

Exposed! The Imposter Syndrome

Matthew 22:1-14

Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, October 12, 2008, Duke University Chapel

If Matthew and Luke had churches in my town, I would definitely go to Luke's church. Every time I visit Matthew's church, I sit near the door. Things are so clear-cut for him. In his world, you are either a sheep or a goat, wheat or tare, a wise maiden or a foolish one. If you pretend to be one when you are in fact the other, then woe to you, you hypocrite—you wolf in sheep's clothing, you splinter picker with loggy eyes. Three guesses where you are headed when the kingdom comes!

In my part of the country, Matthew is what we call a fire and brimstone preacher. He gets really excited about hell, which he conceives as a burning trash dump where a lot of sorry hypocrites are going to grind their teeth for all eternity. Luke mentions the dump once, so maybe there's something to it, but Matthew can't seem to get enough of it. Over and over, he puts hell in Jesus' mouth, filling the fiery furnace with sinners of every kind: evildoers, unfaithful stewards, wicked servants, and at least one poor guy who was so afraid of his master that he did not have the nerve to invest a single talent in the financial market. Imagine that.

"You wicked and lazy slave!" his master replied when he found out. "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was mine with interest" (25:26-27). I'm pretty sure this guy worked for Lehman Brothers. Then he had his slave thrown into outer darkness as punishment for being afraid, but at least he didn't cut him up first. In another story, another master cuts his wicked slave into pieces before sending him to the weeping and gnashing place (24:50-51).

I'm not saying Jesus didn't say these things. You will have to talk to your Bible teacher about that. I'm just saying that Matthew sure seems to enjoy reporting them, the same way he seems to enjoy telling the parable of the wedding banquet.

The first part is bad enough. The king invites the A list to his son's wedding, but they don't show up. When he sends his slaves to fetch them, they not only make light of the invitation—they kill the messengers, which so enrages the king that he puts the roast ox and the fatted calves his chefs have prepared for them back in the oven while he rallies his troops to go and kill them all, burning their city to the ground.

Bad enough, right? But then he sends his slaves to bring in the B list, which also includes some people on the C, D, and F lists, most of whom were checking their e-mail, changing the oil in their pick up trucks or just sleeping in the bushes until the shelter opened when they were summoned to the king's wedding banquet. *Cool! I must have won the lottery!* So they go. And you know what happens. The king notices one of them who is not dressed appropriately, acts as if that is some kind of big surprise, and—when the guy has nothing to say for himself—orders him bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness, “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Can we go to Luke's church, please?

No we can't. We're in Matthew's church this morning. It's his turn to give the sermon, and if you have a hard time sitting still, don't forget: it's his story, but it's not his gospel. It's the gospel according to Matthew, which every one of us and all of us together are allowed to engage according to the gospel that has given us life.

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I have spent so much of my life changing bandages on people wounded by brutal religion that you have to keep an eye on me, to make sure I don't round off edges God means to keep sharp. My problem is that I really believe the gospel is good news—that even the hardest sayings, recorded by those with the angriest ears, have life in them somewhere, with truth I need to know.

In the case of this morning's parable, I am deeply relieved that someone knows about this awful dream I keep having. In one version of it, I am the guest preacher at some grand place like this but I have forgotten my vestments, and there is nothing in the closet that fits me. My only choices are big baggy black things made for men twice my size or little angelic things made for choristers half my size. I keep trying them on and ripping them off again while the clock ticks the time away. The next thing I know I am standing in church in something completely inadequate when it comes time for me to read the gospel. I decide that posture is everything, holding my head high as I step into the pulpit to find that the bible is written entirely in Swedish.

In another version, I have just learned that I am enrolled in a class I have not attended all semester—usually in advanced math or physics—but I also forgot to drop the class, which means that I have to take the final exam no matter what. I find the textbook. I cram and cram. I stay up all night, but I can't do anything with the numbers. They keep swimming on the page like tadpoles. So I go to the exam next morning knowing I will fail it, and when I walk through the door the professor looks quizzically at me. “And who are you?” he asks.

You know the dream I am talking about, right? At least I hope you do, or this is really embarrassing.

People seem to have different versions of it, depending on their stations in life, but the dream always comes down to being somewhere you are not equipped to be—usually without any clothes on—waiting to be exposed for the imposter you are. As hard as you have worked to prevent it, it is finally going to happen. People are going to learn the truth about you: that you are stupid, that you have no business being here, that you don't know the language/ don't know which fork to use/don't remember your host's name--that your body really is as bad as you thought it was, that people really are looking at you and there is nothing in reach—nothing at all--that you can use to cover yourself up.

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Whatever else Matthew was up to in this parable, he got that part right. Everyone else at the banquet seems to have gotten a memo that the under-dressed guest has not. When the magnificent king approaches him, with anger still radiating from his royal person over his first, disastrously received effort at being generous, the under-dressed guest has no time to think, much less get the textbook.

“Friend,” the king says to him (a lousy translation; “buster” works much better).

“Buster,” the king says to him, “how did you get in here without a wedding garment?”

Oh, God. It's one of *those* dreams.

