

A man and his wife were in a bank where a robbery was taking place. There was one other woman in the bank. The robber pointed his gun at that woman and asked, "Did you see me rob this bank?" The woman said, "Yes." And the robber shot her dead. He approached the man's wife; he asked her the same question, "Did you see me rob this bank?" No," she said, "but my husband did."

We don't speak much about judgment, about the possibility of a final accounting before God. But Matthew's gospel is notable for many stories of final reckonings, the gavel of the judge coming down and the final verdict being rendered upon us.

This week's Gospel has a parable that's found only in Matthew. And as it begins with "At that time," we are tipped off that Jesus is speaking of the future. The future will be like this, although we don't know the day or the hour. "Therefore, keep alert, because you don't know the day or the hour."

We will eventually be held to account, so how shall we live in the meantime? The bridegroom does not judge or condemn the young maidens who were unprepared. By their unpreparedness, they miss the party. That becomes their judgment. As some theologians have explained biblical judgment – it's not that God judges us but rather our own sins that judge us. These same theologians also suggest that whether we go to heaven or hell will be no surprise to us. We'll KNOW whether we belong in heaven – or not.

It is suggested that Christians in Matthew's church may have been concerned by the delay of Christ's return in glory and that was the occasion for this parable. If that's the case, then we can relate to their concern; we also have been awaiting the complete fullness of Christ's presence. So the question before us is their question: How shall we live in the meantime?

The reality is that when Jesus speaks to us of judgment, He is paying us quite a high compliment. In speaking of the consequences of our actions, Jesus is saying that our actions have important, even eternal consequences. What we do, how we live, makes a difference.

God has created us as creatures who are given ability to impact the world. It's so easy to think to ourselves and say "I'm just one person. What difference can I make?" Jesus tells us that we are important and that how we live our lives is of consequence.

It is interesting that the Greek word for judgment is KRISIS. KRISIS does not really mean the end, the final act, or what happens after the final act, but more accurately means 'turning point.' A crisis is not what happens after everything else is over. A crisis is what happens when the plot of the story takes a decisive turn. That decisive turning point could be at the beginning, the middle, or the end. It doesn't always have to be at the very end.

Jesus often talks judgment, particularly in this Gospel. When He talked judgment, He did not speak of it so much at the very end, but any time there is that moment of crisis, a turning point. Toward the end of Matthew's Gospel, the crisis comes like a thief in the night, when we are sleeping, and the thief pries open a window, and climbs in. Like that. Judgment comes when we least expect it.

And we know this. We are in a conversation with a boss. We are making our way to the office, going to work. There is a phone call late in the night. We're on the phone with a friend. That's usually the way the judgment or crisis occurs. In other words, for Jesus, judgment appears to occur not at the very end, but in the middle of things.

Therefore, from these parables of judgment in Matthew it would appear our concern is not, “Will you be ready to meet Jesus at the end?” Rather, our question is, “Now that we have met Jesus, how then should we live?” Now, right now, in the middle of things, in the midst of our daily lives. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2023, p. 21-23)

OK, enough background. So what? Here are 2 stories of this KRISIS, or judgment day –right now – in the middle of things. This first one is told by Francis Storrs. His twin girls just turned 13 – of course, he’s known for 13 years that age was coming yet, still, it caught him by surprise. How did those years go by so fast?

He writes: “There were a lot of things I didn’t know before I became a father. How to change diapers. How to do Tik Tok dances, How to realize sooner that it’s horribly embarrassing to watch your dad try to do Tik Tok dances....I suspect there are a lot of things new parents don’t know, like how your kids are probably going to outgrow believing in fairies, and maybe even some of the magic of Christmas. How spectacularly unprepared you’ll be for pretty much.....everything.

“If you’re a new parent, you might not know that on more nights than you’ll care to admit, you’re going to wish they’d just go to sleep already. Later, you’ll be sorry you were in such a rush. Sorry you worked late so often. Sorry you stared at your phone when you should’ve been sitting on the floor playing make-believe.

“You might not know that some of the things you found annoying are what you’ll miss most. For years, no matter what errand we were driving to, every playground we passed was met with pleas of ‘Can we go?’ from the back seat. We stopped often, and also not nearly often enough. There’s an awful lot I would give to be asked that again....

“Here’s one that I didn’t know: One day you’ll put your child down from a piggyback ride, and then you’ll never pick her up again.” (“WHAT I DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT BEING A DAD, The Boston Globe Magazine, June 19, 2022)

This parable reminds us that time is a gift that God gives us through which we might come to discover God and the things of God. Too often we fall into the mindset of the 5 ‘foolish’ bridesmaids, carrying on convinced that there will always be enough time ‘later’ to make our lives what we want them to be, to do the things we know that we should. We can easily think that there is an unlimited amount of ‘oil’ in our lamps to make it all happen. But life is finite, it ends, reminds the parable.

And second. Another true story from a homily by Jan Naylor Cope of the Washington National Cathedral. A Washington, DC, executive often would go to the noon Eucharist at a downtown church. One bitterly cold, windy day in February, he entered the church and took a seat. He noticed a few pews in front of him a man shaking uncontrollably. The man was undoubtedly homeless and had come into the church to get warm.

The executive began thinking about what he could do. How could he help this person who was in such obvious need? He knew the Gospel response would be to give the man his own coat. He had an old, frayed coat hanging in his closet at home that he would give to the poor man without hesitation – but today, the executive was wearing his very best dress coat, the one he had traded up to. He was thinking how much easier it would be to deal with the issue if he were only wearing his old coat instead of his new one, but he had a whole afternoon of meetings and appointments outside the office and needed a coat.

The executive, a good man, couldn't focus on the liturgy; he was totally obsessed with what he should do. He even considered giving the man money to buy a coat.

Finally, at the end of the service, totally transfixed on the plight of the poor man, the executive knew that he needed to give him his coat. So he went up to the man and he tapped him on the shoulder. He started to offer him his coat, but the man looked at him and thanked him and said, "Well, that's very kind of you, but that man over there just gave me his coat."

And the executive wept. He was ashamed at the struggle that he had just gone through. He knew all along what was the right thing to do. And he failed.

But he also wept in gratitude that someone was moved enough to follow Christ, to share from the abundance with which he had been given. An opportunity lost – to bring the light and love of Christ the Bridegroom into another's life. We have only so many opportunities to become part of Christ's work of mercy and reconciliation; we only have so much 'oil' in our lamps to illuminate the love of God in our lives. There is so much we want to do with our lives, but the many demands on our time to make a living derail us from making a life focused on the love of family and friends, a life aware of God's loving presence in our midst, a life that finds its meaning and joy in contributing whatever we are able to the good of all. Christ warns us not to fall into the trap of the five foolish bridesmaids who squandered their time before the Bridegroom's arrival. Each moment of our life is precious. We want to use it well. Amen. (taken from CONNECTIONS, November 2023, p. 4-5)