

## Endings

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

Just last Sunday, Doug brought the sad news that his dad, our friend Lowell, had died in the wee hours of the morning.

Doug mentioned how he was looking forward to the next several years with his dad, and how unexpectedly his dad's death arrived.

On that same Sunday, a man burst into a small village church in Texas, murdering some 26 people, from a child still in the womb to grandparents and people of all ages in between.

On the world stage, the loud rhetoric of war with North Korea has many feeling anxious and afraid, as Hawaii civil defense announces that missile warning sirens will begin again next month.

Endings, and time running out, seem to dominate the conversation these days.

So it is with Jesus today, as he draws 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, he tells them a strange and difficult story, a story of ten bridesmaids.

So much about the ten is alike.

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

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

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

So very much alike, these ten girls.

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

So what's with the oil?

And what's with Jesus in telling this story?

A little inside baseball first.

We know this as the parable of the "wise" and "foolish" virgins.

But the word in the literal Greek isn't "foolish", it's **moron!**

Which makes this an even tougher parable!

First, any half-baked Christian immediately objects when the gals with oil refuse to share with those who don't.

After all, 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 approve of this selfishness, and to top it off, he has the chutzpah to call the poor unlit ones .... **morons???**

Perhaps because today something different is happening.

Remember that context is everything.

And today, we walk with Jesus as he prepares for his final days — the cross is no longer a distant threat, it is a present reality.

Time is short, and Jesus is intent on driving home something that is absolutely crucial.

What Jesus is getting at, I think, is faith.

And more than that, he's getting at what faith is, and what faith isn't.

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

Faith is a relationship, one that matures over time; that has its ups and downs; its fights and arguments; yet finds itself saying "yes" one more time to this God who sometimes 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 on a tree, even as children are shot, even as Syria burns).

Trying to square the horrors of this world with a loving God can often lead to tearing your hair out with frustration.

But perhaps faith isn't about making sense of everything as much as it's about trusting this God.

"Faith sits down next to Job, and says:

'Though he slay me, yet I will trust him.'

Faith sits down with Jesus and says:

'Take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.'" Capon, *The Parables*, 498.

The oil represents faith.

That's why the five morons are in trouble.

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

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

Some things -- we gotta work out for ourselves.

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

Some see time as a never ending circle.

But Christians and Jews see time as history: with a beginning, with an end.

Meaning, we don't have all the time in the world to choose whether or not we will accept the invitation of friendship offered by this bizarre God, to develop the taste buds that long for the food of his Kingdom, a thirst for the drink she provides.

The five girls with the oil, they developed those taste buds.

They get to party.

The other five didn't, and they are sent packing.

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 the kind become kinder, the gentle, gentler still.

Today's choices matter today, and they matter for tomorrow.

Which may explain why in today's parable the five 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 way streets, and you, with the time you had, never bothered to know me."  
Capon, The Parables, 500.

We live in dangerous times; yet we live too with hope.

Knowing that more time is never guaranteed, perhaps Jesus is urging us to seize **this** moment, to seize **this** time!

To take hold of all that we have and all that we hope for and realize that:

"This is our chance to turn around, to change our minds, to get on board with *God's* will for this creation.

To say, 'yes, Lord, we're all in with the revolution that you started so long ago.'

We answer this call because **this** is our moment, **this** is our time — to reach out to those at the edges, to promote the cause of peace and non-violence around the world; to reclaim *God's* dream of creation, a dream that is bathed in harmony, grace, peace, and love." Paul Nuechterlein, paraphrased.

Perhaps this is an impossible dream.

With so much human depravity, hope can be lost.

And yet ....

if we hang around long enough, we may come to know something of the true character of *God*.

We may finally see in "God the comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of that one lost sheep than out of the ninety-nine who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place."

We may discover in "God that eccentric host, who, when the fat cats turn down his party invitation, goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards, hauling in a human smorgasbord." Buechner, *The Gospel As Comedy*, 66, paraphrased.

Indeed, we might finally open our eyes to the magnificent truth that we are, each and every one of us, daughters and sons of the God who calls all things into being, who holds everything in her loving arms.

It is this yearning, adoring God, with arms outstretched, who's waiting for you to respond...

And frankly, if we don't ... we **are** morons!

So work at your faith my friends; make it your own, since no one can make it for you; and if you do, you too shall be an honored guest at the heavenly banquet, whose host is our humble servant, this gentle God, our Lord.

+amen