

## Behold The Busker in the Underground

Feb. 15, 2008 ~ APCE San Diego

### Mark 8: 22-26

**Text:** “. . . Jesus asked him, ‘Can you see anything?’”

I have a lot of empathy for the blind man in Mark’s terse little report. Did you notice that *other people* took the initiative to appeal to Jesus on his behalf? This man doesn’t even petition for himself: perhaps his condition had come to feel so normal to *him* that the little blindnesses of everyday life<sup>1</sup> just seemed a “given” in his routine existence. If “blindness” can mean any and all of the benumbed faculties we carry with us in this noisy and over-distracted world, then we’re the same way, in the “benumbed faculties” department. There are some who cannot see, but many more who cannot– or do not– *notice*. Most of us harbor a blindness to the sparks of life around us that is ultimately much more crippling than challenges to physical sight. “Can you see anything?” Jesus asks. For us, it’s a question that probes far deeper than the presbyopia that’s common among us when eyes begin to age...

My spouse, who would chuckle to hear me reporting this, has reached that presbyopic point in his aging process (call it his “maturation”) that he can’t read much of anything without some kind of corrective lens-- or a new and longer pair of arms. For at least half a decade, his desk sported an old magnifying glass found among his stepdad’s belongings. And then he discovered the little half-glasses for reading sold in just about every pharmacy ... and THEN he discovered that he could pick up a pair cheap, whenever he needed one, at our local neighborhood hardware store– there, right beside the cash register. Now, you might be picking up a missing theme here... visit to an ophthalmologist maybe? Some prescriptive lenses? Not for Anthony, nope. Believe me, his wife has urged that obvious approach several dozen times over the years! But Mayer Hardware’s bottom line is all the better for his stubbornness. Visually, he’s set in his ways. Someone *else* would have to haul Anthony to the healer, and it wouldn’t be an easy job.

Once the blind man was brought by his friends, Mark says that Jesus led him *out* of the village...before performing a remarkably tender and intimate healing touch. I wonder... do the assumptions and prejudices, the noisiness and clutter of our “villages” pre-empt the healing of our capacity to perceive? Is there something about daily village life among us that is toxic to the possibility of new sight?

“Can you see anything?” Jesus was not the type to doubt his own capacity as agent for the healing power of God. And so the question had to be not so much about whether the saliva, the touch, the hands laid on, were effective, as whether the man was receptive to the sights before him. Perhaps, like him, we open our eyes, our minds, our hearts just a crack at first. Tunnel vision. “I see people,” he said... “but they look like trees walking.”

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<sup>1</sup>The phrase is used by Gerard Sloyan in his Interpretation commentary on *John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 123.

At 7:51 a.m. on Friday morning, Jan. 12, 2006, in Washington, D.C.– the middle of the morning rush hour– a nondescript, youngish man in a long-sleeved T-shirt, jeans and a baseball cap emerged from the Metro at L’Enfant station and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. He took a violin out of a small case, and with the open case at his feet (after tossing in a few coins to “prime the pump”), he began to play. No one knew who he was, but the fiddler standing there in the indoor arcade just at the top of the long escalators from the underground was Joshua Bell, one of the finest classical musicians in the world. For the next 43 minutes, he played six of the most elegant pieces ever written, on a \$3.5 million dollar Stradivarius. The performance had been arranged by the *Washington Post* as an experiment in context, perception, and priorities. In the next three-quarters of an hour, 1,097 people passed by– caught on videotape by a hidden camera– almost all of them on their way to government jobs: policy analysts, project managers, specialists, facilitators, consultants... Not even for a second did a crowd gather: they all raced past, ignoring him like some nuisance to be avoided– except for twenty-seven who tossed a total of \$32 into the violin case, most of them while on the run. Only seven of them actually stopped... Seven. One thousand and ninety simply hurried by him, oblivious, few even turning to look. Just across the arcade from where he stood is a newspaper kiosk, where people were lined up, sometimes five or six at once, to buy lottery tickets. But in the entire 43 minutes, none of *them* turned around to look at him; “they just shuffled forward toward the ticket dispenser...”

The videotape of this astonishing event, wrote one journalist, “never gets any easier to watch.” It records “a grim *danse macabre* to indifference, inertia, and the dingy, gray rush of modernity.”<sup>1</sup> Bell began with Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Chaconne” from Partita No. 2 in D minor– said to be one of the most difficult [violin] pieces to master, and “a celebration of the breadth of human possibility.” On this day, the busker in the underground played it with passion and intensity; and the sound filled the Metro arcade like a symphony. And yet it wasn’t until six minutes into his inspired performance that someone actually leaned against a wall and listened. Coming off the long escalator, John David Mortenson– a project manager for the Department of Energy who confesses to knowing nothing about classical music– started to walk past like everyone else; but he was drawn back, checked the time on his cell phone, and saw that he was three minutes early for work. He stayed the whole three minutes, and later said that the music put him at peace.

