

Smoke and Mirrors (Matt. 22.1-14)
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My uncle was never a theologian, but he was close enough. Instead he was an attorney, he was a magician, he was a man with mental illness, and he was a teller of very inappropriate jokes. In my view, all of these elements combined to make him something of an amateur theologian, although he would never have called himself that. The reason that I call him that is that he taught me about heaven and hell.

My uncle had a passion for performing magic tricks. He always had a knack for them and was usually on the lookout for an audience. So it was to be expected that when you went to grandmother's house for dinner, Uncle Bob would probably be sitting in the living room nonchalantly, waiting for someone to amaze and mystify. No sooner had you arrived than Uncle Bob might come up to you, say hello, and reach behind your ear to produce a shiny coin. Or he might retrieve a pack of cards from his coat pocket and ask you to pick one, remember what it was, and put it back. Then he would shuffle the deck wildly, fan it across the table, and with a single reach pick out the card that was yours and hold it up. "Is it this one," he'd ask, knowingly? As a child I found his tricks irresistible. "Do it again, do it again," I'd ask, and he was only too happy to oblige. Then I'd watch his eyes and hands and try and figure out how he was fooling me. So when my uncle first offered to teach me some of his tricks I could hardly wait to get started. Before we began, however, he informed me that there was something we needed to discuss. There was something that he said I needed to know.

I can remember it quite vividly. Just before my first lesson, my uncle and I sat down together, magician and apprentice. He looked over his shoulder to see if anyone else was

around. Once the coast was clear, he closed the door, sat down across from me, and leaned in close to whisper. "Here's what you need to know. It's a secret. All magicians know the secret, but you have to promise not to tell. Can you promise not to tell the magician's secret?" I nodded. "Okay," my uncle continued, "Here it is. ... There's no such thing as magic. It's only an illusion. So magicians don't need to be afraid because there's nothing to be afraid of. We're not really doing magic. We're just playing tricks." Then he repeated that there was no reason to be scared. "Do you want to learn how it works?" he concluded. "Yeah," I said.

What followed were the happiest memories I have of my uncle. Throughout my boyhood he taught me all sorts of tricks. They were easy enough to learn, but each required a great deal of practice. I can remember spending hours in front of the mirror trying to make something in my hand appear to vanish. Then I'd summon my uncle and show him. "You're getting much better," he'd say. "But I saw what you did. Here. Watch how I do it and try it again." With time I got good enough that I was invited to join my uncle in putting on occasional after dinner magic shows for the family. I started off slowly with sleight of hand tricks before moving into some fairly elaborate illusions that surprised everyone. The best of these involved pouring an entire pitcher of milk into a cone of rolled up newspaper right in front of my parents who wondered what on earth I was doing. As my uncle looked on and tried not to laugh, I tossed the cone of newspaper at my parents who threw their arms into the air and shrieked before realizing that they were completely dry. "Where did the milk go?" they asked. "Seriously Jeremy, where is the milk?" "I can't tell you," I smirked, glancing at my uncle. "It's a secret."

I couldn't stop thinking of my uncle this week and the magic shows we used to put on. Perhaps this is because the lectionary text tells of a great banquet that I feel could use some entertainment at the end. Perhaps it's because the sacred story sounds like a trick to me and I want to learn its secrets and not be afraid. Or perhaps it's because the reading is an allegory that conjures up images of heaven and hell, prompting me to think of my uncle's last trick when he disappeared about a year and half ago after going to sleep and never waking up. What secrets would he tell me, I've been wondering, what secrets would he tell all of us, if he could? Would he still lean in close and lower his voice to a whisper? Would he say now, as he always did, "There's nothing to be afraid of. It's only an illusion. Do you want to learn how it works?"

