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“And the Door Was Shut”

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33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Amos 5:18–24, Matthew 25:1–13

The parable of the ten bridesmaids is one of the most straightforward, accessible, and understandable of all Jesus’ parables. And it is also one of the most disconcerting.

One need not be familiar with Jewish culture or Palestinian wedding customs to understand what is being said. Certainly, it is helpful to know that the girl friends of the bride would hold a vigil outside the house awaiting the groom’s arrival. When the groom approached with the throng of his family and companions, you can almost hear the giggles and shrieks of the bridesmaids that the wedding was about to begin! In that day without wristwatches or clocks, the event started when everyone arrived, not at a precise hour. And when the groom’s arrival was heralded, the wedding ceremony began, concluding with a lavish feast.

We may not know all the details of wedding etiquette in ancient Palestine, but even a child knows the meaning of “And the door was shut.” I think it is fascinating that a closed door evokes the same meaning today as it did back in the days of Jesus.

A young child is at home with her parents when the babysitter arrives. Mom and Dad are getting their coats to go out for the evening. “We won’t be gone long,” they try to reassure her. “You will have a good time with the babysitter; you’ll get to watch your favorite video.” The child isn’t buying it. She is clearly anxious about being left behind. The child may throw a fit, cry, and cling to the legs and

arms of her mother because when the door is shut, her greatest fear will engulf her: separation from her parents.

Later on in life, that same child, now 15, will slam a few doors shut in anger to emphasize the point that she doesn't need them or want them. The shut door indeed means separation.

What do folks say when a hoped-for opportunity doesn't materialize? Or when a phase of life concludes? "Those doors are closed."

In movies, the poignancy of a failed relationship is frequently depicted with a closing door. A peculiar sense is evoked in hearing the door shut and the latch hit the strike plate. And then the silence.

A closed door can represent the denial of opportunity. In the days of segregation, doors were shut to people of color.

And the reality is that closed doors continue to define those who are on the inside and those who are on the outside. The ones on the inside are the folks with the goodies, the comforts, the power, the prestige. To be one of the insiders is to steel ourselves with the belief that we are all right, that acceptance by others whom we respect has been achieved.

So often the personal struggle for beauty or youth, for power or riches, for status or intellectual acumen is little more than the attempt to get inside, to feel "OK." If the door has to shut, at least I want to be on the inside, and not on the outside.

And the door was shut.

I've decided I don't like this parable. It isn't very nice. Now I like the parable of the prodigal son, that's a good one! Some young upstart runs away and wastes his father's money and comes home poor but repentant. The father forgives him and they all live happily ever after. We like that, don't we?! It is a heartwarming portrait of God's grace and love and acceptance.

Or how about the parable of the wedding feast? That's another good one. When the guests don't show up, others are seated at the banquet table: poor people, the sick, the lame, the outcast. That is a broadening picture of God and the circle that God's grace embraces.

These two good parables provide a proper picture of God and provide guidance for us in how we are to respond to others in the world: we need to be forgiving, and we should be more inclusive in the human family.

But this parable of the ten bridesmaids, what are we to do with it? Five were farsighted and prepared; the other five didn't have it together when the time came. Five participated in the wedding feast with joy; five were shut out in the dark.

Wouldn't the story have been better if when the five foolish bridesmaids knocked on the door, the master flung open the door and said, "I've been anxiously awaiting your arrival! Come in and join the party!" Isn't that what the God of grace is supposed to say?

At the very least, shouldn't someone remind us, "When God closes one door, God opens another"?

And the moral teaching of this parable isn't fit for a children's sermon at all. You see, if those five wise bridesmaids had been good Christians, they would have shared their oil. Or maybe they would have said, "No one goes in until all of us go in." Or they might have said, "You use mine while I go get us some more." But they didn't do that. Those other poor girls had to run off to the store late at night, and the only place open was clear across town. They made those poor girls miss the party.

It is no wonder this isn't one of the more popular parables of Jesus. And I suspect it was just as unpopular when Jesus told it.

Scholars say this parable was specifically addressed to the early church. The author of the Gospel of Matthew told his community of faith to be prepared for the long haul. Their faith would be tested and stretched and tried.

This is not what people want to hear. People want relief now, they want resolution now, they want God to deliver them out of their bad situation now.

The conditions for followers of Jesus in the life of the early church were intolerable. The uncertainty of life for all people on the edges of society was only compounded for Christians because of the opposition and persecution they faced because of their faith.

