

If you like happy endings -- If you prefer parables full of inordinate and unearned grace, you better skip this one...

Perhaps you'd be better off going back and reading the story of the workers in the vineyard again, from last month -- a parable where God acts like God and over treats everybody equally.

This parable ends with the slamming of the door, and the image of five girls out in the cold while the party goes on without them.

It starts out happy enough. Nothing was more joyous in Jesus' time than a wedding feast. Jesus uses that image over and over when he talks about the Kingdom. Wedding feasts were kind of undeclared holidays, where everybody let their hair down. And notice, that the groom was the center of attention, not the bride. He made everyone wait. Nowadays, it's the bride that's the focus...

But the climax was the parade, where the family and friends of the bride went to the paternal home, that is the groom's father's house, where likely they would live for a while... And as the party drags on while waiting for the groom to show up, the bridesmaids begin to nod off. They held these little lamps that look like gravy boats with wicks in the spout -- sometimes carried on top of a pole. They all had them; they all fell asleep; the only difference was that five of them brought extra oil.

Finally, at midnight, the groom shows up, and five of them discover that their lamps are running out of oil and they ask the others if they might borrow some oil... "Sorry," comes the reply, "but that wouldn't leave enough for us. Go and buy some for yourselves."

Wouldn't it have been nice if the other bridesmaids had shared? Wouldn't it have been nice if the door had not been slammed in their faces?

That's not what happened.

Some of the Bible commentators say that Matthew was trying to teach a lesson about the second coming in this parable. It's one of those troublesome eschatology stories - about the end time. The parable is set in among a whole lot of other lessons in Matthew having to do with keeping watch and being prepared -- about the coming judgment and our need to prepare for it and not be inattentive. Jesus said, "Some of you may not taste death before the son of man returns" Paul had said 30 years before Matthew put pen to paper, "The time is short. The fashion of the world is fading away..." Matthew may well have been saying, "Be ready. Don't be misled. Be ready and don't let down your guard..." Maybe so.

But the parable says some other things too -- disconcerting things that we know all too well from living our lives...

It says that maybe sometimes it IS too late, at least too late for us. Grace might not be a perpetually open door, with a perpetually patient doorman. Maybe this parable reminds us that God isn't interested in spoiling people by his love, any more than a parent is interested in spoiling a child and calling it devotion.

However much it hurts, this parable might just well remind us that there is in the vocabulary of God, the word "NO". And our actions do indeed have consequences. It makes sense. In a world where actions have consequences, without "NO," "yes," means nothing. Without yes there is no hope. It's a consequential world

Maybe there was something to the man's definition of luck being where preparation and opportunity meet.

Maybe there was something to my father's comment about school: "Don't sleep through class and expect to do well on the test -- or on a job." (I hope so, because I've told the college students in our family the same thing...)

And I've been seeing the "consequentialness" of the world all too well: In the hospital, visiting friends. There are people who are lying there because "*one of these days*" they were going to do something about their lifestyle (their smoking - their diet - their drinking -- their exercise -- whatever) Sometimes it is too late for us.

I've sat and listened to fathers of grown children reflect on a life spent in compulsive working to give their kids everything, only to discover they had deprived them of everything that was really important... Sometimes it is too

late for us.

And perhaps one thing more this parable might suggest: However nice it might have been to loan a little oil, the truth is, and some things can't be loaned or borrowed or transferred.

I want more than anything in the world to transfer to those I love, a bit peace and security -- some of the calm and grace that the Lord (sometimes) blesses me with, but I know I can't. Some things can't be given. Money, things, directions: sure, easily. The things that matter: not so easily...

Some things we can channel. Some things we can help someone discover in him or herself. Some things we can encourage --- but we can't give. Most of the things that matter are that way. Love, courage, faith, responsibility - - there are some things you just can't borrow.

And if those things haven't been discovered, or channeled, or developed -- Well, sometimes it is too late for us.

I think an underlying thought in this parable is that somehow we need to hold the two thoughts in tension: True: God is merciful, full of compassion and loving kindness, willing to save up to the twelfth hour, ever willing to forgive and welcome those who turn to him. True also: God's judgment will come for us all - is an ongoing process for us all - as we make our choices and accept their consequences. True also that "NO" is as much a part of God's vocabulary as "YES" is.

And Matthew's message of course is apropos: Be ready. Don't be deceived. Make sure that you have your priorities in their proper order, with God and his kingdom first – and act upon them, because you'll never have a better chance at that than right now.

In Jesus' name,

AMEN