

Proper 27A: Matthew 25:1-13
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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Offer Available for A Limited Time

Methodist bishop William Willimon tells of how, when he was a young pastor in rural Georgia, a dear uncle of one of his congregation's members died suddenly. And though this uncle was not a member of Willimon's church, he and his wife decided to attend the funeral. So Willimon and his wife drove to a back-woods, off-brand Baptist church for the funeral one sunny afternoon. It was, Willimon said, unlike anything he had ever seen. They wheeled the casket in and soon thereafter the pastor began to preach. With great fire and flaying his arms all over the place, this preacher thundered, "It's too late for Joe! He might have wanted to do this or that in his life, but it's too late for him now! He's dead. It's all over. He might have wanted to straighten out his life, but he can't now. It's finished!" As Willimon sat there, he thought to himself, "Well, this is certainly a great comfort for this grieving family!" The minister continued: "But it ain't too late for you! People drop dead every day, so why wait?! Too late for Joe but not for you! Make your life count, wake up and come to Jesus now!" "Well," Willimon concluded after, "that was the worst thing I ever heard. Can you imagine a preacher doing that to a bereft family?" he asked his wife in the car on the way home. "I've never heard anything so manipulative, cheap, and inappropriate! I would never preach a sermon like that." His wife agreed. It was tacky, calloused, manipulative. "And of course," his wife added, "the worst part is that everything he said was true."

Here in polite, middle-of-the-road mainline Protestantism, we don't like to talk much about judgement. We are rather a people who champion "a God of second chances," who insist that no matter what we've done we can be forgiven, that there's always space for do-overs, for mulligans. And it's true, the Gospel *is* about forgiveness and about how God invites all of us to have eternal life, even when we mess up. But behind that belief is a reality we can't really ignore, the reality that this offer is for a limited time only, the deal does expire. There will be a time where there is no more time, when promises to change, to do better, are useless.

Jesus speaks to this reality in today's gospel lesson. In this Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, Jesus warns his followers that there will be a time when our options has run out and the door will be closed forever.

The story concerns an event that Jesus' listeners would have known well—a village wedding. Such weddings were great events, the town's really the only diversions for villagers besides religious festivals. According to custom, the young unmarried women would serve as bridesmaids, escorting the bridegroom from his father's house to that of the bride, where the ceremony and festivities would take place. And it was not uncommon for the bridegroom to stop at various houses along the way, to receive well-wishes and perhaps a toast for the couple's future together. Depending on how many houses he stopped at—and how many toasts he received—his journey could stretch far into the early morning.

Such apparently was what happened in this story. Which shouldn't have been a problem, except that not all of the bridesmaids were prepared for the delay. After the young women had all fallen asleep, they were awoken to news that the groom was near. Only, half of the girls didn't have enough oil. They'd brought only enough for part of the night but what, with the delay, it had run out. The oil-free bridesmaids tried to beg some fuel from the well-oiled sisters, but they were having nothing of it. They'd be out of oil too if they shared, they insisted. By the time the girls managed to get more oil—waking the oil dealer up in the middle of the night—and made their way to the bride's house, they found the door locked and their pleas rebuffed.

If you have ever experienced being left out, (I suspect that includes all of us), you know how hurtful it is to be excluded. Whether it is not being picked for the schoolyard baseball team, or being rejected by a crush, or turned down for a job, you know what it's like to have the door shut in your face. It hurts. And it's probably because we know what that's like that we are so uncomfortable with God doing that to anyone, judging them, excluding someone *eternally*. There's always got to be a second chance, that there's nothing, ultimately, we believe, we can't come back from.

While we should never be too eager to define at what point it is too late, when God's patience has worn out, we cannot as faithful Christians deny that such a point exists. Just as in other areas of life, there are times when it is too late: our dream house gets snatched up, we neglect the pain in our back until the cancer spreads, we don't say anything as a family member makes bad decision after bad decision, until they've lost everything. The same is true in matters of faith. There *is* a limit, we will hit a wall, a point of decision, an unignorable time when a verdict will be rendered, if not by God then by us ourselves, when repentance is sadly, shockingly no longer possible.

As scary as that prospect may be for many of us, it is in fact a good thing, a compliment even. For, in saying there are consequences for our actions, that we will be held accountable for the things we do, Jesus is saying that our actions matter. What we do, how we live, makes a difference. If it didn't, we would not be held accountable. Yet God has created us as creatures who able to impact the world. And God honors that fact by holding us accountable, expecting good things from us. It's like when the boss looks at what you have done and sighs, "This is not your best work." That hurts. But it's only because the boss knows we are capable of a much greater contribution.

So, in a strange, backhanded sort of way, God holding us accountable, saying that our actions, the way we live our life, will be judged, is in fact an indication that we matter, that what we do matters, that it has consequences, perhaps even eternal consequences.