I don't know what the gospel writers would have thought of my uncle, but I suspect that one or two of them might have appreciated his ideas about magic and reality. For the parable that we've heard this morning is actually told by several gospel writers, each of them stacking the deck to amaze and mystify in his own way. The parable is, in its most general sense, an allegory about the kingdom of heaven, the movement that Jesus was always talking about. As the parable goes, there is a king who sends out invitations to a dinner party. All of the ancient writers recount that after a period of waiting the king's RSVP list comes up miserably short. So he changes his plans and simply invites anyone interested to come for his meal. When read allegorically, the parable is almost always interpreted as a picture of heaven, more often than not a heaven that is an eternal and otherworldly place. With that in mind, I read and reread the parable this week, first in our text from Matthew, then in Luke and finally in the Gospel of Thomas. I'm sorry to report that Matthew's version is by far the most troubling because it his account that adds

such severe judgment at the end. Luke and Thomas both offer a kinder versions of the parable with much more open endings. But according to Matthew, and really only according to Matthew, the king in the parable is portrayed as an angry and violent character, ultimately casting one of his guests into a place where the text says there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

If you're like me you may be wondering why Matthew adds to his heavenly allegory a portrait of hell to match. If you're like me you may be wondering why the lectionary gave us this version when there are friendlier renderings in our Bibles. And if you're like me you may be wondering why Matthew would take a pretty good parable about a dinner where everyone is invited and turn it into a story of seemingly inexplicable cruelty. I'll admit that I'm not Matthew's best defender on these points because I'm a Universalist Christian and the last thing on my agenda is casting anyone out or making them afraid. Heaven and hell are, in my view, not so much otherworldly destinations as they are realities in the present day. And if anyone hasn't seen heaven or hell just this morning, I can only advise you to buy the *Sunday Times* on your way home and you'll find them on every page. But even for those of us who can't take Matthew's allegory literally, we may still be able to take the questions that his story stirs up. And we can ask just what sort of trick he's trying to pull. Why is he so eager to condemn? Why all these words of warning and woe? Why has he written all of this bitter stuff?

While I've admittedly never been much for hell, I have taken note of its popularity. For as long as people have been telling stories, they've cast them as morality tales, dividing the characters into good and bad in order to entertain an audience. And “entertain” really is the operative word here. Stories about heaven and hell are

entertaining. In the middle ages, for example, traveling bands of players set up stages throughout the countryside to perform great metaphysical dramas. Of particular interest in these “mystery plays” was the enactment of judgment day, whereupon all of the characters were sent to either eternal reward or punishment. As these plays became more and more popular, it was noted that without exception the crowds were eager for the part about hell. This was actually reflected in the stagecraft as the entrance to heaven was done up fairly simply while the gate to hell was fantastically ornate. Huge jaws were often constructed that could open wide to swallow up the damned at the end of the show. Torches were lit and smoke would bellow forth from the underworld as characters were ushered inside. The whole scene was loud and obnoxious and audiences could hardly get enough.

Historians of the stage have noted that crowds were so keen on this drama because it grew progressively sillier and sillier. As the props developed, the mouth of hell began to belch and snort and audiences would invariably go to giggles. But they were laughing at more than the fog and the flatulence in the scene. They were laughing because it was always the powerful who were sent down below. When the fires were stoked and the stage directions given, it was always the privileged characters who had to go to hell. So the king went. And the queen. Then came the bishop, quite naturally, and a host of priests followed by wealthy merchants. Common audiences laughed and cheered as the powerful were marched away and echoed the words I used to say to my uncle, “Do it again, do it again,” while troupes of dramatists were only too happy to repeat the trick.

In a very strange way this is what the author of Matthew may have been doing when he included so much judgment in his parable. The old writer was indulging a bitter

