

## **IDOLS AND IMPOSTORS**

*Exodus 32*

*Matthew 22:1-14*

*October 9, 2011*

If Matthew and Luke were pastors of local churches in Dayton, I would go to Luke's church. Matthew preaches a lot of hell fire and brimstone. Liberal Luke says, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (14:13). Luke only mentions the fiery dump of hell once, but Matthew can't get enough of it. Over and over he puts hell in the mouth of Jesus, filling the fiery furnace with sinners of every kind: evil doers, unfaithful stewards, wicked servants, and one poor guy afraid to invest a nickel in the stock market, choosing instead to bury his money in the ground (a modern temptation along with under the mattress).

Matthew matter-of-fact, cut and dried. In Matthew's world you are right or wrong. You are a sheep or a goat, a wheat or a weed, a wise maiden or a foolish one. Look at Matthew wrong and I think he'd have you weeping and grinding your teeth forever. So as much as I'd rather go to Luke's church, today we get Matthew for our assigned reading, so I'm sitting near the back door. Like Will Campbell's friend who attended the snake handling service and when the preacher took the big snakes out of the boxes, he said, "I'm outta here, out the back door." Will said, "There's no back door." "Where do you think they want it?" We who think we are too smart to fall for Matthew's hell fire and brimstone preaching, what are we to make of this story?

What is going on here? This story is filled with enough killing to make the angry woman in Kill Bill I and II envious. Town burned to the ground. People refusing invitation to party murdered. Talk about shock and awe. Talk about fear and panic. Well, I don't know for sure what's going on here. Checking with a variety of commentaries I found the following ideas: The story is about God's judgment on Israel. Matthew has reworked the story to make it an allegorical account of the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. The motif of the story is invitation, but you have to maneuver around a bunch of dead bodies to get to the party. Some accept the king's invitation to the banquet and some don't. The parable ends with the warning that admission into God's banquet is no guarantee of staying there. The story is an outline of salvation history from a Christian perspective. It explains the inclusion of marginal people in God's kingdom.

At the level of ordinary life, we understand this attention to what folks wear. Whether it's at a party or church, we check out what people wear.

***Should I wear a tie and coat?  
Is this dress OK?  
Is this formal, informal or business casual?***

In Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Everything that Rises Must Converge," a self-righteous white woman and an African American woman are wearing the same hideous hat and the story revolves around those hats – matching purple velvet flaps on one side and stood up on the other; the rest green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. The old white woman is clinging to a dead past – when her grandfather owned slaves and was governor of Georgia – but now she's riding the bus and her grandson, no paragon of compassion, tells her,

**"Knowing who you are is good for only one generation."**

So we shouldn't be surprised that how we are dressed has profound theological meaning in Scripture. Centuries before Jesus was a winemaker, God was a tailor and he made clothes for Adam and Eve as they left the garden. St. Paul writes, **"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."** In Revelation 7 we have a picture of all God's people robed in white.

Somewhere I read that if you are invited to a banquet by the Queen of England, you will be told to wear a dark suit or a formal dress. We're talking traditional formal wear here and not the outrageous display of extreme couture on display at a Paris fashion show or the red carpet at the Academy Awards. Formal and discreet – no pants suits for women, no cowboy boots for men. If you do not follow the dress code, you will be denied entry and sent back into the darkness from which you came.

Still, the story irritates our usual easy-going liberal attitudes. Search the story for clues as to why the king kicked out the badly dressed man, and you get nothing. The story has been wiped clean of clues. Even CSI couldn't solve this puzzle. This man, like everyone else in this banquet room, has never been on the guest list for any party other than a backyard bar-b-que. He has friends in low places; he's not much on social graces. He doesn't own a tuxedo. The king's servants picked him up while he was changing the oil in his pick-up truck. Read the parable any way you like. If

this has something to do with religion, it is unfair. You can't invite a guy to a party and then throw him out because he's not dressed right. Can you?