Another revealing thing happens a couple of minutes into Bell’s second piece, Franz Schubert’s breathtaking “Ave Maria.” “A woman and her preschooler emerge from the escalator. The woman is walking briskly and, therefore, so is the child. She’s got his hand.” Sharon Parker is almost late for her training class for a federal agency, and needs to rush her son Evan off to his teacher. Evan is 3. “You can see Evan clearly on the video. He’s the cute black kid in the parka who keeps twisting around to look at Joshua Bell, as he is being propelled toward the door.”<sup>2</sup> His mother is so rushed for time that she does what she has to do– cutting off her son’s line of sight by moving her body between Evan’s and Bell’s. But as they exit the arcade, little Evan can still be seen craning to look.

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<sup>1</sup>“A Virtuoso Ignored,” ©2007 by The Washington Post Co., from *The Week* Issue 308, May 4, 2007, 52.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 53.

There wasn't any ethnic or demographic pattern to distinguish the people who stayed to watch the busker, or the ones who gave money, from the vast majority who hurried past without noticing him. White, black Asian, young and old, men and women were represented in all three groups, found the Washington Post study. "But the behavior of one demographic remained absolutely consistent. Every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scooted the kid away."<sup>3</sup> The poet Billy Collins once observed that all babies are born with a knowledge of poetry, from the lub-dub of the mother's heart that is in iambic pentameter. Then, he said, life slowly starts to choke the poetry out of us. Maybe the music, too... or maybe just the capacity to notice.

What busker is pouring out the melodies of life in your underground? And what tunnel vision carries you right on by, watching the clock, watching the headlines, plugged into your Ipod, ticking off your grocery list? The one with the singing violin in her hands might be your child, still trying everything to get your attention; and you've noticed (*oh you've noticed!*) the [annoying] behavior –but still haven't quite heard the violin.

Or, like me, you faithfully read the newspapers, headline by headline. But while you've clipped all the coupons, and the end-of-winter sales have landed in your memory bank, you've skimmed right past the signs of the times.

"Oh, *I* can see people; but they look like trees, walking." And so Jesus went back to work, laid hands on his eyes again... There was a second touch. I have a lot of empathy for the blind man because, like me, he needs another dose. For better or worse, his awakening comes in stages. Maybe this is why Matthew and Luke both leave the story out; it's a little awkward, perhaps, to record that Jesus wasn't immediately successful in one particular healing.

Finally this time, says Mark, "his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly." But did you notice there's something Mark does *not* say? What Mark *doesn't* say is "Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and his sight was restored..." No, it doesn't go that way: there's something else that happens, the instant *between*. Listen once more to the subtle progression of our story: "Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly."

This blind man isn't any longer simply a passive victim who becomes a passive recipient of healing. The walking trees must have caught his attention, perhaps piqued a longing to see people as *people* and not as objects passing by. And so for the first time in this little drama of five verses, the man becomes intentional. He looks... *intently*. Everything else is turned to "fade": the blather of the talk shows, and the glitz of the tabloids, the to-do list and family chauffeuring schedule, the siren seduction of email and the overloaded Internet and the next rung to climb on the company ladder. Everything. Silenced for an instant of *noticing*. And when he looks intently... his sight is restored. It may well be that Jesus' *second* touch is not for the restoration of sight to the eyes, but for the motivation of will and mind and heart to stop and *notice*.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

“Then [Jesus] sent him away to his home, saying, ‘Do not even go into the village.’” Once you can see— really *see*— don’t go back to the place you’re used to, where you could live your comfortably unseeing life... where you knew all the doorways and how high the curbs jutted up, and the Braille of your existence protected you from having to pay attention. **But God says ~ Notice the busker in the underground!** Because like Epiphany’s Magi, you are being sent home by a different way.

At the end of the article “A Virtuoso Ignored”, the journalist asks a question we should *not* ignore: “... if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we can be oblivious to a world-class musician playing some of the best music ever written, then what else are we missing?”<sup>4</sup>

Is God calling us, as Christ’s community, to *notice* some things?

What underground busker, fingers flying, violin strings flaying, is pouring his music into the tunnel of your daily grind?

And what messy, insistent, holy touch is reaching toward us for the renewing of our minds?

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 53.