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Why do I think it's a dream? Because real people don't turn down a king's dinner invitation, much less torture and kill the messengers who came to fetch them. Because once you have a whole ox and several fatted calves on serving platters, they won't keep while you wage war on a whole city, kill its inhabitants, and torch the place. Because who really expects someone nabbed in the middle of an oil change to have a clean wedding garment in the back of the truck?

Jesus called it a parable, which is almost the same thing as a dream. It's not a once-and-for-all story. It's a story you can walk around in, a story that wants a response from you—hopes for a response from you—one that changes as you change, so that it is different the tenth time you hear it than it was at the first.

Matthew was certainly looking for a response, but his reasons for recording the story don't exhaust our reasons for entering it. The king, the banquet, the dress code, the failure—the exposure of the failure, the judgment, the free fall into outer darkness—you know this story, don't you?

You even know why it's no good to be a hypocrite. It really *is* deadly, to keep two yous going—the public you and the private you, the you you say you are and the you you act like, the you you dress like and the you you really are. You say you're an environmentalist but you gobble energy like a suburban mall. You say "have a blessed day" to the lady at the bank and then pull into traffic like a demon straight from hell. You tell everyone who will listen how worried you are about the public schools, about the people who are losing their homes, about the election, but you don't do anything about them. You say you will go to the vineyard but you don't.

Matthew seems to think that all this twoness is about gaining advantage over other people, but I think that's circumstantial. When he wrote his gospel, he was dealing with religious people who were living high on widow's mites, who were using their theological educations—their institutional privileges--to climb on top of other people. While that hypocrite's club still has plenty of members, Matthew stays so busy with them that he seems to lose sight of the people whose twoness has less to do with their inflated sense of their own worth than with their terrible fear that they are worth nothing at all.

It's just as deadly, this other hypocrisy. You look all pulled together but you are really a wreck. You make a good salary but you're on welfare in your heart. You can speak three languages. You have a college degree. You know which fork to use, and still you keep waiting for someone to come and arrest you--to ask you how you got in here--and when you cannot get a single word to pass your lips because you have been found out at last—you hold out your hands so the usher will have an easier time being them. You're scared of the outer darkness but it's no surprise, really. It is where you always feared you belonged. Based on personal experience, I would have to say that the only thing worse than the twoness is waiting for someone to find out about it. The only thing worse than showing up in your dream with the wrong clothes on—no clothes on?--is waiting for someone to notice. Then someone does, and while there can be real terror in that moment—especially if the noticer happens to be a really mad king--there can also be real relief in that moment—because someone finally noticed your twoness and now you don't have to pretend anymore. Someone was not fooled by your pretense. Someone has reached past the two yous to tap the real you on the shoulder, and even if he calls you "Buster," the jig is up.

Here's the good news: because your twoness has been exposed, your wholeness is a real possibility, perhaps for the first time. Because someone has paid attention to you long enough to notice what it was about you that didn't fit—someone who has decided not to let you pass this time, who has the regal nerve to walk right up to you and say, "Which one's the lie? This isn't a Halloween party. Take off the mask."

Well. Now that that's happened, you have a chance to be made new. When this dream comes back, you're going to play it differently—because you can, now. When that king approaches you next time, you're going to let him know you got the point.

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I am teaching a film class at Piedmont this semester. Every other Tuesday night, nine students and I sit in a dark auditorium watching deep and sometimes disturbing films like *American Beauty*, *Pleasantville*, and *Magnolia*. On alternate Tuesdays we sit in the same place with the lights on, discussing the characters we watch come to life on the screen. Nine times out of ten, we know more about them than they know about themselves. The high-strung real estate agent cannot see how brittle her striving has made her, but we can. The man with testosterone poisoning can't see how much he misses his dead mother, but we can.

Last Tuesday we were sitting there talking about why these characters are so *dense* when someone pointed out that they do not have the luxury of watching the movie like we do. They are *in* the movie, where they are so busy with their own dramas that they don't have much opening to think about their parts. They just keep playing their roles—acting like people we

know they are not, saying things they don't really believe, and hurting the people they want to be near.

When their lives change—*if* their lives change—it is because someone gets close enough to tell them what they can't see about themselves: that they are even worse than they feared, that they are lovelier than they ever imagined, that their story does not have to turn out the same way every time unless they insist. Since the characters are all different, so are the revelations that change their lives. There is no one sized truth that fits all, except that the keys to their prisons are usually in other people's pockets—someone, anyone, who will stop, look, and refuse to by the act. When that happens, it pops their locks. It opens the door to their salvation—because someone got close enough to see past their twoness and call them to become whole.

I don't remember who it was in class who said this so well—probably the painfully shy girl who is brilliant on paper but almost never says a word out loud. Whoever it was, we got it: that we could not see ourselves any better than the people on the screen could see themselves. Who was watching our movies carefully enough to tell us what they saw? Who—in a whole room full of people who could see exactly how we were dressed—who would have the nerve to come up and say, “How did you get in here?” or “Didn't you see the garment with your name on it?” or “Would you like to dance?”

I guess you never know who that person will be—a mad king, a patient lover, a scary Matthew, a sweet Jesus. Since this is our gospel—our story, our hope of waking up to real life—then I guess that person could be you or me—dreaming God's dream as many times as it takes to put the fiery furnace out because everyone—I mean everyone—is inside the banquet hall, dancing the night away.

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