

Last week some friends of mine were awakened during the middle of the night with the kind of phone call nobody ever wants to get. The sheriff's department was asking for directions to their house to speak to them in person. In those heart-stopping minutes before the officers arrived, my friends thought up every possible bit of bad news. Nothing could prepare them to hear that their son had been killed while riding his motorcycle. We all think these things happen to other people. It's unimaginable that any ill would happen to us.

I suspect Jesus' audience felt like that when he told the parable we hear today. This little story opens with a reminder of the big story. Luke says Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem. We know what will happen there. With that ominous reminder in the background, we hear this severe question from someone in the crowd: "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" The person wants to know numbers. Jesus answers with a parable.

This is not a happy parable – no good shepherd finding lost sheep, no diligent woman searching out the lost coin, no prodigal son returning after a foolish absence. There is no joy in Mudville today. Jesus says being saved is like entering through a narrow gate where many people are pushing their way in and only the strong will survive. In the parable, he compares our request for salvation to the appeal friends make to get into the master's house. They think they should have access because they ate and drank with him and learned from him. But the master says, surprisingly, "Never saw you before. Get outta here." Because this happens after the master has "arisen," and because the people call him, "Lord," it seems that the master represents Jesus, and the people outside are those who ate and drank with him and learned from him. The parable says they won't get into the master's house. Instead, complete strangers from east, west, north, and south will find themselves at table in the kingdom of God because some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last.

What's frustrating about this parable is that Jesus never says why. If eating and drinking with Jesus – as we do weekly in the eucharist – and if learning from him – as we do weekly in the eucharist – isn't enough, what is? He doesn't say what the people from east, west, north, and south were doing that got them a place in the reign of God. He doesn't say what should be different. His main point seems to be to shock people from being too complacent, to say, "Boo!" We think if we go to church each week, that's enough. We think we'll never get the call from the sheriff's department in the middle of the night. Young people think they're always going to be healthy. Families think they will never be touched by divorce, drug abuse, or an unwanted pregnancy. But it can happen. And if it happens to us, we're going to be shocked.

Jesus does not always offer answers. He acts like we do. We don't know what to do in every situation. But this much is sure. Be prepared. Be prepared for anything. If there's something you've been meaning to say, or meaning to do, now may be the time.