Most of us reckon that accounting will come at our death. That was the message of that backwoods Baptist pastor I mentioned. And it is sometimes joked that the reason churches are filled with older people is because they're cramming for the final exam! There's some truth to that, of course. The older we get, the more aware we are that our time on earth is counting down and we have less of an opportunity to prepare, to stock up on oil, as it were, before we too fall asleep. And so we come to church to fill up, to make sure we've got enough for the journey.

Of course we don't know when death will happen either. Likely sooner than we would like. Life expectancy charts don't really help when applied personally. An accident tomorrow or a medical diagnosis next week can change all that.

I was at a race once when one of the runners, a thirty-something veteran of marathons, collapsed two-thirds of the way into the race. He was dead within the hour from an undetected heart condition. If a trained, disciplined athlete like that has no guarantee of life, then surely neither do you or I. We never know when the bridegroom will announce his arrival.

There are, of course, also less dramatic but no less serious trials that arise without warning—the death of a loved one or the prospect of major surgery, a shattering divorce or estrangement from child or parent. These challenges come at all ages and junctures in life. But when such events arise, they are always a trial, a test. Are we as ready for this? Have our preparations enabled us to meet the challenge?

New Testament professor Rick Lischer points out that in Greek the word for judgment is *krisis* and that this word does not really mean the end, the final act, but more accurately, it means a “turning point.” A crisis is not what happens after everything else is over. A crisis is what happens when the plot of the story takes a decisive turn. That decisive turning point could be at the beginning, the middle, or the end. It doesn't have to mean it's over.

This is how Jesus talked about judgment, as a moment of crisis, a turning point. And he makes plain that such crises come like a thief in the night, when you are sleeping, when you least expect them. You know this. You are in a conversation with a boss, you are going to work, you are in the middle of an important conversation, the phone rings late in the night—that's usually the way the judgment or crisis occurs. In other words, for Jesus, judgment appears to occur not at the very end, but in the middle of things.

It's right in the middle of things that we clergy usually come in, when someone is knee-deep in tragedy, when they're in an acute crisis. That's not, of course, the best time for teaching people how to handle crises. Very few people remember what was preached to them at the funeral of their spouse. As the foolish bridesmaids discovered, the middle of the night is not the time to be worrying if you brought enough oil.

I remember reading a book on marriage in which the author said, “Preparation for marriage begins in infancy and continues throughout life, in all the ways that we learn to be faithful people.” Wow. I have required four, two-hour sessions of every couple I married to prepare them for marriage. But I reckon maybe I was already too late! It's very difficult to put oil in your lamp after you've started the procession.

As a new priest I called upon a grieving young woman. She was not a member of our church. She and her young husband had visited a couple of times, with their little baby. And I had followed up on their visits. They only came to church a few times but then they stopped coming at all. Coming home from a business meeting, the husband was involved in a tragic automobile accident and died. I was called by one of our church members and rushed over to her side when I heard. She was of course in terrible grief. In her grief, while I sat there on her sofa, she asked me,

“Why would God do this to me? Is this some sort of punishment? I’m left here with a child to raise on my own. Tell me! How do you answer this?”

Now I have been asked much the same by people in grief in my church. Such questions are understandable at the time of tragic death. But you can understand why I had difficulty in responding to her. The poor young widow had no church background, knew next to nothing about Christian beliefs or Scripture, and little experience with the church. I tried to respond, but can you see how I was severely limited? The coming days were hard for her, particularly hard I thought because she, well, she did not have enough oil for her lamp.

Many of our neighbors in America face the same situation. They live their life running after what feels good, what serves them, what advances their aims, a highbrow hedonism. But when tragedy strikes, when suffering comes, as it does to all of us, they find they have no oil. They may have thought they were insulated from suffering by wealth, by technology, by advanced medicine. But when that veil falls, and they find themselves in the dark, in the valley of the shadow of death, they discover they have no oil, no fuel for their lamp to light their way.

We may wish we could give our small share of faith to those in distress, but it isn’t possible. We can encourage another person to buy some oil, to put the time into cultivating a relationship with God. We might even inspire them. But there is a point at which a soul is at last on its own. We can’t make it on our parents’ supply of oil, or our spouse’s, or that of our dearest friend. We have to go to God’s market and buy for ourselves.

I reckon some of you are squirming a bit in our seats right now. But when all is said and done—when we have scared ourselves silly with the now-or-never urgency of faith and the once-and-always finality of judgment—we need to take a deep breath and let it out with a laugh. Because what we are watching for is a party. We do indeed need to watch for the Bridegroom, but only because it would be such a pity to miss all the fun! Thanks be to God!