

Time

Time, and time running out, has been on my mind a lot this week.

Our friend, many of you know her, the wonderful choir director at St. E's during Fr. Gifford's term, Lina Doo, is struggling with a serious form of cancer.

She and her husband are in Houston now for treatment.

Our saints, among them Gertrude Tyau, Akiu Chock, Lily Ho, Hermenegilda Sarcedo and Florence Kaneda, each face medical and age challenges, challenges that can't help but remind them, remind me, that time doesn't go on forever for any of us, try as we might to pretend that it does.

Soon, we will say out the names of those we love and who are now lost to us in death.

As each name is called out, as you remember your mom or dad, husband or wife, uncle, auntie or child, each name, in its flood of memory, reminds that time is short.

Jesus today is drawing in his closest followers, "come and listen," he says, as his own time grows short.

And because his time is short, Jesus sharpens the point of his truth, bringing it home since your eternity and mine hangs in the balance.

Today, as he calls them together, drawing them in close, he tells them a strange and difficult story, a story of 10 bridesmaids.

So much about the 10 is alike.

All 10 are lucky recipients of the wedding invitation: a party guaranteed to be a blast!

All 10 are wearing matching blue velvet dresses, with ruffles, the kind that only bridesmaids would be caught dead in.

All 10 wait for the groom while gossiping about who's dating whom; all 10 fall asleep in the warm summer night and at midnight, all 10 wake up since the groom is finally here.

So very much alike, these 10 girls.

In fact, the only difference between these girls is that half of them brought along extra oil, and they get into the party; while the five with no oil are shut out.

So what's with the oil?

Any half-baked Christian immediately objects when the gals with oil refuse to share with those who have none.

You can hear the protests:

"Isn't Jesus all about sharing?"

"What about the loaves and the fishes?"

"Couldn't someone have made some more oil?"

"And what about giving all you have, like the widow and her mite?"

"Why aren't the haves sharing with the have-nots?"

"And why does Jesus seem to approve of this selfishness?"

Perhaps because today something different is being taught.

What Jesus is getting at, I think, is faith; and more than that, I think he's getting at what faith is, and what faith isn't.

Faith isn't saying I believe something.

Faith isn't reciting the creed or answering the latest Gallup poll with "Yes, I believe in God."

Faith isn't a product of the head: an intellectual "This I Believe."

Faith is a relationship, and like all relationships, it matures over time; it has ups and downs; fights and arguments; and over and over again, finds itself saying "yes" one more time to this God who doesn't seem all that together (have you looked at the world lately?); to this God who seems to turn a blind eye to horror (even as his own son hangs from nails on a tree, even as children are kidnapped and turned into murderers in Africa); even as Lina suffers the cancer, even as Gertrude wastes away.

Faith is not grounded in **understanding** this God: it is grounded in **following this God**.

Faith, at the end of the day, sits down next to Job, and says with Job: "Though he slay me, yet I will trust him."

Faith sits down next to Jesus and says with Jesus: "Take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

That's why the five with no oil are in trouble.

It's why the five with oil weren't selfish at all.

You can't give someone faith, anymore than you can give someone the ability to love.

Some things -- we have work out ourselves.

And this gets us back to time, to the shortness of time.

Our Buddhist and Hindu friends see time as a circle, never ending, always existing.

We Christians, together with our Jewish brothers and sisters, see time as history: history as something that begins at a certain time and ends at a certain time.

Meaning: choices matter.

Meaning: we have a limited time to choose whether or not we will accept the invitation of friendship offered by this bizarre God, and do the work needed to develop a hunger for the food of his Kingdom, to develop a thirst for the drink he provides.

The 5 girls with the oil, they did that work.

They get to party.

The other 5 didn't, and they are sent home.

There's an old saying that seems truer every day:

"As you age, you become who you are, only more so."

The arrogant become haughtier; the angry more upset; but so also the holy become holier, the kind become kinder.

Today's choices matter not only today, they matter for tomorrow.

Which may explain why in today's parable the 5 with no oil hear these shocking words from the Lord:

"You can't come in, I never knew you."

He doesn't say:

"I never invited you;" nor does he say "I never loved you;" or "I never called you."

He simply says: "I never knew you," because relationships are two ways streets, "and you, with the time you had, never bothered to know me." Capon, *The Parables*, 500.

There's no better time than All Saints Day to come to know the upside down God who allows weeds to grow up with the wheat, who invites the uninviteable, who weaves beauty out of the confusion and ugliness of our lives.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not promoting a "Me and You Jesus" that is so often on the evangelical tongues of some Christians.

That kind of relationship too often looks like the old Jerry Seinfeld episode where Jerry falls in love with his female "twin": a woman who looks like Jerry, sounds like Jerry and thinks like Jerry.

The wise guy said: "God created us in his image, and we returned the favor, creating God in our own image."

The relationship God invites us into is far deeper, far stranger, far more overwhelming than someone simply agreeing that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.

And something else too.

Who is this God, and what is she like?

What kind of God longs to call us her own, no matter who we are, no matter what we've done?

"God is not our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped. He is a funny old uncle, with a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other." Id. 501.

Or this:

"God is the comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of that one lost sheep that he finds again than out of the ninety and nine who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place."

"God is the eccentric host who, when the country-club crowd all turn out to have other things more important to do than come live it up with him, goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards and brings home a freak show." Buechner, *The Gospel As Comedy*, 66.

It is this God whose arms are outstretched waiting for you to respond.

It is this God who, right now, sits at the bedside of Lina, of Gert, of Akui and Florence and Lily and Herminia.

So work at your faith my friends; make it your own, since no one can make it for you; and if you do, then you too shall be an honored guest at the heavenly party, the likes of which we none of us have ever imagined.

May God bless you and may God bless all of the saints this day.