

“Faith Actually”

James 2:1-10

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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 on Friday, January 12 [2007], the middle of the morning rush hour.¹

So begins the wonderfully crafted *Washington Post* article by Gene Weingarten which tells the story of the famous violinist,

¹ Gene Weingarten, “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.” *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2007, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1df9948c17be (accessed 8-7-18).

Joshua Bell, a virtuoso who commands \$100 a seat for the *regular* seats when he comes to town (and yes, he is coming to the Triangle in just over a week) who took his place in the subway as a part of an experiment, a stunt, if you will, to see if beauty might be recognized in a non-traditional place, in non-traditional “clothing,” so to speak. For forty-five minutes Bell played his own violin, a Gibson ex Huberman, made by Antonio Stadivari in 1713, because he could not imagine playing another. He began with Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Chaconne” from the Partita No. 2 in D Minor. Bach wrote this piece specifically for solo violin and Bell calls it “not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man [sic] in history. It’s a spiritually powerful piece, emotionally powerful, structurally perfect.” And so, in that dark corner of the subway at the top of the escalator, he took a breath and began to play. As he played, writes Weingarten:

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? Do you hurry past with a blend of guilt and irritation, aware of your cupidity but annoyed by the unbidden demand on your time and your wallet? Do you throw in a buck, just to be polite? Does your decision change if he's really bad? What if he's really good? Do you have time for beauty? Shouldn't you? What's the moral mathematics of the moment?²

Ah. The moral mathematics of the moment. That moment when you stop to calculate how much time you have to linger and the importance of what is in front of you and then weigh it against the urgency and importance of what awaits. It is the same calculation the three travelers in Luke's gospel made on the road between Samaria and Jerusalem when they came across a man on the roadside, beaten and possibly dead. Quickly, the first two did the moral mathematics in their heads and determined that

² Ibid.

morally it was more important to arrive on time to their expected destination, for their expected duty, their expected obligation than it was to reach out to help a man in need on the side of the road. The third passer-by, a man from Samaria, also did the moral mathematics in his head and came up with a different conclusion that caused him to stop and make all the difference for the man in need.

Does this sound familiar? I know that I have done my own moral mathematic calculations in my head when I have come across those in need, whether they are holding up signs on the corner of the road or lying covered in blankets on the hard cement in a darkened corner near my favorite grocery store. “How much time to I have? What obligations do I have to others who are expecting me? What could I do to help anyway? She needs someone who knows the system better than I do,” and, of course, “Is it safe, practical, or wise to get involved?” We do all the math in our heads and we see where the balance tilts and we make our decisions and walk on. Or not.

This is what over 1000 people did that Friday morning in the Metro. Most seemed to have already done the math in their heads before they even heard the sounds of Bell's violin soaring through the acoustical halls of the subway. They had a place to go, a set routine, and a certain amount of time to reach their destination. Not even the soaring notes from a Stradivari violin could deter them. In the end, only one person recognized him, and only two others stopped for more than 30 seconds or so. 27 people put money in his violin case for a total of \$32.17. That's right. Some people threw in pennies as they dashed by one of the most talented classical musicians in America today. After all, anyone playing in the subway must not be worth much, right?

In our passage from the letter of James today, we find James asking a pointed question to his community, "My siblings, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" He illustrates their "acts of favoritism" by telling a hypothetical story of an usher greeting guests at the door of their

assembly. When someone wearing gold rings and fine clothes enters, the usher seats them in a place of honor. When a poor guest enters, they are given a place on the floor or up against the wall. The usher, it seems, has done a quick calculation and the moral mathematics resulted in a judgment that benefited the rich and punished the poor. James will have none of this non-Christian behavior and calls the community out for forgetting God's "royal law" which says "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And "has not God chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that God has promised to those who love him?" This is likely a reference to the first beatitude in Luke 6:20 "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This passage also alludes to Luke 14 and the banquet guests who enter to choose places of honor only to be removed to lower seats. "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:7-11).

You cannot love your neighbor as yourself if you show partiality to the rich and mistreat the poor. Loving your neighbor as yourself means looking at each person you meet as if you are looking in a mirror. How you would care for yourself is how you would care for anyone who walked in the door (or stood on the corner) in need, regardless of what they looked like and what they were wearing. In fact, God's primary covenantal bidding is for God's people to care for the poor, the marginalized, and those often neglected or forgotten. James has already pointed this out in chapter one when he reminds the people that pure and undefiled religion is seen in those who care for the orphans and widows in distress, or in other words, those who would have been, in James' day, the poorest and most deeply in need.

Who are those today who are in need? How do we respond to the needs of the poor, mentally ill, and homeless? What moral mathematics do we do in our heads as we encounter those in need along the way? New Testament scholar Margaret Aymer writes:

Today, it is tempting for us to downplay the real needs of the poor, to blame them for their collective disenfranchisement, and to question the morality of collectively taking care of the poor. But, for those of us in the church who claim the books of the Bible as scripture, the voice of James sounds a counter-cultural critique, a critique that sounds remarkably contemporary for something written thousands of years ago.

As Christians. . . the epistle of James calls us to a collective responsibility for the needs of the poor and to a collective prophetic stance against of the excesses of the rich. We are called to answer to a higher royal law, a law that puts neighbor and the needs of the whole community equal to our own needs. We Christians, James reminds, are called collectively to affirm the marginalized, and to ameliorate the

injustices faced by our neighbors. Especially if they are poor .

...³

When I think of the hundreds of people who walked by Josh Bell and *ignored him* as he played the most hauntingly beautiful pieces of music with passion and perfection, I cannot help but think, and maybe you do, too: “Well, *I* would have noticed. *I* know beauty when I hear it. *I* would have stopped. *I* would have listened.”

But then I think of the beauty I walk past every day, with my eyes not seeing, my ears not hearing, and my heart not feeling.

And I ask for God’s mercy. And I pray for God’s guidance.

Edna Souza, a Brazilian woman who shines shoes across the way from where Josh Bell gave his free concert, was surprised to find out that the mystery violinist was so famous, but she was not

³ Margaret Aymer, “ON Scripture: Margaret Aymer on James 2: Poverty, Wealth, and Equality?” Day 1, September 5, 2012, <http://day1.org/4216-on-scripture-margaret-aymer-on-james-2-poverty-wealth-and-equality> (accessed 8-7-18).

surprised that people rushed by him without a second look.

“That, she said, was predictable.”⁴

“Couple of years ago,” she said nodding toward a spot at the top of the escalator, “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. People walk up the escalator, they look straight ahead. Mind your own business, eyes forward. Everyone is stressed. Do you know what I mean?”⁵

“My siblings,” asks James without mincing words, “do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in your glorious Lord Jesus Christ?”

Do we?

In the name of our Triune God – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.