Look, we have advanced degrees in God's grace. Millions of church members are counting on grace to get them to heaven. They came out of their baptism dripping grace, left the church, and haven't been heard from since. "There's just nothing we can do to avoid being graced by God's grace. It's like the air we breathe; it's like the water we drink. Every gasp and gulp is but a form of God's grace (SH, *Unleashing the Scripture*). Our God, after all, is so good, he is so good to us. Surely, all we have to do is accept our acceptance.

So students of the parables of Jesus scramble for ways to make this story more acceptable. Some suggest that a king had extra wedding robes hanging on racks at the entry to the palace during the first century. I have no way of knowing if that is true, but once I was pastor of a church that required staff to wear a coat and tie, but the music director hated ties so I kept a couple of ties and a jacket in my office for those days I needed to make public appearances with him. Read this way, the guest stomped into the banquet hall as if he owned the place, tramped mud on the carpet, didn't put on his wedding garment and went straight for the shrimp and beer. Maybe he was far too casual; maybe he dripped indifference. Maybe he was arrogant in the defensive way that insecure people can be arrogant. In any event, in the midst of a huge banquet, he stuck out like a sore thumb.

So what does God say? God says, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" To his servants, the king says, of all things, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." We are shocked.

**Nice touch the idea of robes hanging there for all to put on, but I can't get away from the line in the story that says the impostor was speechless. HE WAS SPEECHLESS!** In other words, he couldn't speak the language of the kingdom. His silence gave him away as it gives us away. "Without repetition and repetition is but another word for the worship of God, we are in danger of losing the grammar of the faith." "Prayer is the heart of Christian speech." We acquire the habits of speech through the right worship of God. But this is something that you resist with all your might. Like the Israelites bored with the worship of God and Aaron making them a golden calf so they could be entertained in worship. Note that idol worship is mixed with the worship of God. If someone asked me for a picture of American religion, I would paint this

scene of Israel before the golden calf and claiming to worship the one true God. We can be worshipers of idols and impostors and not know it, but our silence means the gig is up. You can't fake a language that is foreign to your heart, unformed on your tongue, and unknown to your mind.

The man had no answer for how he got in the banquet of the kingdom without a wedding garment – without the practices of a faithful life, without the robe of righteousness, without the virtues of the Christian life, without participation in the community of faith. And aren't we just as speechless today before the world? Where do we feel comfortable talking about Jesus? I am not nearly as concerned with your desire not to talk politics or sex in church as I am with your habit not to talk about faith in the world. I'm afraid that we can't be silent witnesses and then go to heaven and break out in praise of God. Speechless.

Perhaps our speechlessness is testimony to how desperately we want God's grace to be "You are accepted." We want salvation to be some abstract "spiritual" experience, some out-of-body experience, but God has saved us through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. God has saved us into the church, the embodied, flawed, very fleshly community of faith. And it is all of one piece. I know, I know, we want the church and all those practices of holiness to be incidental to our salvation but it is actually essential. There are those who claim that the Catholic Church is the only church that understands that the church is "neither an abstract idea nor merely a voluntary association of believers, but a divinely commissioned and ordered community of apostolic faith, worship, and discipleship through time." But I would argue that such an idealization of the Catholic Church is just as misleading as our own Baptist idealization that it's all grace all the time. Many Catholics believe that as long as they show up and the priest says the right words over the bread and cup, there's nothing that can keep them out of heaven. Many Baptists think that since that have a baptismal certificate and their name on a church roll, there's nothing else they have to do. This means a lot of Catholics and Baptists are showing up at the kingdom banquet improperly dressed.

After all, putting on the wedding robe is a lifelong practice. Every morning when we get out of bed, we must get dressed and be clothed in the robes of righteousness. We are baptized into the life and resurrection of Jesus so that we might be different people shining in the world that the world might know that God's kingdom is about a new world. Without such clothes, we cannot enter the kingdom of God. Let's pay attention to how we are dressed. Amen.