

November 12, 2017 – Stewardship Sunday
“And the Door Shut!”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Matthew 25:1-13



The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids (or more accurately translated “virgins”) can be kind of jarring to our radical-hospitality-oriented, no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey-favoring, open and affirming-insisting ears. How dare Jesus tell a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven in terms of some being included while others are locked out as the door slams shut! I’ve even had a member our congregation once tell me – “That story shouldn’t even be in the Bible – it’s just not Christian!” I note that member is not in worship this Sunday. But before we get our knickers all into a left-leaning, liberal twist, let’s consider what is really going on in this intriguing tale.

The setting is that of an Ancient Near-Eastern, Jewish wedding. Suffice it to say – then as now – weddings are complicated. As was the custom of that culture the guests had all assembled at the home of the bride, where they were entertained by her parents while they awaited the arrival of the groom. When the bridegroom approached, the guests, including the bridesmaids, lighted torches and went out to greet him. In a festive procession, the entire party walked to the groom’s home where his parents were waiting for the ceremony and the extended banquet that would follow and continue for several days. Jesus and his mother were at such a gathering in that famous story of the wedding at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine.¹

In this parable, for whatever reason, the groom did not show up – or, I should say, he was unexpectedly detained. Cold feet perhaps? Who knows, but hours passed and many in the wedding party fell asleep. At about midnight, the announcement was made, the “tardy groom” had finally arrived. The bridesmaids leapt into action. They lit their lamps and the procession began. Five had enough oil to last for the entire parade and then some. Five did not and sought oil – unsuccessfully – at that God-forsaken hour. But, when they returned, faced a door slammed shut. A fate we cannot fathom given our penchant for radical inclusion and the “God of second chances.”

But, be careful. This was about them – not us, at least not entirely. Indeed, the writer has a bias in this story. The parable was written at a time the budding Christian community was dealing with the delay of Jesus’ promised return. By his actions and his farewell addresses, they expected him to return soon – following his resurrection – and certainly during their lifetime. But that proved not to be the case.

¹ John Buchanan, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, p. 286.

Some had given up and left the community. Others were beginning to wonder whether they had heard Jesus properly. Most harbored doubts trying to put the whole thing out of their minds as they came to grips with the fact that they may have followed the wrong leader. All were tiring, falling asleep. The wait was simply too long with little to show for their efforts.

It's to the community standing in that space – metaphorically – that threshold of time and space between Jesus' resurrection and return to which the writer of Matthew's gospel encourages them to “trim your lamps – keep them burning” or more simply, “prepare” – “be ready” – “look, the bridegroom IS coming.”

So ultimately this is not a story about who is in and who is out. No. It's a story about preparation – and what are we doing as we live our lives in this season, this “ordinary time” – when we stand in this threshold we refer to as our lives. The instruction here is not of warning in the sense that you had better follow the rules or your out. On the contrary, the invitation is to become more fully conscious – to take stock of how you are living your life, because we only get one crack at it – and, not a single one of us knows how much time we have. That's not intended to be a threat to scare us into action, rather it is an invitation to wake up and notice how we are BEING in the world.

It's a fascinating metaphor – this idea of thresholds. And so, I've been thinking a lot about thresholds lately – the physical ones I cross each day and the invisible ones that sometimes are far more important and much more difficult to navigate. It's these “thresholds of life” that are beginning to give me a clue at how I am living out my life – that is whatever time I have. Let me give you an example.

Some of you know I spent some time last week visiting my Dad in Pennsylvania. Like weddings, family is also complicated – I bet most of you will agree. There are some things about a visit with my Dad that are fairly predictable. For example, it goes without saying that we would take long rides in the country – rides that were particularly beautiful at this time of year with the magnificent display of color in the changing leaves. Our rides almost always involve a visit to one of our favorite ice cream shops – places my Dad refers to as “our places.” We don't talk much, but we enjoy each other's company and Dad loves to get out and go for rides in the car – an activity he only does with me. But the visit, this time, took an interesting twist.

This year he inquired several times why I chose to visit him during football season. A question that puzzled me unsure of why that would make any difference. I didn't think much of it at first chalking it up to his general grouchy demeanor. I only found out later that my Sunday visit with him – incidentally, the last day I would be in town – would have to be interrupted due to the Eagles game being played between 1 and 4:30 that afternoon. The reason: Ever since my mother died (13 years ago) he and his grandson watch the Eagle's games together – just the two of them. They have done this for every Eagle's game since she died. They haven't missed a single game. No one else is allowed in the room – some superstition, I suppose. No matter, I was not welcomed. The door was slammed shut.

It hurt at first. Not understanding his reason, my initial reaction was to resist and wanted more than anything to respond with words like, “You mean I have flown 3,000 flipping miles and I won’t be able to visit but 3 hours on my last day in town.” Or in the words of the bridesmaids, “What do you mean, you won’t share any of your oil with me?” But, then I realized, I was standing in another threshold. In a way it was physical. I was being shut out. But it was much more invisible than that. In reality, this was not about me. This was about him. I could respond like a child demanding my way. Or I could respond with deeper awareness, compassion, more fully conscious of what was really going on. Doing so I could begin to see the value he placed on this time with his grandson despite my desire to be with him.

Did I like it – hell no! The door what shut – there was no option to open. Believe me, asked. Did I want the situation to be different – certainly so. But what would I gain by insisting on my way?

I never said living life in the threshold – or becoming increasingly aware – is easy. On the contrary, it forces us to take complete responsibility for our actions and for our words. Living in the threshold means to grow up, to become increasingly aware and it may involve sacrifice in doing so. It may mean staring at a door slammed shut for quite some time – even when we disagree or don’t understand.

Too often our responses are knee-jerk and defensive. Can you imagine the indignance of the foolish bridesmaids? “We want in! We ought to be included! We should be allowed!” But that was not their lot – and often the same can be said for us. Our growing edge is based on what we do in that moment – standing in the threshold of what we want and what we need.

I believe that this story serves to remind us that we are constantly standing in that space. And that it is ours to realize, the threshold is an incredible opportunity – it is fertile ground for growth, change, and the ripening of our soul as we experience firsthand the invitation to live in love.

We are ushered into these thresholds each day. Sometimes the doors appear to be wide open. Other times they are slammed shut. Each time they offer us the possibility to stop and ask ourselves the question what am I being called to notice in this place and how will I respond?

In our silence today, I invite you to consider what threshold are you standing in at this time? What do you notice there? How did you get there? What might God be trying to teach you? How will you respond?