

The Art of Seeing

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Preaching on:
John 14:15–21

On Friday, January 12, 2007, one of the world's greatest musicians, Joshua Bell, arrived in a downtown Washington, D.C. subway station just in time for the morning rush hour. He took out his \$3.5

million Stradivarius violin, he laid the open case at his feet in case anyone wanted to drop in some money, and he began to play for the morning commuters. Bell is a virtuoso and around this time was voted America's best classical musician. For 45 minutes he played the greatest music ever composed for violin. He performed it on a 300-year-old instrument which is even more famous than he is. A hidden camera captured the performance. What do you think happened?

That morning only seven people stopped to listen for one minute or more. Another 27 people dropped money into Bell's case as they ran past. (He made 32 dollars and change for the performance, 20 dollars of which was from a guy who recognized him because he has been at his concert at the Library of Congress the night before.) That leaves 1,070 people who streamed past without the slightest idea that they were encountering something extraordinary and beautiful—something worth seeing. "This is the Spirit of truth," Jesus said in our scripture reading this morning, "whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him."

Some of you may want to call foul here, and I understand why. Is it really fair to judge people while they're on their morning commute, rushing through a crowd, just trying to get to work? Bell probably would have done better in the middle of the day or on a Saturday afternoon or above ground in a nice public park. And you're probably right. But while rushing around and getting annoyed with anyone in our way and not having time for any nonsense that isn't on our work dominated to-do list might not describe us perfectly, it maybe describes our culture and our lives on average. It may be that we're more of a rush-hour, move-it-or-lose-it people than we are a Sunday-stroll-in-the-park-looking-for-magic people. And I think that's what this piece of performance art, masquerading as an experiment, is trying to get across to us. Are we losing the cultural, psychological, spiritual capacity to SEE, and thereby to RECEIVE, what is most real?

On the other end of the spectrum from all this we have *Fountain*. In 1917 the artist Marcel DuChamp bought a perfectly ordinary urinal—the kind you could find in any men's restroom—from a hardware store. He laid it on its back, signed it (with a fake name) and dated it, titled it *Fountain* and entered it into an art contest. Don't worry, it didn't win any prizes, in fact, it was rejected from the contest, and you could understand why the contest's organizers thought someone might be making fun of them. But that didn't stop *Fountain* from becoming one of the most famous and influential artworks of the 20th century. In the 1950s and 60s DuChamp made 17 copies of the original work—urinal—most of which were purchased by great museums around the world. Perhaps millions of people every year stand in front of one of them somewhere, gaze into it deeply, and search for something—for beauty, for truth, for meaning, dare I say for a certain kind of Spirit or inspiration—where (I think it's safe to say) no one had ever thought to look before.

Jesus says to his disciples, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live."

I'm not comparing Jesus to a urinal, but what I am thinking about this morning is our human capacity for SEEING. Vision and sight seem to take on a special spiritual significance in Jesus' ministry. It's about more than being sighted or being blind, it's about more than healing and miracles. SEEING in Jesus' ministry becomes a metaphor or a symbol for our capacity to perceive the truth or to perceive the movement of the Spirit in our lives and world, to see what God is doing and intending in the present moment, to see another person—perhaps even a stranger, perhaps even an enemy—not as an outsider, or a threat, or a means to an end an IT—but to see them as a Thou, to see them not according to our prejudice and our expectation and our need, but to see them as God sees them—as a child of God, as the image of God—and to love them as you love your own self. Jesus teaches us that whether we are sighted or blind, we all have “eyes to see and ears to hear” this spiritual truth, and yet we do not SEE.

One of the mistakes of modernity, in my personal opinion, is the overconfidence we have developed in our powers of observation. We have come to believe as a culture that we have an ability to perceive reality as it actually is. By taking all the magic out of the universe and describing it mathematically and scientifically as basically dead material with no soul or spirit, and by positing that human individuals can be reduced down to nothing more than the atoms and the biological processes of their brains, we have come to believe that we have finally cleared out all of the hallucinations distorting our understanding of the universe, and we've now opened a window into objective reality.

I don't think that's true at any level. And it's certainly not true at the level of the individual. 21st century neuroscience is actually catching up to this realization. Whatever objective, independent reality may or may not actually exist out there, we ain't seeing it. Our brains just don't work that way. Our brains are the most complicated things we know of in the universe, but they are not infinite and they're not omnipotent. In fact, perhaps the greatest accomplishment of our brains is their efficiency. Sense data comes in and our brains give us what they think we need to know, what they have learned is important, and they edit out the bits that they have learned are boring or unimportant or that they just haven't learned to see at all yet.

We don't ever see things objectively, which is actually an opportunity. It means that SEEING is an art, not a science. It is a spiritual practice, not a video camera attached to your objective brain. It is an opportunity through the power of faith and imagination to attempt to allow the Truth of God and love to break through “objective reality” into our dull lives at any moment.

I might walk past a miracle without seeing it simply because I'm not used to the idea of miracles. I might honk my horn at somebody driving five miles under the speed limit because I'm in a rush. Do I have any idea what's happening in the car in front of me, who's driving, who they are, where they're going, what they're going through. No! And I don't care! BEEP BEEP! Move it! Right? I've got places to be!

At the same time, I can walk into a museum like I did this weekend and stand before a piece of art that I would have just walked past if I saw it on a table at the rummage sale. Something ugly. Something I'm not particularly drawn to. But because I'm in a museum, in this sort of temple of art, I can go through the ritual of trying to SEE what I don't expect to SEE, to let the artwork inside of me, let down my defenses, and let it speak. And I can do the same thing when someone approaches me on the subway to ask for change. Whether I am giving change or not, I can allow myself to interact with that person as if I were interacting with Jesus, as if I were interacting with myself from another universe, as if I were this person's mother.

This is one of the great qualities of a great mother. Right? Mom doesn't see us objectively, does she? No way. She always sees the best in us, encourages the best in us, tries to bring out the best in us. She believes in us, sometimes despite all the evidence. She sees things in us that we don't or don't yet see in ourselves. Not everybody gets a mom like that, of course, but those of us who have, see ourselves differently when we see ourselves through her eyes.

A good way to misread our scripture lesson this morning would be to say that the good people get rewarded for being good by getting to see the Holy Spirit and the bad people don't get to see Her because they are bad. The disciples get to see Jesus because they are holy and chosen and everyone else doesn't get to see him because they are lousy. But that's not it at all. Receiving the Spirit, seeing Jesus, is not the reward, it is the process, the means, the way. The disciples, remember, are not a particularly impressive group. They're average. They're me and you. But they're committed to Jesus' path of love, to his way of SEEING the world, of SEEING other people, of SEEING God.

If you want to feel the presence of God more fully in your life, if you want a life that feels more purposeful and meaningful, if you want to feel loved and supported by your neighbors and your community, this is way: Quiet your eyes. Don't rush past the world, don't rush past people, allow yourself to imagine that the tree in your yard may be a message from God to you, allow yourself to imagine that the boring 45 minute train ride into NYC that you do five days a week is an oasis of time and space where the Spirit of God is alive and active and jumping up and down trying to get your attention. I believe that wherever we are, whatever we face, God shows up, Jesus can be seen, the Holy Spirit can be received, if only you and I are ready to SEE it.