



Context and Identity

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Year B, Lent 2

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8: 31-38

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Context influences everything. We're in the context of this beautiful church, built in a style that reflects its Anglican Christian roots. Roots that bring with it a tradition with liturgical rhythm and right now we're in the season of Lent. A season we simplify our living as we prepare for the pivotal feast of Easter. It's in this context we hear the readings of the day.

Genesis tells of a pivotal moment in the God, Abram/ Sarai relationship. Through committing to covenant relationship with God Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai Sarah. Something fundamental shifts, they end up not as they were. Abram, become Abraham, Sarai become Sarah are no longer old, faithful but without shared progeny to have a future for their lineage people. They become fruitful continuing ancestry people. Barrenness becomes fertility. Who they are in the context changes completely.

In the gospel Jesus openly declares the non-triumphal repercussion of following the way he walks. Living Jesus' way of self-emptying priority doesn't look pretty. Peter thought he knew the context he was in. He had expectations of a Messiah and where being a follower might lead. And it's **not** the program Jesus outlines! This too is a pivotal moment for Peter, apparent defeat brings triumph. Peter's identity in context was challenged completely.

Context and identity: let me share a story about context and perception with you. In Washington, DC, at a Metro Station, on a cold January morning in 2007, this man with a violin played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, approximately 2,000

people went through the station, most of them on their way to work. After about 3 minutes, a middle-aged man noticed that there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds, and then he hurried on to meet his schedule.

About 4 minutes later:

The violinist received his first dollar. A woman threw money in the hat and, without stopping, continued to walk.

At 6 minutes:

A young man leaned against the wall to listen to him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again.

At 10 minutes:

A 3-year old boy stopped, but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The child stopped to look at the violinist again, but the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head the whole time. This action was repeated by several other children, but every parent - without exception - forced their children to move on quickly.

At 45 minutes:

The musician played continuously. Only 6 people stopped and listened for a short while. About 20 gave money but continued to walk at their normal pace. The man collected a total of \$32.

After 1 hour:

He finished playing and silence took over. No one noticed and no one applauded. There was no recognition at all.

No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth \$3.5 million dollars. Two days before, Joshua Bell sold-out a theatre in Boston where the seats averaged \$100 (remember this was 17 years ago) each to sit and listen to him play the same music.

This is a true story. Joshua Bell, playing incognito in the D.C. Metro Station, was organized by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste and people's priorities.

Context for identity and understanding seems to matters.

On Ash Wednesday, as Nick and I were returning to the office from the Ash Wednesday service, we were paused, waiting for the traffic moving up Federal Street to clear. The last vehicle was a police van. It stopped in front of us. The young female officer driving the van put down the window, leaned over and asked, "What is that?"

Pointing to her forehead, "I'm seeing people with it all over town." Nick and I laughed, "Oh it's Ash Wednesday" I said. She looked a little puzzled, "We're about 6 weeks out from Easter and we have a service where people get the sign of the cross made on their foreheads with ashes. It marks the beginning of preparing for Easter, time for simplifying and reflecting, penitential season the church calls it." "Oh, ok" she replied, not looking much less puzzled but at least she had a name for it. She had no context for this.

If context for identity matters and the context is church, with its religious lineage story and a gospel that today proclaims how we live is a matter of life and death. Life if you live the good news, self-emptying, not all about me way, death if you don't. How do we live out this weird potential fullness of life gospel identity, in a world that largely has no context for it? Especially when like today it proclaims a priority completely upside-down to the normal ways the world operates.

People passing in the Subway had no idea of Joshua Bell's identity out of context. Did it make Joshua less talented, Bach's music any less beautiful or the violin any less valuable? Do such things depend on the context?

As we make our way through life, certain things or causes can catch our attention, intrigue, interest or alarm us. Perhaps out of concern at their impact on individuals, our community, our context or our world. We explore, delve and dive into them, become learned and passionate and want to share. But in our enthusiasm we can forget those we want to share with haven't done our legwork, haven't any entrée to our whole world of interest. So when in bursting enthusiasm, we go to share and can be met by looks of blank incomprehension. Like the young police officer, polite but, what the heck?! There's no shared context for translation. Does it matter?

Does it take from the essence of our passion? It matters to **us**, is vitally important from our context. Whether it's about the urgent and immediate need to change because the climate crisis is **now**, or the need to increase religious participation so there's continuity, the

reality is the agency to change lies within a person, only through a desire in them for inner change will a shift happen.

We can't **do** that **to** someone. We **can** influence through the way we enlive our passion. Grow deeply in knowing, open for our understanding to be tested, so we're grounded, wholly living it in our doing and being. Because it's in **us** to do so, because it's who **we** are, not with some secondary motivation, to stockpile information as weaponry to strategic deploy against those not yet convinced and converted.

Although I struggle with the either/or language of today's gospel, maybe it's simply stating the way things are. If we live our lives in a way that's all about us, what we can get, achieve, manipulate and take for ourselves, what do we end up with? Where do we end up? Jesus' way, his words are of letting go, opening up for the full life of the Creator to flow. Resisting and naming behaviours and systems that block, divert and prevent such flow and allow injustice to flourish. When our ways are to collect, grasp and keep for ourselves, then something in us dies.