

A funny story about a judge

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I've been thinking about Jacob a good deal lately, so for [this week's Century lectionary column](#) I wrote about [Jacob and the angel](#). But I also rather wanted to write about the Gospel reading, the [Unjust Judge parable from Luke](#).

I wanted to write about the parable because on the surface it is a bit nonsensical. Jesus cannot have meant to compare God with someone who “neither feared God nor had respect for people” but could be wearied into submission by boredom. Moreover, experience in prayer has taught me that endlessly banging on about some petition is not usually particularly effective in getting it responded to the way I want it to be.

I think the best way to read this parable (and pray with it) is as a funny story. There are other examples of this. Unless you assume a degree of mutual affectionate teasing, the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman—before he does in fact heal her daughter—is cruel and excluding. But I have never heard a sermon on Jesus' sense of humor, much though we value that quality in our other relationships.

I cannot imagine having a deep personal friendship with someone I could not laugh with. I need to believe that heaven is alight with merriment, and that on earth Jesus and his friends giggled, guffawed, laughed and exchanged both silly and profound jokes. I think the Unjust Judge parable is meant to be funny, and indeed it is funny—if we are not too pious or un-incarnational to accept that Jesus had a good sense of humor.

For the magazine column, I decided not to risk it. My New York-based daughter often says the only thing she finds difficult about being an ex-pat is that Americans have a

really different sense of humor from ours in the U.K. A great deal of humor gets lost in translation, and in the subtle shift from verbal to written forms. I was afraid that any attempt to share my sense of Jesus' frequent playfulness might come across merely as offensive. But I do think about it.