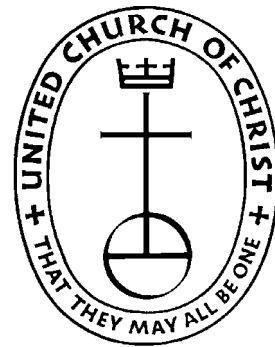


Incognito in the Metro Station

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
June 13, 2010



This sermon suggests that we often overlook opportunities to rejoice in life's gifts, missing the beauty of life itself, chances to relate to others, and ways we could contribute to the healing of our wounded world. We should instead be open to reverence for the beauty of life, creating meaningful relationships and making a difference in the world.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
June 13, 2010 (#1404)
Reading: Ecclesiastes 9:7-10

First Congregational Church
(Long Beach, California)

Incognito in the Metro Station

The Book of Ecclesiastes, in the Hebrew Bible's "wisdom literature," was written by a philosopher called Qoheleth. Listen to a passage from that book:

So go, eat your bread in merriment, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God already judges your work. Always wear white; don't spare the ointment on your hair. Enjoy life with someone you love, all the illusory days of life allotted you under the sun – all these days of illusion. This is your lot in life; this is the work you are truly supposed to do under the sun.

Whatever you choose to do, do with all the drive you have. There will be no sense of accomplishment, pride, learning or wisdom in the grave. And the grave, after all, is where you are going.

An interesting passage! Since we are all going to die, we should enjoy life, eating and drinking with merriment.

On a January day in 2007, during rush hour, Gene Weingarten, a *Washington Post* reporter, arranged for a violinist to sit at a Washington, DC metro station and play six pieces by Bach.

Three minutes went by before anyone noticed there was music playing. A middle-aged man stopped for a few seconds and then hurried to meet his schedule. A minute later, the violinist received his first tip – a woman, without stopping or looking at him, threw the money into his violin case. A few minutes later, a man actually leaned against the wall to listen, but looking at his watch, he started to walk again.

The one who paid the most attention was a three-year-old boy who stopped to look at the violinist. But his mother pushed him hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. All the parents, without exception, forced them to move on.

In the 45 minutes the musician played, 1,097 people passed by him. Only six stopped and stayed for a while. Twenty gave him money, \$32, but continued to walk their normal pace. When he finished playing, no one noticed. No one applauded.

The violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the world's preeminent classical musicians. He had played one of the most intricate violin pieces ever written using his handcrafted 1713 Stradivarius violin worth \$3.5 million.

Two days earlier, Joshua Bell played in Boston's Symphony Hall before a sold-out crowd where the average ticket cost \$100.

Weingarten wrote about this event in a feature story on context, perception and priorities, and it won him a Pulitzer prize.

Now let me tell you a second story. Barbara Rohde, a Unitarian Universalist writer said, "One summer morning – the morning of our forty-fifth wedding anniversary – we were awakened by the sound of two hummingbirds hovering among the feathery pink blossoms of the silk tree outside our bedroom window."

She said, "It was a small sound, more clicks than notes. It had none of the calling beauty of a cardinal's song. And yet we experienced it as a gift, something life offered for our particular delight."

What contrasting images! A thousand people ignoring the beauty of Bach's music played by a great musician while a woman rejoiced in the simple clicking sounds of a hummingbird.

Back to those words from Qoheleth who says we must value the experiences of daily life, rejoicing in food and wine and all that life offers because life does not go on forever.

I think there are three ways in which we often overlook the opportunity to rejoice in some of life's gifts. Here I am really preaching to myself – you can listen in.

First, I think we often miss the beauty of life itself. We fail to stand in reverence before life's mysteries and wonders. We get so busy doing other things that we fail to hear the sound of the violin or the melody of the hummingbird. We are so busy trying to keep up with daily tasks, we miss seeing the beauty of a sunset or smiles on the faces of children at play.

Kay and I often take our two-year-old granddaughter to the Long Beach Aquarium. Her favorite area is one with lorikeets. She could spend the whole day just watching them fly and land and drink nectar out of people's hands. She giggles when they get close to her. She would be happy doing nothing else at the aquarium except watching these tiny birds. But I, the adult, get anxious and want to move on after a few moments; after all, there are many other important things to see.

Inevitably, when we leave the main building and head toward Shark Lagoon where you can touch sharks and rays, Charlotte always pulls back on my hand wanting to stop to watch older children scamper on climbing structures getting wet as water is sprayed onto them. She doesn't want to get wet herself but she enjoys the children at play. She wants to slow down while I race from exhibit to exhibit – after all, we came to see sea life, not children playing.

Charlotte stops to take in life's beauty and wonders and marvels. I follow my itinerary.

There are some Sundays when Marc Dickey plays a rather lengthy offertory. And I see some people with their eyes closed, clearly moved by the music, but others looking at their watches anxious for the service to end so they can get on with whatever else is planned for the day.

I think Qoheleth would tell us, slow down and appreciate the beauty of life; stand in reverence before all its mysteries and wonders.

Secondly, I think we often miss opportunities to relate to other people in meaningful, helpful and significant ways. The biblical narratives tell of a crowd watching as Jesus walked by and Jesus looked up and saw in a tree, Zacchaeus, a man short in stature who couldn't see over the heads of the others. Jesus saw something in him, perhaps in his expression, in his eyes, in his demeanor, that said that man is hurting and needs me.

And it's the same with the story of Jesus reaching out to a outcast woman sitting by a well in Samaria.

