

A man began to play a violin at the L'Enfant Plaza Metro station in Washington, D.C. It was a cold Friday morning, January 12, 2007, during rush hour. I don't know the precise mechanism, but he had some obvious means of receiving donations – maybe his open violin case.

He played six Bach pieces for about forty-five minutes. One report suggests that thousands of people passed by. Another sets the exact number at 1097.

Three minutes after he started playing, a middle aged man noticed and slowed his pace and even stopped for a few seconds before hurrying on. A minute later the violinist received his first tip; a woman threw a dollar bill into the collection box without stopping. A few minutes later a man leaned against the wall to listen, but looked at his watch and hurried away. Maybe he was late to work – or didn't want to be.

The most attentive listener was a three year old boy. His mother, holding his hand, seemed to be in a hurry, but he stopped to watch. His mother tugged a couple of times and then finally pushed him firmly, and they moved on, the child turning his head back all the while. All the parents, without exception forced them to move on.

In the forty-five minutes six people stopped and stayed for a few minutes. About twenty people gave the man money, all of them without stopping or even slowing down. He collected \$32.17, which I suppose isn't too bad for forty-five minutes, though it was rush hour. When he finished playing there was no applause; no one seemed to notice.

The man playing was Joshua Bell, a world known musician. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written for the violin, and he did it on a Stradivarius said to be worth 3.5 million dollars. Two days earlier he had played to a sold out audience in Boston where the ticket prices averaged \$100 a seat.

Jesus told a story. It is one of those stories that sits in the collection consciousness of our culture. Everyone knows it, even those who have never read it or even actually heard the real thing.

A man had two sons, and the younger of them asked for his inheritance early. It's hard to know just what that would have meant in the legal customs of the day, but it's a story. But whatever the particulars it would have been a hurtful thing. It may not have been quite the same thing as wishing his father dead, but it was close.

The younger son took the money and went to a distant country where he squandered it on wild living. Reduced to poverty and surviving only by feeding pigs – especially humiliating to a few – Luke tells us that he came to himself. He came to his senses. He decided to go home and beg for forgiveness, maybe not so much because he was sorry that he had hurt his father or because of what he had done, but because he was hungry.

While he was still far off, before he could recite his memorized and rehearsed confession his father ran to him, took him in his arms and kissed him.

The elder brother had been outworking in the fields as he had done all along. He got home in the middle of the celebration and refused to go in the house where the party was going on. “When this son of yours comes back, who had devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fatted calf for him!” And I guess I understand that. I might have felt the same way. The thought surely would have crossed my mind.

Most of us, I think, would like to see ourselves as the younger brother, at least in some ways. We would like to be welcomed back from our foolishness with the open arms of unconditional love. We know that there is brokenness deep in the core of our being, and we long for the healing that we sense comes with love. It is not an accident that we have titled the story, *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. He is the hero. He is the main character.

Or maybe we can see ourselves as the father, wounded to be sure, but wise and loving, nonetheless filled with a spirit of generosity and compassion, reaching for and finding forgiveness when more ordinary people would fall short. Maybe that’s a presumptuous imagining, more a secret wish than a public proclamation.

But within each of us – or, at least, within me – there lurks an elder brother. Grace is an offensive thing, especially when it happens to someone else. Why should I work so hard for what I accomplish, and it just be given to you? The protest leaps to mind, *it isn’t fair*. And it isn’t fair. Forgiveness is never fair. Maybe that’s why we have so much trouble with it.

It’s important to realize that Jesus told the parable to Pharisees and not to notorious sinners. The Pharisees weren’t bad people; they were the best of people. The problem was that their piety and righteousness had become their pride, the thing that separated them from others. Their holiness had become the unholy thing about them. They just couldn’t accept grace. They knew everything about law and nothing about love.

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” And Jesus said, “Let me tell you a story.” It should have been called *The Parable of the Elder Brother*.

The story has an open ending – it isn’t finished. We don’t know how it turned out. There is a profession of love and an implied invitation. “All I have is yours. I love you dearly. But we had to have a party because your brother has come home. Won’t you join us? Won’t you come in?” And we don’t know if he did or not. I hope he did. But I wonder. The cost would be high. The cost would be his pride. I hope he did because I hope I have the courage to do the same thing.

Lent is a time of reflection and self-examination, a time to offer the sin of our lives – the things that separate us from God and from God’s love – to offer those things for God’s healing. That is as it should be.

But it is also a time to use that reflection to heighten my awareness of the beauty of the world around me and the possibility of grace that fills my life. Martin Bell, Episcopal priest and author, once wrote a little story playing on the expression, “I’m going to fast for Lent.” The confusion revolved around the hearer mistaking the meaning of *to*. I’m going too fast for Lent. I am going

too hard with too much speed. Slow down. Maybe this is a time to re-evaluate what is really important, what really matters. Won't you come to the party?

The Joshua Bell story is true, by the way. It appeared in The Washington Post. A reporter/writer named Gene Weingarten set it up as a social experiment. The interesting thing is that there was a wide range of response. Some lamented over the lack of culture in America. One person suggested that a different response would have been found in Europe. Others argued that it just demonstrated the irrelevance of classical music.

Some people argued that the experiment was unfair. In a concert hall people expect to hear beautiful music. Expectations are different in the business of a metro station.

And of course it is unfair. It was rush hour. People had places to go, jobs to do, and schedules to keep. But that's the point isn't it? Joy and beauty and love come more often than not by surprise rather than by design. Grace really isn't fair. Won't you come to the party?

Amen.

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Dean