

People playing a trick or a prank is one thing. We can laugh at that. But God playing tricks is something else. In this story in Matthew's Gospel this morning it sounds as though God is playing a very nasty trick. The disciples are jockeying for the power positions in Jesus' cabinet. Jesus says the first will be last and the last first. To teach them what he means, he tells a story.

Early one morning a manager goes to the marketplace to hire some workers. He offers a handful of men a denarius each for a full days' work. They agree and head back to the vineyard. Before long, it is apparent that more workers are needed, so three more times the manager goes back to the marketplace for more workers. Finally, at 5:00 in the afternoon, with just one hour of daylight remaining, he goes back one more time. He finds another handful of men he can hire and back to the vineyard they go. Just one hour later comes the moment they have all been waiting for — the handing out of the wages. The steward begins by going to the end of the line to the last person hired and hands him a denarius. Those at the front of the line who worked the whole day get excited thinking, "Wow! He's going to raise the amount he offered us if he's paying a whole denarius to the guys who worked just one hour." Not so. Each worker received the same pay, whether they started at dawn or lounged in the marketplace until the last hour of the day. The early workers were angry. They felt that a bad trick has been played on them. They confront the manager, who reminds them that he paid them what they agreed on. He kept his part of the bargain. What business is it of theirs to tell him how he should run his affairs? It is his money, his vineyard. Can't he do what he wants with what is his? He asks, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" You bet they do.

Like most humans, they have a keen sense of what is fair and what is not. Equal pay for equal work is fair. Equal pay for unequal work is not fair. What's most interesting in this story is how the pay is received, and how it is received depends entirely on what each person believes he deserves. We all know that life is not fair, which makes it seem all the more important that God should be. God should be the one authority we can count on to reward people according to their efforts. People should get what they deserve but according to this story, that's not how God operates. Imagine yourself standing in line for two hours to get into a theatre. You get there extra early so you can be at the front of the line. Then the manager comes out and says the end of the line comes in first. How would you feel? How we react to Jesus' story depends on where we imagine ourselves in the line up. I think most of us would imagine ourselves at the front of the line up. We see ourselves as the ones who get the short end of the stick. We are the ones who are tricked and cheated out of what we deserve. I'll bet that's how 95% of us hear this story. Did you ever consider that you might be mistaken about where you are in the line up? It's entirely possible that we are halfway around the block, as far as God is concerned, with almost everyone else before us in the line. You want to cry because your chances of getting in are next to nothing. Then the manager comes out, and shock of all shocks, he beckons you in first. You and everyone at the end of the line begin to cheer and those at the front start to grumble, and you didn't do a thing to deserve this remarkable turn of events.

God is not fair. God actually seems to enjoy reversing the systems we set up to explain why God should love some of us more than others. Because God is not fair, there is a chance we will get more than we deserve, and not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

There is an image from literature that has stuck in my mind for years. Hypatia the witch of Alexandria is walking around the streets of the city armed with a jug of water and a flaming torch. All the while she is crying out, "Would that I could drown hell with this water and burn heaven with

this torch so that people would love God for himself alone.” If only we could just wipe away our fear of hell and get rid of the conviction that we are earning our way into heaven. Then maybe we really could love God for who God is and let God be God.

There was a well-known trickster in Norwegian literature. His name was Peer Gynt. As a child, Peer couldn't seem to separate fact from fiction and he never stuck to anything very long. As a young man he ran off with Solveig but he soon got tired of her and abandoned her. Peer went on to have many adventures in life, but he never stands for anything and he never seems to see anything through. As an old man, Peer finds his way back to Norway. In the middle of a deep forest he pauses to eat a wild onion. As he peels away the layers of the onion, he thinks about himself and the layers of experience in his own life. Panic strikes him as he searches for the core of the onion. He realises that his life is like the onion... layer after layer with nothing in the middle, nothing to give it meaning. His life was nothing but a long series of missed opportunities. Along comes a button moulder who is looking for him. The button moulder says to Peer, “You are going into my ladle.” “What will happen to me there?” asked Peer nervously. “You will be melted down,” says the button moulder. “Melted?” says Peer. “But this isn't fair. I'm sure I deserve better treatment than this. I'm not nearly as bad as you think. I've done a lot of good things. I might be a bungler, but I'm not an awful sinner either.” “That's just the problem,” said the button moulder, “that's why you're going into the ladle. You're not one thing or the other.”

In a panic Peer asked, “What should I do? How can I learn to be myself?” The button moulder answered, “Stand forth everywhere with the Master's intention displayed like a signboard.” Peer was devastated. He had failed. He had never wondered what he was supposed to be. He cried out for one last chance to prove that he was somebody and that he had an identity. He ran to the hut of Solveig, the girl he had left behind so many years ago. Peer called for her to curse him, because leaving her was a terrible thing for him to do. The button moulder waited at the side of the house to hear her reply. Peer was stunned when Solveig hugged him with joy. “You have made all my life as beautiful as a song,” she exclaimed. “Blessed are you for returning.” Peer pleaded with her, “Ask me where I have been all these years.” Solveig smiled. “Oh, that riddle is easy.” Peer urged her again. “Then tell me what you know! Who am I? Where was I, as myself, as the whole man, the true man? Where was I?” Solveig replied, “In my faith, in my hope, and in my love. That's where you were.” Peer's face lit up as he realised that he had been somebody. He was somebody in Solveig's heart! He had had an identity in her love all that time as she waited and longed for him. Peer Gynt cried out, “In your love... oh there hide me, hide me!” The button moulder disappeared into the distance.

It's a good thing God isn't fair. We just might get more than we deserve. We might even realise one day that we have been hidden in God's love for a whole lifetime while we laboured with him in the vineyard. Amen.

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