

Primary Text: Luke 7:11-17

It happened back in January of this year. It was a rush-hour morning like any other in a busy train station in Washington, D.C. 7:51 a.m. to be precise. A young white guy in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap emerges from the crowd, stops and puts down a small case, produces a violin from this case, and leaves the case propped open hoping for change as people pass by.

For the next 43 minutes, the violinist played six pieces and some 1,000 people passed by. No crowd ever gathered to listen to him, only seven people briefly paused on their way to work, and a total of twenty-seven people gave money – a total of \$32 and a bit of change.

It seemed like a morning like any other. But it was a wake-up call for the violinist who had been put up to this venture by a newspaper reporter from *The Washington Post*.

You see the performer was thirty-nine year old Joshua Bell, who is arguably one of the best classical musicians in the world. He's sold millions of cd's, performed for movie soundtracks and in nearly every big name concert hall. And on that morning in Washington, D.C. not only were commuters listening to one of the greatest musicians in the world, but Joshua Bell was playing a Stradivarius violin that's currently worth about \$3.5 million.<sup>1</sup>

"I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow" writes the poet Theodore Roethke in his poem "The Waking." We like to think that we'd act differently, but I wonder if we're not so different from those commuters who were sleep-walking past a world-class performance. How often do we sing our way through hymns and pray our way through prayers as if they were terribly ordinary? As camp staffs prepare for campers, how often do we assume campers will be ordinary people rather than extraordinary and gifted friends as they often become when we take a moment to get to know them? How often do we "wake to sleep," and take *our* "waking slow."

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the details were adapted from the story, "A virtuoso ignored" in *The Week* (Volume 7, Issue 308), May 4, 2007. © 2007 by *The Washington Post*.

But let me try to say the same thing in another way... In the book *Practicing Our Faith* which I know some in this church are familiar with, one of the authors writes in a section called “Saying Yes and Saying No:”

Many of us long to grow stronger in the Christian life. But are we really ready to exert ourselves? Being spectators comes much more easily...We are conditioned by our modern culture to count on immediate results; we want the gain, but we shrink from the pain...

Throughout Christian history, it has been clear that spirituality is not a spectator activity. Tough decisions and persistent effort are required of those who seek lives that are whole and holy. If we are to grow in faithful living, we need to renounce the things that choke off the fullness of life that God intended for us...We must learn the practice of saying no to that which crowds God out and yes to a way of life that makes space for God.”<sup>2</sup>

We do not and *can't by our own will* say “no” to all the things that choke off fullness of life. Maybe this is why we call it the *practice* of saying yes and saying no. But to me the story of a virtuoso violinist in a train station is a reminder of all of the beauty, the mystery, the blessings, the fullness of life which surround us each and everyday. Things we often say “no” to, simply by being too busy or too tired. We're so often too occupied with the funeral procession that sometimes is our lives to hear the still, small, sweet, beautiful voice of God. Calling us to “Wake up! Rise!”

In the biblical world of the Gospel reading for today, this reminder of who-wakes-up-who is clear. “Then Jesus came forward and touched the coffin, and the pall-bearers stood still” says the Gospel-writer. “And *Jesus* said, ‘Young man, I say to you rise!’ [and] The dead man sat up and began to speak...”

Even as we enter into a time we call “ordinary,” *people of God...* in every second of time and every inch of space, is not God's voice crying out extraordinarily – sometimes soft like the hush of a breeze through pine, sometimes warm like the sun rising against the hills, sometimes loud and fierce like a laborer demanding fair wages... Is not God's voice crying out?

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<sup>2</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, “Saying Yes and Saying No” in *Practicing our Faith*, Dorothy Bass, editor (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), pp. 59-60.

Can you hear God saying, “People of God, I say to you rise!” *Rise to a new life... a life that’s so much more abundant than the funeral procession of this world grinding on like sleep-walking zombies past music... Rise to a life filled with the very presence of God...* God’s invitation is to pause in the train-stations of our lives and listen to the wonders of creation and the mystery of life and the presence of God shining through a world that is at best transparent.

I imagine that you’ve heard folks say as I have, “I don’t need a church to worship God... I’m more of a spiritual person than a religious person... I’m much more aware of God’s presence when I’m hiking through the hills than I am indoors.” I have to admit, these words resonate with me. And I couldn’t agree more – especially living in a place like the Black Hills, which the Celtic Christians might call a “Thin Place,” a place where it’s as if the hills and trees, the Cathedral Spires and Sylvan Lake are transparent with God’s very presence shining right through them.

I couldn’t agree that finding God’s presence in the church sometimes feels more like work – like a *practice*. At the synod assembly last week in Sioux Falls, I’ve told a few people that I kind of felt like God showed up *in spite of our best attempts*.

Let’s be honest, dear friends, the church of which this church is a part is made up of broken people like you and I. We are people who hurt one another... sometimes with words and sometimes with actions... And to be frank, it’s probably easier to isolate ourselves from one another, to ignore one another, to stay home and find God in the peace and the quiet.

But dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I believe God’s greatest gifts in our time – a time in which we find more and more ways to isolate ourselves... to create our own little bubble of a world... our own little world of music with personal I-pods is just the tip of the iceberg of the e-mail, individualized world in which we live...

But it’s in this world that God gives what I believe to be one of the greatest gifts to heal the individualized, broken soul. And the gift is community like soil for the soul to grow. The gift is church sometimes a little too rich in “fertilizer,” but nonetheless a flowerbed for our individualized hearts to grow together.

And it's not an easy gift to receive, because part of the gift means acknowledging that our souls and our hearts and our bodies are vessels sometimes cracked, sometimes broken, and sometimes shattered.

And it's not an easy gift to receive because as God gives us this gift, as God raises us up to new and abundant life, here and now, today and in this space – *we are raised not to live for ourselves.*

Like the young man who was raised up in the reading for this morning... this young man about whom we are told: "Jesus gave [him] to his mother [a widow!]" God raises us up to new and abundant life to be given away to widows and children... to those who are living from paycheck to paycheck... to those who can't afford medical insurance... to serve and *be in community with* the most vulnerable in our society...

God raises us up to new life to be in a community like this one... a community where there is hurt, but where God's presence also reveals help... a church where there is brokenness, but God's presence also reveals wholeness... a building with walls, but also with windows to let in the light... a world that it seems God has abandoned... but when we look through its transparency and brokenness we can sometimes see God shining through every crack and crevice...

...so let us pause to listen at the train stations of our lives to the young guy wearing blue jeans and an old baseball cap. And let the funeral processions of our daily life grind to a halt because a young Jewish guy *who we realize now to be no less than the fullness of God* – this God stops to touch the coffins in which we sleep...

...and so we pause to become aware that God shines through every second of time and every inch of space... the music of God's presence drifts through every train station, every main street, every home, and yes – even every church *in spite of our best efforts!* And this music of God's presence causes us to pause, renews us in heart, mind, and body... and then sends us back to work, back into relationships once broken now whole, back to serve those more vulnerable than we. Amen.