Let me share a story I told in a sermon in 2006, so some of you may remember it.

Forty years ago, as a theological student in a clinical training program at Boston City Hospital, my supervisor was a Roman Catholic nun. I was very nervous the first time Sister Carol came to observe me interacting with patients. I wanted to impress her, so my mind focused totally on what I should do, who I should see, what I should say. I walked with her toward a nursing station.

I didn't even notice when she stopped walking. I got to the station and she wasn't with me. Back down the hall, she had her arms around a crying woman, ministering to her. As we had been walking, she noticed a person who appeared to be in pain. I was so intent upon my own agenda, I didn't even see the woman – just like all those who didn't even hear Joshua Bell's music because they were so wrapped in their own needs and concerns.

Sister Carol, like Jesus with Zacchaeus, reached out to that woman, saying something like, “You look as if your pain is overwhelming.” And the woman began to pour out her agony. Carol saw her as a fellow wounded child of God and intuitively reached out to her.

I had a liturgist in my Carlsbad church arrive midway through the service one Sunday. I had already led some of the parts of the service assigned to him. He looked at me sheepishly as he sat down during a hymn, and shrugged his shoulders and said he had stopped enroute to help a woman and her children fix a flat tire. He didn’t let an agenda prevent him from reaching out to a fellow human being.

We must be careful – lest we miss the opportunity to stand in reverence before life’s mysteries and wonders, and we must be careful lest we miss the opportunity to be with others in meaningful and significant ways.

Then finally, I think we must be careful lest we miss the opportunity to find ways to contribute to the healing and the mending of our wounded world.

Meg Whitman used \$70 million of her own money to buy advertising to convince voters to support her bid to become California’s governor. She has promised to spend twice that much in the coming months to tell us why we shouldn’t trust her opponent. That will mean over \$200 million in advertising.

Or Steven Strasburg, who quite amazingly at age 21 can accurately throw baseballs at a 100-miles-an-hour, striking out with ease the most fearsome of hitter. He received \$15 million dollars to just sign a major league contract.

Now my son-in-law, Bill, works very hard; he’s a welder. Do Whitman and Strasburg work harder? I doubt it. But my son-in-law had a business making frames for racing motorcycles, and in this economy that business failed. He finally found another job stocking shelves on the graveyard shift, but was laid off when that business closed. At a new job, he works long hours each day making minimal wages and works all the overtime he can get. He just got a \$2-an-hour raise and the family was quite excited. But that may mean my three grandchildren who are on Medicaid will no longer qualify, and the \$2-an-hour raise may cost them their health insurance.

Now what kind of a world have we created where we pay those who throw baseballs millions of dollars, where obscenely wealthy political candidates can literally buy their way into our most important elected offices while at the same time children can’t get medical care, or those with disabilities can no longer find funds to pay their

home caretakers, or teachers lose their jobs and classrooms get more and more crowded? That's not right.

The prophet Micah said that what God wants of us is that we each seek to do justice, love kindness and walk in humility. No one of us can respond to all the world's problems, but each of us can and must do something. Each of us can take the skills we have, the personality we have and find a way to make a difference in the life of our world.

We don't have to do big and impressive things. But nevertheless, we do need to walk our talk about justice and kindness.

Bob Funk was an amazing biblical scholar. He started the Jesus Seminar and in many ways opened the doors that have led to today's dramatic new insights about the biblical world. He was also a curmudgeon; often grouchy and cantankerous – and very intimidating. I always found myself wary in his presence.

One year, I had the privilege of delivering the feature lecture at a Jesus Seminar meeting. I talked about how local faith communities can use the new biblical scholarship as the basis for creative ministries of service, justice and peacemaking.

I also wrote a seminar paper that was discussed at one of the sessions – it looked at the connections between the language we use and our quest for truth and justice.

Sometime after delivering the lecture and writing the paper, I found myself with Bob Funk, just the two of us, on an elevator. And this giant of scholarship turned to me and said very quietly, "Jerry, you know, I really envy you. You are out in the world making a difference in people's lives. I have spent my whole life," he said, "worrying about the conjugation of particular Greek verbs."

Now I think he was too harsh on himself, but he was pointing to the danger, that just as those folks in the metro station were too busy to hear the sounds of Joshua Bell's violin, many are too busy with life to be part of the healing of a broken world – and thus they will never know that it is actually through participating in that healing that fulfillment and meaning come into our lives. In our uniquely different ways, each of us can and must make a difference in our world.

We must be open to reverence for the beauty and wonder of life, creating meaningful relationships and trying to make a difference in a wounded world.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote about an 85-year-old woman from the hill country of Kentucky who said, "If I had my life to live over, I would dare to make more mis-

takes next time. I would relax, I would be sillier, I would take fewer things seriously. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles but fewer imaginary ones. You see," she said, "I'm one of those people who lived seriously and sanely hour after hour, day after day. I've been one of those persons who never go any place without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat and a parachute. [I understand that, because I am one of those people too. But she continued...] If I had it to do it again, I'd travel lighter."

Rabbi Kushner said of her comments, "God has given us the capacity to find greatness in the everyday. Lunch can be a hurried refueling, the equivalent of an auto racer's pit stop, or it can be an opportunity to savor the miracle that dirt, rain, seeds and human imagination can work on our taste buds. We just have to be wise enough," the rabbi said, "to know how to recognize the miracle and not rush headlong past it in our search for 'something important.'"

Most people rushed headlong past Joshua Bell in that metro station, but children, traveling lightly, stopped to listen. Let them be our teachers.