

When Time Is Short

Delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Nov. 12, 2017

Based on Matt. 25:1-13 and Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-18

As a way of easing into the subject, let me begin with a personal story told by Rick Beyer about boundaries of various kinds: Rick says this about growing up -

My grandfather died when I was a small boy, and my grandmother started staying with us for about six months every year. She lived in a room that doubled as my father's office, which we referred to as "the back room." She carried with her a powerful aroma. I don't know what kind of perfume she used, but it was the double barrel, ninety-proof knock-down, render-the-victim-unconscious, moose-killing variety.

When she would leave the house to go spend six months with my Aunt Lillian, my mother and sisters would throw open all the windows, strip the bed and take out the curtains and rugs. Then they would spend several days washing and airing things out, trying frantically to make the pungent odor go away. This, then, was my grandmother at the time of the infamous "pea incident." It took place at the Biltmore Hotel, which, to my eight-year-old mind was just about the fanciest place to eat in all of Providence. The three of us were having lunch after a morning spent shopping. I grandly ordered a Salisbury steak, confident in the knowledge that beneath that fancy name was a good old hamburger with gravy. When brought to the table, it was accompanied by a plate of peas.

I do not like peas now. I did not like peas then. I have always hated peas. It is a complete mystery to me why anyone would voluntarily eat peas. I did not eat them at home. I did not eat them at restaurants. And I certainly was not about to eat them now.

"Eat your peas," my grandmother said.

"Mother," said my mother in her warning voice. "He doesn't like peas. Leave him alone."

My grandmother did not reply, but there was a glint in her eye and a grim set to her jaw that signaled she was not going to be thwarted. She leaned in my direction, looked me in the eye, and uttered the fateful words that would change my life forever

"I'll pay you five dollars if you eat those peas."

I had absolutely no idea of the impending doom that was heading my way like a giant wrecking ball. I only knew that five dollars was an enormous, nearly unimaginable amount of money, and as awful as peas were, only one plate of

them stood between me and the possession of that treasure. I began to force the wretched things down my throat.

My mother was livid. My grandmother had that self-satisfied look of someone who has thrown down an unbeatable trump card. "I can do what I want, Ellen, and you can't stop me." My mother glared at her mother. She glared at me. No one can glare like my mother. If there were a glaring Olympics, she would undoubtedly win the gold medal.

I, of course, kept shoving peas down my throat. The glares made me nervous, and every single pea made me want to throw up, but the magical image of that five dollars floated before me and I finally gagged down every last one of them. My grandmother handed me the five with a flourish. My mother continued to glare in silence. And so the episode ended. Or so I thought. My grandmother left for Aunt Lillian's a few weeks later. That night, at dinner, my mother served two of my all-time favorite foods, meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Along with them came a big, steaming bowl of peas. She offered me some peas, and I, in the very last moments of my innocent youth, declined. My mother fixed me with a cold eye as she heaped a huge pile of peas onto my plate. Then came the words that were to haunt me for [the rest of my life].

"You ate them for money," she said. "You can eat them for love."

One never knows when the jig is up; when time is really closing down. When forces converge to change one's life forever. Peas, of course, are small matters, but there are larger things, larger forces we may ignore until they demand our attention. Jesus' parable this morning is the story of something like that.

It's not one of my favorite stories of Jesus. It begins alright; it begins like so many of Jesus' other parables of the Reign of God with a great invitation to a party.

Over and over again Jesus couches our ultimate encounter with the holy in party images; the prodigal son's homecoming ends with a party; Jesus seems to love nothing more than a wedding banquet.

But in this story the bridegroom, for whom this has all been arranged, is delayed. No, this is not a case of the guy getting cold feet. In first century Palestine the bridegroom and his party go to the bride's family's home to fetch her. It's all part of the festivities. These things just take time. There are rituals to be performed.

So, some guests wander off while they await his eventual arrival. Knowing that additional oil will be needed for their lamps some, not all, go and buy oil just in case the wait will be prolonged.

At last, late in the night there is a shout, "The bridegroom is here. Let the festivities begin."

Those who have no oil for their lamps are now in a panic; the oil sellers are in bed. It's too late; they try and find some but can't. They return to the scene of the party and the door is shut. They bang on the door, but no one answers; they are too late. Jesus says the kingdom of God is like that.

This is a disturbing parable -- especially for those of us who think of ourselves as open-hearted, open-minded, "let everybody into God's party" kind of people.

Those final words are down right haunting, "And the door was closed."

It's haunting because the story is so much at odds with the rest of Jesus' teaching. Jesus was famous for those stories about open doors, the always available party -- the party where there is always room."

Just one month ago I preached on a different story from Matthew's gospel that seems to say just this. It was the one about the laborers in the vineyard and the foreman who hires some at 7:00am, others at 10 more at noon, 2:00, and finally at 4:30, and they all get paid the same -- a generous full days' wage, whether they've worked ten or only one hour.

"See, the door is always open," it says. Don't worry that you got there late; that you have no oil; there are oil sellers who work swing shift, even graveyard; don't worry, the door is always open, and the price is like gasoline was in the 1950s."

Nope, not this time!! Not in THIS parable.