humor by setting his stage in a way that his audience would have understood. If we look beneath his words for a moment, we can see it. The author of Matthew is writing to a group of both Jews and Christians who consider themselves to be elect or chosen in some way. And he means to unsettle them a bit with this parable. For Matthew's audience would have heard his allegorical meaning quite clearly when he told of the character who was cast out. That character couldn't stay for dinner because he wasn't dressed for it. He wasn't ready to participate in the grand occasion. And the writer of Matthew may well have had enough of Jews and Christians alike who acted like they were special, assuming positions of privilege and control without really contributing much. We can almost lend the text a sympathetic ear if we hear it this way. We can almost hear the author mumbling as he adds his words of judgment, "Dinner is still free, people. And there really is room at the table for everyone. But for God's sakes, get yourselves together and show up like you mean it. Comb your hair and put on a tie and remember that this party isn't all about you. Bring a speck of humility and stay for the meal." My own best guess is that the writer was exasperated by a religious community where people weren't participating fully. So he added some harsh words to his story in an attempt to inspire them to action. As he did it, he brought the allegory of heaven and hell into the present tense, warning all of his hearers that heaven and hell were closer to home than they thought and salvation wasn't so much a given as it was a process in which people must choose to participate. "If you want to come to dinner," Matthew's parable says, "get yourself ready."

I suppose what troubles me most about this story is the way that its allegory has so often been taken by the larger Christian church and cast as literal truth. Instead of

allowing us to ask why Matthew set his stage this way and what exactly is going on here, the church has often used parables like this to speak in heavy-handed ways about things like heaven and hell. To be quite honest, texts like this have been used as instruments of control. Churches near and far have frightened the faithful into believing that if they do not say the right thing or do the right thing or perhaps give the right amount of money then they, too, will have to join the long line of characters marching toward their doom. This strikes me as at once both scary and silly, it seems like the cruelest trick of them all, a system of smoke and mirrors set up not so much to entertain us but to keep us in one line or the other. And in a culture where ideas of heaven and hell are still invoked on a regular basis, perhaps churches like ours could exhibit the same amount of grace that my uncle once showed. Perhaps we could learn to tell a secret like the magician once did, only this time with the door wide open. Perhaps we could sit down with everyone who comes to our table and say, “Okay. Here it is. There’s no need to be afraid. This parable is an allegory. It’s a question. It’s an invitation. It isn’t heaven. It isn’t hell. It’s just a story. It’s just a church. Do you want to learn how it works?”

Near the end of my uncle’s life, as his mental illness progressed, he offered a final lesson in theology. We were sitting in the Emergency Room at Park Plaza Hospital. I was there because it had taken both my cousin and myself to find my uncle and persuade him to come with us for a psychiatric consult. We spent the better part of the day there, waiting for the doctor, and once he arrived my cousin went to speak with him privately. I stayed behind with my uncle so that he wouldn’t perform one of his favorite tricks and disappear from the hospital. And as we sat together he began to tell me stories about his life that I’d never heard before. The stories weren’t about his life as the jovial magician

I'd known growing up. They were stories about a different reality. As he sat on the edge of a hospital bed in a thin gown, looking around the room, he began to talk about his fear and anxiety. Then he told me about the stigma of mental illness and said that he knew how people looked at him. And then he just kept going, mumbling in a manic ramble that was full of anger and sadness and a lot of confusion. I listened to him and thought for the first time in a long time about hell. Maybe hell wasn't some metaphysical destination. Maybe hell was Houston without your medicine. I sat with my uncle in that place and became convinced that if the kingdom of heaven is in the here and now, maybe the kingdom of hell is just as close. I wondered if we couldn't all move between them somehow with a bit of help from our friends. I wondered if we couldn't see through all of the smoke and mirrors for once, to learn how the whole trick works, to see that the only thing that's really scary is how close the sacred is and how sublime its call that we show up.

It's difficult to know how exactly to answer that call sometimes. But the final lesson that my uncle taught proved that he was a theologian after all. The last thing I learned from him was that the greatest trick of all is the illusion of control. And during the moments we spent in the emergency room, he without his medicine, me without my answers, it was clear that we were back in the place where we'd started, the place where we could share some secrets and tell each other that we didn't have to be afraid. Before anyone else came back into the room I asked him, "Uncle Bob, do you remember the magic shows we used to put on after dinner?" He looked up at me with a mischievous smile and began to chuckle. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I remember." Then we just talked

about our old tricks and laughed together. The nurse brought some juice and crackers.

And it felt to me like some sort of banquet.

Amen.

(I relied upon Alice Turner's book, *The History of Hell*, for its discussion of the development of mystery plays.)