

There is a story about one of the world's most famous violinists, Joshua Bell.

In 2007, the Washington Post asked him to participate in an unusual experiment. Bell was one of the world's great violinists. He played in the finest concert halls, before audiences who came specifically to hear him. He played a Stradivarius worth millions of dollars.

But one morning, he put on jeans, a T-shirt, and a baseball cap. He went into a Washington, D.C., Metro station during rush hour, opened his violin case, and began to play.

And people walked past him. More than a thousand people passed through the station while he played. A few stopped for a moment. Very few stayed to listen. Only one person recognized him. And that is what makes the story so interesting.

The music had not changed. Joshua Bell had not changed. The violin had not changed.

What changed was what people thought they were looking at.

In a concert hall, they knew they were seeing a famous violinist. In the Metro station, they saw a man who looked like a street musician. And once they had placed him in that category, they did not expect very much.

Sometimes we know what that feels like.

We all carry pictures in our minds of what certain people are supposed to be like. Those pictures develop over time through our families, our communities, our experiences, and the culture around us.

We meet someone, notice one thing about them, and our minds begin to fill in the rest.

Age can do that. We hear that someone is very young or very old, and without meaning to, we may already have an idea of what that person can contribute.

Gender can do it too. We may have spent most of our lives seeing certain professions occupied mostly by men and others mostly by women. So when someone does not fit that familiar picture, we may need a moment to adjust.

That does not necessarily mean we consciously believe the old picture is correct. It simply means that our expectations are powerful.

And categories themselves are not bad. We need them. They help us understand responsibilities and make sense of the world. If we are in a hospital, we want to know that the person treating us has the appropriate training. If we are trusting someone with an important responsibility, qualifications matter.

The problem comes when the category becomes more important than the person.

A category can tell us something true without telling us everything that is true.

And that brings us to the Gospel.

Jesus has entered the temple, and he is teaching. The chief priests and the elders come to him and ask: "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?"

It is a serious question. Authority matters. They are responsible for the temple and for the religious life of Israel. They understand themselves as guardians of an established tradition.

So they want to know where Jesus' authority comes from.

But there is something deeper in their question.

Jesus does not fit easily into the structures they already understand.

And Jesus does something unexpected.

He does not simply answer them. Instead, he asks them about John the Baptist:

"Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

Now they are trapped.

If they say that John's authority came from heaven, they have to explain why they did not believe him. If they say that John's authority was merely human, they are afraid of the crowd, because the people believe John was a prophet. So they answer, "We do not know."

And suddenly we see what is really happening.

They had asked Jesus where his authority came from, but they were not actually prepared for an answer that might challenge their understanding.

They wanted to know where Jesus fit within the system they already knew.

But Jesus did not fit. And that is where this Gospel becomes very close to our own lives.

Imagine growing up with a particular picture of what a pastor looks like. For many people, that picture has been a man. And then one day a woman stands in the pulpit.

Nothing about God's call to ministry has changed. Nothing about the gospel has changed. But the picture in someone's mind may have to change.

I know that because, right now, I am the only female pastor in this county. I know I am not the first; there have been women pastors here before me. But for some people, seeing a woman in this role may still be different from what they have always expected.

And that is how categories work. We may know intellectually that women can be pastors, men can be nurses, women can be engineers, and people can continue to learn and lead at every age. But sometimes our old pictures are still there somewhere in the background.

The Gospel is not telling us that categories are useless. Jesus is not telling us to stop using wisdom or discernment. The church needs accountability. Communities need structures.

Responsibilities matter. But our categories have to remain tools for understanding the world.

They cannot become the final word about another human being. And they certainly cannot become the final word about what God can do. That is the problem in the temple. The chief

priests and elders have a framework for recognizing legitimate authority. They know what authority is supposed to look like. And then Jesus comes along. Instead of asking whether

their framework might be too small, they ask how Jesus can possibly fit into it. Their

categories have become a barrier to recognizing God. And perhaps that is one of the great

challenges of faith. We like to know how things work. We like to know who belongs where.

We like to know what we can expect. But God is not obligated to fit inside the world we have organized. God is bigger than our expectations. God can work through people we did not

expect. God can speak through someone we would have overlooked. And God can meet us in

ways we never would have imagined. That does not mean that everything unexpected is

automatically God's work. Jesus is not asking us to become naïve. We still need wisdom. We still need discernment.

But we also need humility. We need to be able to say, "I thought I understood this. Perhaps I need to look again." That may be one of the simplest forms of faith.

To look again at the person we think we already understand. To look again at the situation we have already judged. To leave room for God to surprise us. Because God sees more than we

see. God knows the story we do not know. God knows the gifts we have not noticed. God knows the person beyond the category. And God knows us that way too.

Joshua Bell was still Joshua Bell in that Metro station. The fact that most people did not

recognize him did not change who he was. And the labels other people place on us do not

determine who we are before God. The chief priests and elders ask Jesus, "Who gave you this authority?" And Jesus' response points them beyond the question they thought they were

asking. The real question is whether they are willing to recognize God's work when it does not look the way they expected. That question remains with us.

We will always use categories. We need them. But we do not have to let them become the boundaries of what we believe God can do. Because God does not see us merely as a

category. God knows us by name. And perhaps that is the freedom of the Gospel:

We do not have to fit perfectly into anyone else's picture of who we are.

We belong to the God who sees more than anyone else can see. And when Jesus meets us, he invites us to look again — at him, at one another, and perhaps even at ourselves. Because there is always more to see. Amen.