Most of us today may not be so greatly at risk. Yet we know realities of global terrorism, wars on multiple fronts, crime, economic downturns, and institutionalized injustice. Locally and personally, we face rising unemployment, threats to our health, the disintegration of family structures, the assault on faith. We have plenty about which we might ask God to deliver us.

But Jesus, in telling this parable, speaks the truth. The parable shoots straight about the world in which we live. It tells the truth about the character of God and about the formation of our character as human beings.

First, it speaks the truth about reality and the world in which we live. The world is not a wish-granting factory. Disappointments and delays and trials are a part of life. We suffer goals unattained and tragic loss and the death of those we love. Why we as Christians expect it to be otherwise, I don't know. Jesus was clear about this: he said, "In the world, you will have tribulation."

We need to read the owners' manual: suffering is one of the standard features of life; it is not optional.

Have we not yet learned that anything of value is costly? That things worth doing or being exact a price? God's promise to us is not that life will be easy or pain free, but that God will walk with us every step of the way, and that the promised joy of the kingdom will outshine the darkness. In the world we will have tribulation, but we are not called to be miserable. Jesus tells his disciples to be of good cheer—Christ has overcome the world!

The parable not only speaks the truth about the world, but also about God. God sets limits. Wouldn't the love and grace of God ring hollow if that love and grace were devoid of truth and justice? If I deceive myself into thinking that my mean or vengeful or insensitive or unethical behavior doesn't really matter to God or me, and that God makes no demands of me for the well-being of others, then faith has become an instrument of evil rather than of good and truth and justice.

The prophet Amos knew God was a God of grace *and justice*. When the ethical behavior of his people did not accord with their religious practices, Amos declared a warning from the Lord: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your offerings, I will not accept or look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

The grace of God cannot be presumed upon without impunity. We presume upon God's grace when we cry out for mercy, and what we really want is for God to clean up the mess we've gotten ourselves into. We have no intention to make changes within ourselves—we merely want relief.

Do you ask God for a business deal to turn out OK when you have used very poor judgment? Do you ask for an "A" on a test when you haven't cracked a book? Do you pray for a transformed marriage in two weeks or two months when you have spent twenty years neglecting it?

Do you hope that the social fabric of our community or nation will not disintegrate if you and I have done little to address the plight of poverty or job creation or quality educational opportunity? Do you expect the vibrancy of this congregation to remain the same as long as you stay on the sidelines of the faith?

God will not let us presume upon God's grace. God's judgment begins with his own children, and that is the assurance that God will be God, that God will not be manipulated by some person or lobby or group, be it liberal or conservative or Presbyterian. This God we worship and serve is the God of mercy and *justice*, of love and *truth*.

Not only does this parable portray the reality of the world and the character of God, it also speaks about our own human character. Certain virtues or knowledge or expertise are acquired only by experience and struggle. The writer's craft, the musician's mastery, the painter's skills are gained through rigorous practice. Justice is not established merely with the stroke of a pen but with its exercise on a daily basis. Do you know of any thirty-day crash course to build character? I don't.

Mahatma Gandhi had a list of what he called the "deadly sins." They include: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, politics without principle.

There are some things we cannot be given; there are some things we cannot borrow. There are some things we cannot attain quickly or easily without commitment and time and energy and money and sweat and tears and prayers into the wee hours of the morning. Sometimes an additional oil supply is needed beyond what one might anticipate. And the truth is that if we are not prepared, certain doors are shut to us.

We may not like this parable because it tells us the uncomfortable truth. Yet it does contain good news! The good news of this parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is that we have an opportunity before the door is shut. What changes a fool into the wise is hearing and heeding the warning it provides.

I believe that God not only wants us to be a forgiven and blessed people; God also wants us to be a forgiving and blessing people, a changed and merciful people, a people who focus our attention not on ourselves but on others.

When the disciples gathered with Jesus for the last supper, Jesus announced that one of them would betray him. With great sorrow, the disciples one by one, asked THE question. They did not point accusing fingers at others. Instead they asked, "Is it I?" And the answer was "yes." Every one of them forsook Jesus and fled when the time came. Only later would they be prepared to enter that door of suffering and service and glory. They were changed—changed by the God of grace and truth, the God of love and justice.

What opportunities exist for us to be different, to act differently in the world? How can the faith for us be something that flourishes in the long haul, when the going gets tough? Like the disciples, we too have failed and shall fail yet again. The God of grace who sets us on our feet again is also the God of justice and truth. We must not let the night grow too late before we show compassion. We must not let the night grow too late before we do justice. We must not let the night grow too late before we seek peace and pursue it among families and neighbors and the nations of our world.

The time is ours until the door shuts.