We used to have a neighbor who, for the most part, ignored us. I say for the most part because now and then she would show up bearing gifts for us. And we soon learned that these gifts were a signal that she needed something, and that something was information. You see at this point in my life, because of my job, I had the inside scoop on a few things (very mundane things) that she sometimes wanted to know about. So once a year or so she would show up bearing gifts and then start probing me to get some information. It was all harmless enough, but the calculus of the transaction was sort of fascinating. It seems that she had reasoned that in order to get what she wanted she needed to offer something in exchange – so we would get a dozen eggs and she would learn if their were any developments on the proposed lift station. It seemed a bit like buying indulgences in the medieval church, but I couldn’t do much in terms of getting her great aunt out of purgatory. However, it also raised an interesting question, which was whether or not she thought that being nice and bearing gifts was the proper way for human relationships to work. And if she did think that why did she only do it at certain times? Our relationship seemed to operate on a similar principle to my cleaning my college dorm room right before my parents were coming to visit. On a certain level I knew that I should keep things clean and orderly, but just didn’t bother most of the time. And it is this sort of complacency that Jesus addresses today when he says, "But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Going back to my dorm room example today’s lesson seems like the equivalent of my parents telling me that they were going to visit sometime in March. Which on a practical level would mean that there could be no last minute panic cleaning, my dorm room would have to be presentable at all times. So here is the question that all of this presents: Why do we frequently display right and proper behavior only when we know it will be required?

There are any host of answers, we are lazy, we get distracted by shinny objects, there was an ABBA tribute band playing in Watertown and so on, but I think there is more going on – some conscious and some not. Let me try to explain. One of the fun things I have learned in being clergy is how people react when you tell them what you do for a living. Occasionally the reaction is hostile, occasionally it is enthusiastic, but the most common reaction I get from total strangers is either a sort of apology or a sort of self-justification. People either tell me that they have been meaning to get back to church and that they really do find church very important, but life has been crazy lately or people try to explain how their not going to church is just like going to church, citing something like walking in nature as being very spiritual for them. The thing is that on some level these people know they need to be at church and either feel bad about it or have constructed a sort of parallel universe where their church attendance is not measured in terms of actual church attendance. So why do people know they should be church attenders but then never or rarely attend a church? I am not positive but let me tell a brief story and see if this sheds any light on the question. And before I tell the story I realize that Jesus this morning is not simply talking about Church attendance, but our entire relationship with God. However, Church attendance is an incredibly important and an easily quantifiable piece of our relationship with God which is why I want to focus on it; so now onto story time.

Last year when I was in Qatar there were three places in the country where you could legally conduct and attend a Christian service. The first was where I was stationed, Al Udeid Air Base, the second was at the U.S. Army Base known as Camp As Sayliyah (which was rumored to have a really good make your own waffle station) and the third was an area known as Church City. The story behind Church City is that in 2008 Qatar gave this piece of land outside of Doha for Christians to use. Since that time buildings have been constructed for the Orthodox Church, The Roman Catholic Church and the catchall building for the Protestants. Only Christians are allowed on the property and unless you are in the military, this is the only place that a Christian is supposed to worship. The place is enormous and it is packed all the time. I don’t have any first hand experience with the Orthodox or Roman Catholic congregations but I do with the Protestants. And at the Protestant facility there is basically not a time when the building is not in use, 24 hours a day. The guy who was in charge of building the Protestant facility is an Episcopalian by the name of Bill Schwarz (he is actually canonically resident in this diocese and a good friend of Barb Atlee). He and his wife Edie were very gracious to me when I was there and took me to services a number of times. On Good Friday when we were surveying the mass of people milling about the complex Edie turned to me and said, “See what happens when you make going to church difficult.” It was an interesting comment and pointed out a stark contrast to how things work in the United States where we have introduced things like drive through ashes on Ash Wednesday and coffee bars, ready to make you a caramel macchiato before you enter into the sanctuary. Getting to Church could not be easier for us. So when we look out and see churches closing for lack of attendance should our response be, “See what happens when you make going to church easy?”

I think on some level in all of our striving to make church attendance easy we may have violated Groucho Marx’s maxim that he would never want to be the member of any club that would have someone like him for a member. But I think there is something beyond this. I think those in Qatar who labored to get to church also saw something that we may have difficulty seeing. They saw the Church as a refuge and a haven in a strange land. In Psalm 63 the Psalmist says, “O God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is.” In a strange land people realize the thirst they have, but in a land of convenience we say we will quench this thirst tomorrow or maybe we will drink from other fountains hoping they will satisfy. Our culture is starving for God, but sadly is either not even aware of this fact, thinks they can do it tomorrow or is looking for their salvation elsewhere. As people have moved away from God the need for salvation has not gone away. The thirst is still there, but people are not going to God to be satiated. I very rarely get political in sermons but in the reaction to the horrific shootings this past week I have seen clergy running to the streets demanding that politicians do something about this. They believe the sickness of souls that are on display by individuals killing total strangers is something that can be solved by a new law or a political speech. And certainly there may be some things that can help, but in a culture of death we must work to bring people to the truth. In John’s Gospel we hear this “Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’” That is what we can offer, the words of life.

We do not know the hour when God will come, but our responsibility is to worship him and to bring the world into his saving embrace. This is not something we do now and then but something we do now and forevermore.