

Disillusioned

Luke 6: 17-26

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By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

This week the nation's attention turned to Washington D.C. where the Senate Judiciary Committee held hearings before voting on a Supreme Court Justice. Robert Dykstra tells another Washington D.C. story of an impromptu concert in the entrance to a busy subway station in downtown Washington on a Friday morning in January 2007. Joshua Bell, one of the world's greatest classical violinists, performed six of what he considered to be the most beautiful pieces of music ever written. Dressed in sneakers, jeans, and t-shirt with baseball cap, he was playing a Stradivarius valued at \$3.5 million, its case with a few dollars of seed money opened to collect donations from passersby. Gene Weingarten, a journalist with *The Washington Post*, enlisted Joshua Bell to stage the social experiment. His subsequent front-page article won a Pulitzer Prize. Just three days before the subway station concert, Bell had filled the house at Boston's stately Symphony Hall where the cheapest seats went for at least \$100. In the subway he made \$32 and change.

"If one were to take great art out of its regular context, would anyone notice?" This was the question underlying the experiment. Would beauty transcend? He started with a piece by Bach that Bell described as ". . . not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history." He played to the passing rush hour crowd, all of it recorded by hidden cameras placed around the subway entrance. In nearly forty-five minutes of the performance, 1,070 people passed by and only seven stopped to listen. Though Bell makes a thousand dollars per minute in concert performances around the world, 1,063 people hurried past within three feet, oblivious. Few even turned to look.

There was thunderous silence. Bell played Shubert's "Ave Maria." Shubert was unaccustomed to writing from a religious perspective. When he was asked what led him to the sudden piety in his writing this composition, Shubert replied, "I think this is due to the fact that I never forced devotion in myself and never compose hymns or prayers of that kind unless it overcomes me unawares: but then it is usually the right and true devotion." Something revealing happened according to Weingarten.

A woman and her preschooler emerge from the escalator. The woman is walking briskly and, therefore, so is the child. "I had a time crunch," recalls Sharon Parker, an IT director for a federal agency. Her son, Evan is three. You can see Evan clearly

on the video. He's a cute black kid in a parka who keeps twisting around to look at Joshua Bell, as he is being propelled toward the door. "There was a musician," Parker says, "and my son was intrigued. He wanted to pull over and listen but I was rushed for time." So Parker does what she has to do. She deftly moves her body between Evan's and Bell's, cutting off her son's line of sight. As they exit the arcade, Evan can still be seen craning to look. When Parker is told what she walked out on, she laughs. "Evan is very smart."¹

So often we miss what is truly beautiful and important on our way to somewhere else, in search of something else. What if the teachings of Jesus left the context of the religious institutions? What if, instead of waiting for people to come to the truth, the truth came to them right where they live, there on the level place, there in the midst of the turmoil of their lives? Matthew has the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, like Moses going up the mountain, going on high to get and deliver Godly pronouncements. But Luke places those teachings down on the plains, down in the valleys where people are living on the edge, where they can't hide reality. Mountaintops inspire people but valleys strengthen people!

The ethical and moral teachings of Jesus, in a more condensed version than Matthew's, point towards the conclusion that things are not always as they appear. You can't judge based on the appearance of things but on the reality. Disillusionment can be considered a negative thing. But literally it means to "free from or deprive of illusion."² An illusion is "the state or fact of being intellectually deceived or misled."³ When I say I'm disillusioned about our judicial system this week, I'm saying something that many may be able to agree with but also something negative about our judicial system. But if I have illusions about something, isn't it a good thing to be disillusioned? If I'm in a state of being "intellectually deceived or misled," isn't it a good thing to come to my senses and see things as they are – and thus be disillusioned? Americans appear to have lost trust in our institutions. The trustworthiness of those who represent us has been called into question.

The teachings of Jesus are meant to help us come to our senses, even if that means we are disillusioned about what makes for life. In these teachings Jesus is describing reality. He is not

1 Quoted in Robert C. Dykstra's book *Finding Ourselves Lost: Ministry in the Age of Overwhelm* (Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books 2018) p. 47-48

2 Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary p. 239

3 Ibid.p.415

giving me advice. Everything here is in the indicative mood. This is the way life is, inside the will of God and outside of it. Blessed are those inside of it and woe to those outside of it.

This is not the equivalent of our contemporary motto, "Don't worry. Be happy!" Jesus says there is something more dangerous than tears. The danger is the deceptive feeling that our personal world is secure and stable, the best of all possible worlds. There's trouble ahead! There's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself, because you will not satisfy yourself for long. There's trouble ahead if you think life is fun and games because there is suffering to be met and you're going to meet it. There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests.

