

On this day, he played it with passion and intensity; and the sound filled the Metro arcade like a symphony. And yet it wasn’t until six minutes into his inspired performance that someone actually leaned against a wall and listened.

Coming off the long escalator, John David Mortenson – a project manager for the Department of Energy who confesses to knowing nothing about classical music – started to walk past like everyone else; but he was drawn back, checked the time on his cell phone, and saw that he was three minutes early for work. He stayed the whole three minutes, and later said that the music put him at peace.

Another revealing thing happened a couple of minutes into the violinist’s second piece, Franz Schubert’s breathtaking “Ave Maria.” “An African American woman and her three year

old son emerged from the escalator. The mother, holding tight to her child's hand walked briskly by. She was almost late for her training class for a federal agency, and on her way to the daycare center to drop off her son.

On the video you could see the child twisting and trying to break free of her grasp in order to see the busker. She manages to block his view with her body but you see the child sneak one more peak behind her back. There wasn't any ethnic or demographic pattern to distinguish the people who stayed to watch the busker, or the ones who gave money, from the vast majority who hurried past without noticing him.

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 want to pause the sermon now so you can hear what they were missing. Here is Schubert's, Ave Maria, played by the busker who held up the wall in the arcade that day. His name was Joshua Bell, one of the finest classical musicians in the world.

At the end of the article entitled, "A Virtuoso Ignored," the journalist asks a question we should not ignore: "... if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we can be oblivious to a world-class musician playing some of the best music ever written, then what else are we missing?

I want to translate this into our lives as Christians. Are we willing to *believe* the things we dismiss as unbelievable? Are we paying attention to what God is doing in and among us even when we cannot see it; even when that reality doesn't match our own? Are we willing to have God heal us; to transform us; to open our eyes to some new realities?

Sometimes we need to be healed of our spiritual blindness so we see unexpected things in unexpected places. The busker in the underground reminds us of that. Like the blind man in the story, may we be willing to allow God to open our eyes and hearts to the new possibilities God has in store for us. Amen.