So, what's happened to all the grace? I mean, after all, these are supposed to be bridesmaids, right? Well, "bridesmaids" isn't a good translation here. Don't think of college girls in matching lavender dresses. These are just teenagers, the sisters and cousins of the groom. Anyway, they may be young and maybe a little flighty, but what kind of crime is a lack of oil?? It's certainly not evil.

Consistency isn't everything, but why would Matthew include BOTH those stories in his gospel? Maybe it's because life is so multi-valiant. Different times and different people call for different approaches.

The gospel of Jesus IS, at its center, about inclusivity; God's abundant grace; the overflowing love of Christ; the wide open door. Yet there are those times in life when time runs out for all of us.

The late Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, spoke eloquently of that in his now famous, 2005 Stanford University Commencement speech. It's all the more amazing, now, with his passing a few years back.

When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right."

It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.

Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything; all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.

Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.

Maybe the thing we should say when we welcome people to church should be, "Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you better hurry up."

Now, some Biblical commentators tell us that this parable was one that the early church embraced. Christians early on, felt that Jesus would return to earth in a timely manner. When there was a delay, and the most holy pillars of the church, even the disciples, began to die, there was a feeling of panic in the church; a desire among some to bolt.

This parable says, hang in there; stay awake; remain ready -- and here we are, 2000 years along, still waiting.

Perhaps this parable is even more important for us today than for Matthew's church; maybe this is an age that needs most to hear words about standing firm and acting decisively in life!! Mostly we just bumble along the surface – we don't mean to – but time just flies by and we wake up once in a while and wonder at what happens, and also, at what doesn't.

Here is just such a first person account told by Dennis Donoghue:

I was almost forty and had lived by myself for fourteen years when I fell in love at the laundromat. It soon became clear that she wanted marriage and children, but I didn't feel I had what it took to be a good husband and father. Compromise and selflessness were not on my list of personal virtues.

I was seeing a therapist at the time, a sixty-two-year-old woman who'd been married for decades and had grown children. She was also in remission from ovarian cancer. I confessed to her that though I wanted to commit to this woman, I feared it was beyond my ability. What should I do?

The therapist broke into a hearty laugh and stretched her arms out wide as if gesturing to a bounty spread before us.

"You need to partake of life," she said.

I was confused. Was she saying I was ready for marriage?

"This is what people do," she continued. "They jump in. They play the odds. Now is as good a time as any."

"But what if it doesn't work out?"

What if it does?" she asked.

Twelve years later I've learned that nothing teaches the art of compromise and selflessness like marriage, especially when you and your spouse are raising three kids.

The Hebrew Testament text appointed to go along with the parable of the bridesmaids, comes from the book of Joshua. In that story, Joshua addresses the people of Israel and tells them that time has run out; the bill has come due. "Choose **this** day whom you will serve" -- the true God of Israel, or anything less.

Choose THIS DAY. Could those words be meant for us? Could Jesus' parable be meant for us?

Most of us think in terms of "someday," not today --

*Someday, I'm going to spend more time with my son.
Someday I'm going to sit down and type out my life story for my grand kids.
Some day I'm going to get serious about exercise, or, a healthy diet.
Some day I'm going to support the organization I love with a gift I will truly feel proud of.*

Well, life is such a crap-shoot.

I had a roommate in college named Bruce Talkington. In one word, Bruce was hilarious. He was a drama major and wanted nothing more than to be an actor. He did some serious roles, but he excelled in comedy. Following college he went to Los Angeles to seek his fortune. He did children's theater at Knott's Berry Farm. There he was discovered by Will Geer who played Grandpa on the Waltons, if you have any memory of that. Will Geer hired him to play in his Shakespeare theater in Topanga Canyon, and there Bruce was discovered by television promoters who hired him to play comic relief on a sitcom -- kind of a George Costanza character. He did very well with it, but not well enough to save the show and it tanked in its first season.

I visited Bruce shortly afterward and he was pretty down. I marveled that he had made it to a major network. He shook his head and said that being in a sitcom that tanks is the kiss of death for an comedian. Your career is over. Bruce felt like his *life* was over. But he picked up the pieces, found a cheap apartment in Venice Beach and began an apprenticeship with a plumber. It was a life, but he didn't feel it was *his* life.

Now I always told Bruce he was as good a writer as he was an actor, and a year later he was hired by the Disney Studios to write Winnie the Pooh cartoons for them. And there Bruce found success. Great success. He won an Emmy Award for cartoons my daughter loved; that many children people loved.

So Bruce had meteoric success followed by meteoric failure, followed by a fallow period, followed by another meteoric success.

Gut here is what he said -- he said that while he loved working for Disney, what he wanted most was to be a novelist. None of us who knew him doubted that would come. But not long after his 51st birthday, Bruce died suddenly.

The New Testament writer, James, has a word for those of us who always speak about "someday." And it came way before Steve Jobs.

"Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." JAMES 4:13

Life does not go on forever; There will not always be a tomorrow. What is hanging fire for you just now? What decision have you put off forever that is knocking on the door of your heart?

What is it finally time for you to say a resounding "no" to? What might be calling you to say a resounding, "Yes?"

Amen