

What happened to Jesus today, huh? Did He wake up on the wrong side of the bed? Is He just off His routine? Maybe He didn't eat His Wheaties this morning. Either way, the Jesus we get in the Gospel sure doesn't sound like the Jesus we know, does He?

I mean, here He is, slamming the door in the faces of these poor, sweet, innocent bridesmaids—like, what did they ever do? When they say, "Lord, lord, open to us," He says, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." And as if turning to you and me, He warns us, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Now, what's gotten into Jesus?

How does that jive with the Jesus who says, "Let the little children come to Me"? How does that fit with the Jesus who says, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest"? How does that match with the Jesus who says, "I came not for the righteous but sinners"? Slamming doors, and harsh words, and stern warnings—how is that the patient, understanding, and longsuffering Lord we all know and love? What happened to "He is gracious and merciful" and "His steadfast love endures forever"?

Will Willimon, former dean of Duke Chapel, once spoke about a funeral he'd never forget. Early in his ministry, while he was serving a small Methodist congregation in rural Georgia, he attended a funeral at a little country church of another denomination. He'd grown up in a big downtown church, and had never been to a funeral like this one. The casket was open, and the funeral pretty much consisted of a sermon by their preacher.

The preacher pounded on the pulpit and looked over at the casket, saying, "It's too late for Joe. He might have wanted to get his life together. He might have wanted to spend more time with his family. He might have wanted to do that, but he's dead now. It's too late for him, but it is not too late for you. There is still time for you. You still can decide. You are still alive. It is not too late for you. Today is the day of decision." Then the preacher told about how a Greyhound bus had once crashed into a funeral procession on their way to the cemetery, and that that could happen again today. He said, "You should decide today. Today is the day to get your life together. Too late for old Joe, but it's not too late for you."

I was so angry at that preacher, Willimon admitted. On the way home, Willimon turned to his wife, "Have you ever seen anything as manipulative and insensitive to that poor family? I found it disgusting." She said back, "I've never heard anything like that. It *was* manipulative. It *was* disgusting. It *was* insensitive. Worst of all," she finished, "it was also true."

Is that what Jesus is doing here? Like that preacher, is Jesus pointing to those unfortunate, unprepared, unpunctual bridesmaids and telling us, "They might've wanted to get their lives together. They might've wanted to stay awake, to have enough oil, to trim their lamps, but it's over for them now"? Is He saying, "It's too late for them, but it is not too late for you. There is still time for you. You still can decide. You are still alive. It's not too late for you. Today is the day of decision"? Is that what Jesus is saying?

Maybe, just maybe, that's what He's saying—maybe just a little. And as difficult as that is, as harsh as that is, as much Law as that is, maybe we can find a shred of Gospel here. After all, Jesus could just come without giving a heads up. He could suddenly slam the door in our faces, suddenly leave us out in the cold without warning, but He doesn't. No, Jesus loves us—actually loves us—enough to caution us, to advise us. If He shows up and we're unprepared, at least we can't say He didn't warn us. And, in this way, He loves us—like a mother who loves her child enough to warn them about the risks of smoking, getting into cars with strangers, and looking both ways before crossing the street—He loves us. If Jesus *didn't* tell us, then would He love us?

But, are you like me, where this still just doesn't feel right? Is there also just something in your gut that isn't quite settled yet? I mean, Jesus—He's the same guy who spread out His arms on the cross to welcome us into God's family. He's the very guy who was ripped apart by nails and spear to tear the dividing temple curtain in two. He's none other than the guy who opened His veins for us to fling wide the very gates of heaven. Why then—how then—would He ever slam the door in our faces?

Good question. Y'know, thanks to Him, hell has become completely obsolete, absolutely unnecessary, there's literally no reason for anyone to go there. Yet, it still exists, and Jesus tells us it won't be empty. So, why is that?

Well, strange as it sounds, some people actually prefer it to the alternative. You see, they'd much rather do what they want than what God wants, to be on their own than have God in their lives. Once, C.S. Lewis even quipped that, hell is actually locked from the inside. And maybe, in some weird way, these bridesmaids have inadvertently locked Jesus out—not the other way around. When He says, "I never knew you," maybe it's only because they never bothered to get to know Him. After all, God loves folks like that too much to force them to spend an eternity with Him—if that's not really what they want, then they can have it their way. And while nobody might come out and say hell is in their long range plans, you can tell by their indifference toward heaven which they actually want.

