

Nikos Kazantzakis rewrites this parable (Matthew 25:1-13) more to his liking and, perhaps, to ours. "What would you have done, Nathaniel," Jesus asked, pinning his large bewitching eyes on him, "what would you have done if you had been the bridegroom?"

Nathaniel was silent. He still was not entirely clear in his mind what he would have done. One moment he thought to send them away. The door had definitely been closed, and that was what the Law required. But the next moment he pitied them and thought to let them in . . .

"I would have opened the door," he answered in a low voice, unable to oppose the eyes of the Son of Mary any longer. "Congratulations, friend Nathaniel," said Jesus happily, and he stretched forth his hand as though blessing him.

"This moment, though you are still alive, you enter paradise. The bridegroom did exactly as you said: he called to his servants to open the door. 'This is a wedding,' he cried. 'Let everyone eat, drink and be merry. Open the door for the foolish virgins and wash and refresh their feet, for they have run much.'"

Ulrich Luz, author of a three volume, 1,600 page commentary on Matthew prefers Nikos' version to Matthew's. "We must ask," he writes, "whether God's love has the last word in this story."

He believes the original meaning of the parable which Jesus told was about participation in the celebration of the kingdom of God and the commitment it required. The emphasis was on the joyful celebration of a wedding feast, a metaphor for the commonwealth of God.

Luz believes Matthew introduced a new element, especially with his concluding verse. Now suddenly the emphasis seems to be on the uncertainty, indeed on the threat of being excluded.

He acknowledges, however, the presence of another question: whether a story of God's pure love, such as the one Kazantzakis tells, would cause people to depend on this love in their own calculations and thus not take the holy God seriously. This is Amos' argument with the leaders of Israel who believe their special relationship with God secures them against liability for their actions.

Dr. Amy Richter, an Episcopal priest and author, thinks we have a tendency to treat God like the attendant at a fast food drive-through: *Lord, I'll take two breakfast sandwiches with bacon, a medium coffee, and some of those delicious fries.*

*Thank you for your order, says the Lord. Would you like cream with your coffee? Oh, yeah, that would be nice.*

*Great. And because I am the Lord, your order is free of charge. Please drive around.*

It doesn't work that way, does it? Having enough oil to light our torches comes from engaging in the practices and disciplines of faith: prayer, reading scripture, sharing fellowship and worship, caring for people and for the planet. It's spending time with family, appreciating beauty, listening to or making music, knitting, marching, writing, baking, building.

And yes, the oil can run out. You know this. If you don't have a conversation with your spouse that isn't about paying the bills or scheduling car maintenance, the flames of love will flicker and even go out. If you don't spend time with your friends and children and grandchildren you can become strangers.

Yes, sharing is a Christian virtue, but some things can't be shared. Your friend has a marvelous marriage; there is no way to borrow some of that. Someone you admire has a deep faith and abiding hope developed over years of perseverance in the face of adversity as well as in joyful moments. You can't borrow her character. You have to develop your own.

As much as we don't like it, time runs out. You can't forever say *Someday I'll spend more time with my children, my spouse. Someday I'll go back to church, back to reading the Bible, back to praying. Someday I'll take a walk in the woods and breathe deeply and say a prayer of thanks to God. Someday I'll make that phone call, write the letter, make that donation to World Central Kitchen, volunteer at Habitat for Humanity.* We can protest all we like, but someday there will be a shout, *Look, here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!* There is such a thing as too little, too late. We don't like it, but reality is unaffected by our preferences.

The good news is, we are still here. We are still hearing this parable. It is not too late. Today, not someday, is the acceptable time to begin; today, not someday, is the day of salvation.