

“What have you seen? What have you heard?”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Luke 7:18-35

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Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

In January of 2007, the Washington Post tried a rush hour experiment. They asked a fiddler to stroll into a D.C. Metro station on a Friday morning and to start playing near the shoeshine stand. He threw a few bucks into his case and started to play some Bach. Then he moved onto Schubert. He kept on playing for about forty-five minutes, and made just over thirty-two dollars. Not bad. Except this was no ordinary busker. This was world famous violinist Joshua Bell. The violin he was playing was a Stradavarius crafted in 1713, worth over three million dollars. A master was playing the finest instrument one could find. And, for the most part, nobody noticed.¹

The shoeshine lady, Edna, who hates Metro musicians, later said “He was pretty good...It was the first time I didn’t call the police.” Late in the set, a man named John stopped and listened for a full nine minutes. In the hidden camera footage, you can see him looking around, almost beside himself that nobody else is paying attention. He didn’t know who the violinist was, but he knew he was witnessing something incredible. Interviewed later, John said, “Yeah, other people just were not getting it. It just wasn’t registering. That was baffling to me.”

Joshua Bell noted, while watching the video, “I’m surprised at the number of people who don’t pay attention at all, as if I’m invisible. Because, you know what? I’m makin’ a lot of noise!”

We’ve seen John the Baptizer before in the Gospel of Luke. He first shows up in-utero, leaping for joy when his mother is visited by Mary. He’s later the voice calling in the wilderness, proclaiming loud and clear that the messiah was coming. In chapter 4, Herod arrests John, and we don’t know if he’s still in prison at this point, but either way we can imagine that the one who had been ranting and raving about the anointed one for years expected that “release to the captives” and “let the oppressed go free” was literal. We often talk too simply about 1st century Jewish understanding of the messiah. The truth is, there was a diversity of beliefs about what the messiah would do, but it seems pretty clear that for John, there was some expectation that the One would redeem Israel, usher in a new era, and get everyone out from under the thumb of Rome. John had heard that Jesus was doing some wild stuff. The crowds spoke of him as a prophet. There was talk of miracles. But that wasn’t revolutionary. And so comes the question - the question we hear twice - “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus is ushering in God’s reign through healing and hope and restoration and dignity and transforming the way people think. He’s makin’ a lot of noise. It seems so obvious in retrospect. But the question — “Are you the one?” — remains. They don’t see it. They don’t hear it. They don’t know it in their aching bones. So he tells them: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard.”

¹ “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.” by Gene Weingarte, *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2007.

Sometimes that kind of instruction is what we need to truly see what we've already seen, or to hear what we've already heard. We need someone to say, "Did you catch the dude with the violin over by the shoeshine stand?" Until we are asked, it's easy to walk right past and not notice the miracles before us.

I put out a question on Facebook this week, "What have you seen and heard Jesus do?" And I told folks to interpret the question however they wanted. I got lots of answers.

One of the first responses said: "I have seen the hands of Jesus work through the hands of [my husband's] surgeon who brought healing and new life to [his] body, allowing him to walk more freely and with less pain.

Then I heard this story: "Mother would come home from her job and the two of us would go to the porch and sit in a huge swing. We would sing until Mama called us in for dinner. When I was three years old, I developed a nickel sized growth in the center of my tongue. The doctor told us he could remove the growth. Mother told the surgeon how I loved to sing and asked him how long it would be before I could sing again. He told her that after this radical surgery, I would struggle to even talk and it is highly doubtful I would be able to sing again.

Mother called all her relatives who lived in Alabama, and everyone agreed to set an alarm on their clocks and each person would faithfully pray at the exact same time that night that God would remove the tumor and that surgery would not be needed. The next morning, miraculously the growth was completely gone. Mother promised God that she would do her best to see that I was part of a church choir for as long as she lived." That one came, of course, from a member of the choir.

What have you seen and heard Jesus do, Edgewood?

"Be the definitive example for us." "Teach." "Console." "Strengthen." "Bring happiness." "Be the source of strength." "Help us focus on doing the right things." "Reconciliation." "Comfort." "Lead me to reconsider my thoughts, actions, and reactions." "Grant personal peace."

What have you seen and heard Jesus do, Edgewood?

"I saw Jesus at the Fred Shuttlesworth Airport recently. He was disguised a a little girl, dressed as a Muslim."

What have you seen and heard Jesus do, Edgewood?

"I've seen Jesus grant peace to my precious niece as she grieves the loss of her daughter. 'My niece finds great strength in scripture. I consider this Jesus talking to her and through her.'"