Just look at those bridesmaids, they don't seem to be too concerned about the bridegroom or his party. If they were, if they really wanted to be part of the festivities, they would be too excited to sleep. The anticipation would keep them on the edge of their seats, the electricity would surge through their bodies, they'd always be at the ready because they just couldn't wait. But that's not the case—"Oh, well, he might come, he might not; who knows, who cares."

And just imagine the bridegroom, when he does finally arrive. After being delayed because the tux rental mixed up his order, and then having to change a flat on the way, and then getting lost because of bad directions, he finds the following scene at his own wedding: Five bridesmaids all zonked out on the couch, looking like a train wreck—their hair a rat's nest, their makeup all smeary, a few empty bottles scattered about. Checking his watch, he says "Look alive, ladies, we've got a wedding here in one minute, whether or not you girls are ready." Then there's the other bridesmaids—they simply stand up and smooth out their dresses, not a hair out of place, their makeup refreshed—they're like a picture out of a magazine. They are ready—off they go with the bridegroom into the chapel. Which set of bridesmaids are we? Are we excited about the party, like that? Are we looking forward to it? Are we watching, waiting, our appetites whetted?

There's absolutely no excuse not to be at the party. Our name's on the guest list—guaranteed. There's a place waiting for us at the table—one of those little cards, folded in half, sitting there, saving our seat. Everything's prepared, ready for us. In fact, heaven itself is excited about us—looking forward to us—watching, waiting, its appetite whetted for our arrival. Do we feel the same?

I forget which birthday it was, but it was the day of my party. Usually kids can't wait for their birthday to come, but to me it always felt so far off—you know how weeks can feel like forever when you're young. So, when the day finally rolled around, I couldn't believe it. It was like any other day—rolling out of bed, eating the same ol' cereal, watching the usual cartoon lineup. Nothing felt particularly special or different—really, it's my birthday, I thought? But then the decorations started going up, and the cake came out, and the games got set up. Apparently, it really was my birthday and soon my friends would arrive. And while everything around me looked like a birthday to me, it didn't feel like a birthday to me.

Now, believe it or not, but my very own birthday party got started without me. I was in my room all by myself—being silly and unreasonable the way kids are—not really in a birthday mood. I could hear laughter down the hallway, smell hotdogs outside on the grill, make out shadows running around under my door—but I would have none of it. In fact, I even resented anyone who could be having fun without me. Finally, after maybe half an hour, my Mom comes back into my room and says, "Won't you come out? Everyone's waiting for you? They're all asking, 'Where's the birthday boy?'" I still insisted on staying put—and gently but firmly this time, my Mom wouldn't take no for an answer. She picked me up and carried me out into the party—of course, I was kicking and screaming all the way. That is, until I saw the party—everyone there, waiting, gathered around the table. And there was my seat, an open spot for me—nobody else—with a cake and candles set before it. And in that moment, my heart softened—I even got a little excited. They were all there, singing happy birthday—to *me*! And to think, I almost missed it completely.

That's what this parable's about. It's not about slamming doors in faces, or harsh words, it's barely even about warnings to make ourselves ready. Think of it more as Jesus getting *us* ready for what God's got planned. It's our invitation to the

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Rev. David Miller

Lutheran Church of the Ascension

Atlanta, GA

party, the bridegroom's wedding banquet, the marriage feast of the Lamb. See, everything's set—we should be excited! Only thing is, this party's got to start sometime—with us, or without us. Now, we could be spoiled sports and sit it out for reasons of our own, but what a shame if we did. Jesus tells us this parable today because He'd hate for us to skip it!

I love how one theologian puts it on the front of your bulletin: “‘Watch therefore,’ Jesus says at the end of the parable, ‘for you know neither the day nor the hour.’ When all is said and done—when we have scared ourselves silly with the now-or-never urgency of faith and the once-and-always finality of judgment—we need to take a deep breath and let it out with a laugh. Because what we are watching for [isn't so much impending doom as it] is a party. And that party is not just down the street making up its mind when to come to us. It is already hiding in our basement, banging on our steam pipes, and laughing its way up our cellar stairs. The unknown day and hour of its finally bursting into the kitchen and roistering its way through the whole house is not dreadful; it is all part of the divine lark of grace.” Here's my favorite part—“God is not our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped. He is [more like] a funny Old Uncle with a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other. We do indeed need to watch for him; but only because it would be such a pity to miss all the fun.”*

* From Robert Farrar Capon's *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*.