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Healing the Crowd
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Once upon a time, fifteen years ago to be precise, several journalists working for *The Washington Post* teamed up with world renowned classical violinist Joshua Bell for a social experiment. Chronicled in the April 8, 2007 article titled *Pearls Before Breakfast: Can one of the nations' great musicians cut through the fog of a DC rush hour?* the experiment was for Bell to perform incognito as a street musician on his Stradivarius violin, made in 1713 by Antonio Stradivari himself during his "golden period" - which means the violin is both priceless and perfect - during early morning rush hour at the L'Enfant Plaza station in Washington DC and see how many people recognized him or the music written by Bach he performed.

Prior to the experiment, the journalists consulted with the music director of the National Symphony Orchestra who predicted Joshua Bell performing live in such a place would draw a crowd and would collect \$150. However, on the morning of January 12, a Friday, that is not what happened.

Perhaps some of you have seen the video or remember reading the article detailing the results of the experiment. Of the little over 1000 people who were in the station early that Friday morning, about 37 people stopped for a minute or two and less than \$50 was tossed into Bell's violin case laying open on the ground. No crowd gathered. And when a few of the people who passed by or briefly stopped were interviewed, only one person, a woman, reported recognizing Bell and no one recognized the pieces of music he was playing. Some acknowledged he was pretty good, one reported that even though he didn't know what piece of music was being performed it moved him and made him feel at peace.

In the end, the journalists concluded that the demands of modern life are stronger than the beauty that is often in our midst. However, to this day, beauty in the form of street musicians still shows up there and in other places.

In our Gospel reading today there were also crowds of people on their way to wherever they were going in the city of Jericho where Jesus was passing through on his way to Jerusalem. We didn't hear the crowds were gathered around Jesus, he wasn't stopped to teach on a street corner, he was just one person among a crowd of humanity that was as busy with the demands of their time as those in Washington DC 15 years ago.

But one person in the busy city was curious enough to realize there was something beautiful in their midst, and he wanted to get close enough to see for himself. The man named Zacchaeus was not like the rest of the crowd. Luke's Gospel tells us a lot about Zacchaeus. We are told his job was chief tax collector, which meant he was probably not liked by the citizens of the city, and he was rich. We also heard he was inhibited from seeing Jesus because he was small in stature, and he couldn't get through the crowd of people.

Most commentators and preachers focus on Zacchaeus' job and wealth as reasons why he was called a sinner by the people in the crowd. Maybe because it is easier for most of us to relate to despising the head of tax collectors because most of us do not like hearing from the IRS. But there may be more to Zacchaeus the author of Luke's Gospel wanted us to recognize, and that has to do with his being small of stature.

Thanks to the diversity of Biblical scholars who share their perspectives with us, we are given many facets through which to interpret the Bible. This can be good because sometimes we might miss details that stand out to someone with a different perspective. For example, Professor of Theology and Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, Amos Yong has pointed out that disabled people notice something in the story of Zacchaeus that often gets overlooked: that Zacchaeus was most likely what some people call a little person.

In Jesus' time, there was just as much body shaming as we have in our modern times. At that time, being short or small was considered evidence of a person's sinful nature and short and little people were negatively stereotyped as greedy, closed minded, and unable to get close to God. Which could be why the crowd called Zacchaeus a sinner when Jesus called him down from the tree and invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house.

When given the opportunity to speak, Zacchaeus did not defend himself, but proclaimed his intention which was the opposite of the stereotype: to be generous to the point of giving reparations to those he had cheated. Jesus joyfully responded this was a sign of salvation and the reason Jesus came not only to Zacchaeus' house but became incarnate in the world. Jesus came to restore all people to right relationship with God, and in so doing shows us God's Kingdom is full of marvelous diversity. Jesus has a way of making room for those the crowds try to squeeze out or exclude, which can be for us as individuals and a church the reminder to always consider how we make room for each other and for those who might feel excluded or pushed to the back of the crowd.

When we look at this story through the perspective of the crowd, it is easy to judge Zacchaeus as the outcast in need of healing or restoration instead of realizing the crowd is in just as much need of healing. The crowd judged Zacchaeus on his size, something we call ableism today. They didn't recognize the intention of Zacchaeus, but Jesus did.

By proclaiming Zacchaeus a child of Abraham Jesus is reminding the crowd Zacchaeus is one of God's beloved, just as much as they are. Zacchaeus might not have been able to see Jesus through the crowd, but he did recognize the beauty, the hope, the salvation Jesus brought and acknowledged his own desire and need for salvation. Not only did Zacchaeus stop in a busy rush hour, he found a way to get around the crowd and get closer to Jesus. His desire and effort were noticed by Jesus who in turn recognized salvation was near not only in himself, but in a heart that desires to live into that salvation by using what he had to repair damage in hopes of restoring relationships.

Fifteen years ago, well over 1000 people missed the opportunity to come close to joy for a few moments because they were in the crowd hustling, doing what they needed to make their living. They even ignored the few Zacchaeus' among them who recognized beauty on a winter morning. It can be easy to get lost in a crowd, or in longing for the security of the past, or in the anxieties or grief of the present, or in the fear of the future, and miss the moments of joy, beauty, and even salvation that continue to show up all around us, whether or not we recognize them. It can also be easy to feel resentment or anger when we try to offer generosity or some bit of hope or beauty in our ministries here on campus and watch the crowds pass us by. Perhaps we can take comfort in today's Gospel that God always recognizes those moments of beauty. And even if we miss them the first time, or the second time, the invitation is always present to stop, notice, and come close to beauty whether in the performance of a street musician, a sunrise, the song of a bird, a hymn, an expression of generosity, forgiveness, an act of kindness, or some other incarnation of the love of God here on earth.