We've become familiar with lots of sources of advice. Healthcare advice, diet advice, weight loss advice, is plentiful. There was *Dear Abby* and *Ann Landers* for many years in the newspapers, and plenty of TED Talks and motivational speakers today. If you're trying to find a job, there's great advice out there about how to write a resume, and what do wear to a job interview, and how to answer predictable questions. Some advice is useful if it comes at just the right moment – the teachable moment. But a bunch of advice just seems trite and other advice seems nonsense. The fact is very little advice has enough power to touch me at the center of my being and bring about changes in my life.

Since advice giving is so much a part of our society, and because so much preaching in the church seems to be about ways to seek a better faith, it's easy to think that Christian faith is simply another collection of advice: "Forgive your enemy. Do good and share what you have. Do unto others as you would have them to unto you." So it's kind of hard to read here about Jesus, when the real issue isn't what advice to take . . . but a statement of reality as it is. The Gospel is not advice. The Gospel puts you in touch with reality in a way that brings nourishment and gives you a sense of direction. Jesus got out of his pulpit, stood on the level place with everybody else, and said, "Lucky you! If you feel so empty and haven't got enough to make it, and know it, then God has a chance in your life. Lucky you when you suffer from gnawing hunger and can't be satisfied. Lucky you who weep in the face of reality. Tears are a way of letting go of an old order so that a new world might be offered and embraced. It takes courage to weep. Tears may be the beginning of health."

We certainly witnessed tears this week on the national news. The Senate Judiciary Committee held hearings wherein both Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and his accuser Christine Blasey Ford, were questioned about an incident that happened when they were both in high school. Both at times were in tears. At one point during Dr. Ford's testimony, Senator Patrick Leahy from Vermont asked her a question, "What is the strongest memory you have, the strongest memory of the incident, something that you cannot forget?" She replied, "Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter, the laugh – the uproarious laughter between the two, and their having fun at my expense."⁴

Long ago Jesus said, "Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh. But woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." Whoever it was who laughed that day at the expense of Christine Blasey Ford, who thought it laughable that a defenseless, young 15-year-old, was powerless against them, that she was nothing more than an object to do with as they pleased, I suspect they are not laughing anymore. Laughter in our youth has a way of turning to tears in our adulthood. Laughter at late night parties can turn to weeping in the morning. Things are not always as they appear. You have to take the long view. Your task is to be true – not popular. You must stand up for what is right – not easy. Never take advantage of anyone – least of all those who are most vulnerable, poor, broken, and weak.

We sometimes become overly confident in our own perceptions. The captain of a ship looked out into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south." Promptly a return message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north." The captain was angered that his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south – I am the Captain!" Soon a return message was received, "Alter your course 10 degrees north, I am seaman Third Class Jones." The captain was seething and sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke, "Alter your course 10 degrees south, I am a battleship." Then the reply came back, "Alter your course 10 degrees north, I am a lighthouse."

If we intend to avoid running our ships on the rocks, we must be open to receiving directions even though it may disillusion us from our self-justifications and self-importance. It's not good to live with an illusion. Jesus seems to be saying you will be unpopular if you stand up for what

⁴ *Wall Street Journal* "Inside the Room: Key Exchanges" Friday September 28, 2018 p.A4.

is right. You will experience hatred and exclusion and even defamation, but don't act like a victim. Just act, instead of react! Things are not always as they appear. Take the long view.

In life we are often making our way through the darkness and the fog with all sorts of voices shouting advice into the night, telling us what to do and how to adjust our lives. One voice signals something quite different than all the others, something almost absurd, even opposite to the rest. But that voice happens to be the light of the world, and we ignore it at our own peril.

If one were to take great moral teachings of Jesus out of its regular context, would anyone notice? That was Luke's Gospel. Of all the people who listened to Jesus that day in the midst of the turmoil of their lives, I suspect most of them passed by unchanged, something like the subway passengers passed by Joshua Bell. Beauty, transcendence, and some of the greatest insight into reality provided by the creator of life itself for a few moments entered reality but few noticed or cared. Most went about their business unaware. There was thunderous silence in response, but some heard and believed. And later, though they wept on Good Friday at the cross, they laughed on Easter Sunday.

A new kind of life emerged from that cross and this teaching. It's not an easier life. In many ways it promises to be a life of greater difficulty and vulnerability – but it leads to trust and trustworthiness with others. And it builds life for **all** rather than for some, or at other's expense. We ignore this teaching at our own peril as a nation and as individuals. "Alter your course," says the Lord. "Stand up for what is right and true, not what is easy or expedient in the moment. You'll avoid running your ship on the rocks."

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.