What have you seen and heard Jesus do, Edgewood?

"I see Jesus guiding us on a great bike ride. He knows the way, the views, the hard climbs, and the exhilarating descents. He knows where to fill water bottles and pulls alongside when you're feeling lost, or lonely, or knocked about by a storm. He is there as the sun rises and will be with us as it sets, slapping us on the back, smiling, and saying 'great ride!'" How's that for a modern 23rd Psalm?

What have you seen and heard Jesus do, Edgewood?

“I witnessed the power of his love and compassion upon the unexpected and sudden death of my sister's husband in November. There was an enormous outpouring of love by family and friends. Members of their small church surrounded my sister to support her and to cover every need in this tragedy. This family in Christ, the hands and feet and action of our Lord Jesus Christ, continues to watch over my sister.”

What have you seen and heard Jesus do, Edgewood?

“I have seen and heard Jesus provide comfort for the oppressed, give voice to the voiceless, and heal the broken of spirit. I have seen Jesus give courage to those who don't feel brave enough to continue alone, bring peace to those who are in turmoil, and bring welcome to those who have felt excluded. I have also seen Jesus convict those who have dared to preach a self-serving false gospel, so that the truth of gospel love can at last be revealed. Basically, Jesus is pretty cool.” You all have seen and heard a lot!

Jesus gets frustrated after John's disciples leave, and asks the crowds why they ever went to see John. He points out that John's ascetic ways are called demonic and Jesus's bread-breaking is called gluttonous. Basically, nobody sees or hears what's right in front of them. A great prophet. The Son of Man. The One. We're too cynical. Or we're too busy. Or we're too hard to impress. Or we're too unwilling to let our souls crack open a little. That's dangerous, so we'd rather miss a miracle than take the chance of being broken. Better to just shrug and complain that we're still waiting for God to do something. Besides, nothing truly spectacular could be happening right before my eyes. Not in Nazareth. Not in Birmingham. And certainly not in the Metro station on a Friday morning.

The Washington Post noted that the lack of attention paid to Joshua Bell's Metro concert crossed all lines: race, gender, age - all were equally likely to stop for a second, or to just cruise on by. Well, except for one demographic that responded the same way one hundred percent of the time: each time a child walked past, she or he tried to stop to watch and listen. And each time, the adult in charge scooted the kid away.

Of course they did. As we all know, children are way better at spotting God at work than grownups are. They point out the miraculous constantly. Sometimes, we listen. But you know when kids are just *the best* at noticing holy stuff? It's when God's love is being violated. It's when a grownup is being a hypocrite. It's when someone is hurting or something is unjust - when something would really make Jesus flip over the coffee table — that's when children can't stop seeing and hearing. They see and they hear the way we treat each other, and they come at us with their “whys.” *Why are there some people who don't have enough food? Why are we ignoring that man? Why is Lisa not welcome at her parents' house? Why is our country dropping bombs on their country? Why are American lives more important than other peoples' lives? Why are the people on the news so angry? Why are you walking away from me? Why won't you answer my questions?*

Why won't they stop with all the questions? We're just trying to get to work on time. Why do they notice this stuff? Edna, the shoeshine lady in the Metro station, gestured toward a spot near the top of the escalator and told the Post reporter: “Couple of years ago, a homeless guy died right there. He just lay

down there and died. The police came, an ambulance came, and no one even stopped to see or slowed down to look.”

There was one woman who recognized the famous concert violinist. She stopped right in front of him and stared with a goofy grin on her face. She waited for him to finish a piece, and then she told him she'd just heard his concert at the Library of Congress. She was beside herself with joy that this little Metro concert happened to her. I imagine she told everyone for a week what she had seen and what she had heard.

We are, obviously, not a lost cause. When asked, we can tell what we have seen and heard Jesus do. We can tell stories of healing. We can tell stories of justice. We can tell stories of restoration and new life and peace.

The world feels so empty of these stories right now. When we fear, it is so easy to turn aside and put in earbuds. With everything that has gone on these past few weeks, there's a temptation to not want to witness what's going on. But if we ignore it all, we miss out on suffering seeking comfort, restlessness grasping for peace, and despair in search of hope. And that means we miss out on our call to be the body of Christ. And we miss out on the miracles happening before us. We miss out on the stories of justice found and life restored and sacrificial love.

These stories are there. I know, because you told them to me this week. They are there, right before us, putting on a magnificent concert. If only we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Amen.