

The joke is on us: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

"Have you understood all this?" They said yes. God must still be laughing.

by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

"Have you understood all this?" Jesus asked, and they answered, "Yes." Today, some 2,000 years later, we are still answering yes with a straight face . . . and God must be laughing (or weeping) at our lack of self-critical distance. How could we possibly understand "all this"? These parables, this teacher who spoke in parables beside the sea, this gospel writer who meant well in his expunged explication of the text, this biblical narrative with a height and depth—all of this *must* be missed in a merely human grasp. How can we possibly understand?

If the parables presented for our consideration contain the secret, hidden, surprising and unexpected character of God's kingdom, then those who claim to understand easily are exposed by God in these very verses. Maybe that is how it works in the kingdom of heaven.

After almost 28 years of ministry, I find the religious climate around me increasingly populated by people who insist that they do understand it all. They understand, among other things, what they call and take from the Reformers to be the "plain sense of scripture." They declare that those who do not hear God's word as plainly and directly as they do should not be counted among Christ's disciples. Actually, these are the "slow learners," the current-day embodiment of Isaiah's prophecy: "You will indeed listen but never understand, and you will indeed look but never perceive" (Matt. 13:13).

No doubt the issue underlying almost every struggle in the church's history has to do with our misunderstanding of God's address. Let me pose the question in terms of Matthew 13. Does scripture reveal God only as a morally straight shooter who spells out divine expectations of us in no uncertain terms, which we can understand perfectly? Is God a plainspoken deity who addresses us in these almost-but-not-quite-dictated texts? Or are we dealing with a Holy Trickster hidden among the characters in the biblical narrative? Is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob also the Originator of poetic license?

Those of us who are labeled "them," as in "but to them it has not been given," find that this designation leads to a more lively engagement with scripture than does certitude. God invites us—us theologically and morally suspect disciples—to delight in the God whose use of shady characters throughout these ancient pages was and continues to be God's hidden, surprising, unexpected and circuitous means to the kingdom's end.

Take Jacob, for instance. He has been in cahoots with his mother, Rebekah, pulling the wool over his old, blind father's eyes, tricking his older brother, running for his life. Then Jacob—of all people—is made the father of the tribes of Israel. How parabolic that this trickster's role as progenitor is given to Jacob by God, who one-ups him! God's holy purposes are hidden in the twists and turns of human conniving, in the darkened tents of human desire where we are lusciously deceived.

The voice of God here is the voice of the Trickster. It addresses the devout in much the same way and delivers much the same message as did the salvific American genius Mae West to Cary Grant (in the uniform of the Salvation Army): "You can be had."

It was the story of Jacob that prompted present-day author James McCourt to court charges of apostasy by claiming that the Bible is “not sincere.” The dictionary provides a basis for thinking that McCourt is right in one sense. “Sincere” can be defined as “without deceit” and “straightforward.” In this context, deceit is precisely what God used to accomplish God’s purposes. The biblical narrative is anything but straightforward in its telling of salvation history. It includes not only the twists and turns of the plot, but also the twists and turns of the main characters. This makes the Bible’s “plain sense” “non-sense” for most readers.

The contrasting notion, the notion that the Bible is sincere, was born in some long, wet chilly Northern European Protestant winter and unhappily exported to America, where it devolved into fundamentalism. To think that the Bible is sincere is finally impudent. And we are.

We think we are having our way with God, getting the straight skinny on salvation, calculating the odds of our discipleship, casting out the ones we believe to be beyond the power of God’s grace to redeem, and including ourselves in the circle of Christ’s most devout. Here’s the deal, we say to God: I will work seven years—no, 70 years—for what we have agreed upon beforehand that I deserve. But then, at the end of the servitude, we are had. God turns out to be a bait-and-switch used-car dealer.

The careful reader will notice that Matthew casts the religious experts of the day (those robed in canonical or clerical dress) in the role of “them,” a move that supports a tongue-in-cheek, foot-in-mouth reading of the disciples when they claim to understand it all. The gift of living on the verge of being kicked out of wet, chilly Northern European Protestant circles is that you get the joke. It is on you, and you do not have to wait to die to understand it, to understand that by grace you have been had. This is simply—no, plainly—how it just might be, for them and us together, in the kingdom of God.