

There is an old joke that you've probably heard before, especially since I used it in a sermon before! It's about a pilot and three passengers - a boy scout, a priest, and an atomic scientist - and a plane that develops engine problems mid-flight. The pilot rushes back to the passenger compartment and exclaims, "The plane is going down! We have only three parachutes, and there are four of us! I have a family waiting for me at home I must survive!" With that he grabs one of the parachutes and jumps out of the plane.

The atomic scientist jumps to his feet at this point and declares, "I am the smartest man in the world. It would be a loss to all of humanity if my life was snuffed out prematurely! I must have one of the parachutes!" And with that he also exits the plane.

The priest and the boy scout are left. With an alarmed look on his face the priest says to the boy scout, "My son, I have no family. I have lived my life and I am ready to meet my maker. You are still young with much ahead of you. You take the last parachute."

But the boy scout interrupts the priest, "Hold on, Father. Don't say any more. We're all right. The world's smartest man just jumped out of the place wearing my backpack!"

We love to see the arrogant get what's coming to them. It fits our sense of justice and fairness so well. The problem is that life isn't fair. All too often the cocky and arrogant gain all the more. The fair and just get exploited. The saying, "No good deed goes unpunished," can be quite real.

If you look back over your life I'm sure you can find lots of things that weren't fair. I think our minds tend to focus on those times when we've been hurt: when someone else gets away with something but we get caught, someone takes advantage of us, or when someone less qualified gets promoted over us. But we've probably also all had times when we've been unfairly favored - we got the job over someone more qualified, or the punishment was more lenient than it should have been, we just happened to be at the right place at the right time to make use of an opportunity.

On some level Jesus' teachings in our gospel reading get at all of this. We read two excerpts from Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount. It's hard to know how to imagine the scene of this sermon in your mind. The sermon begins with Jesus going up on a mountain with his disciples and teaching them, but by the end we're told that a great crowd has also gathered around. On the whole the sermon reinterprets many of the foundational teachings of Judaism. The excerpts we read today have to do with true piety. Don't practice your faith so as to be noticed and praised by others for how righteous you are. Instead be quiet, humble and even a bit secretive about it.

As is often the case, Jesus likes to make his point with exaggerations - don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Of course that's impossible (although given my lack of coordination and inability to swim one could conclude that my left hand and right hand truly don't know what each other is doing).

But Jesus isn't teaching humility here as an end unto itself. When humility is an end unto itself we are left with the bizarre situation of being quite proud of how humble we have

grown to be. No, Jesus is getting at something underneath humility, true humility.

Let's go back to the idea of fairness in life. If you feel you've been on the unlucky side of things too often in life it is easy to become bitter, resentful, and jealous of others. And especially when you consider God's tendency to be gracious, merciful and forgiving of people's sins it makes unfairness in life hurt all the more.

If you like to think that those who have it all in this life will suffer in eternal life, meanwhile those who suffer in this life will reap eternal rewards for their willingness to suffer, perhaps you'll come to some sort of acceptance of it all. People have thought that way for centuries.

But that is not what Jesus actually teaches. Despite Jesus saying things like, "Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But... your Father who sees in secret will reward you," Jesus is not talking about a reversal of fortunes in heaven. A reversal of fortunes for eternal life is just delayed justice. Jesus never taught delayed justice. He taught grace - God is

gracious and merciful, even to those who are destructive, abusive, evil and mean in this lifetime. Where's the fairness if you can act like that in life and get the same treatment from God as someone has a faith-filled sacrificial life of a life-long Christian? That really rankles our sense of justice. God's true mercy on the bad can really be offensive to us.

Jesus teachings in the Sermon on the Mount aim at something much deeper.

They're aimed at this: whose are you? You are God's.

What defines your identity? God.

What makes your very existence worthwhile? God.

Who and who alone can carry you forever? God.

Life isn't fair. At many levels God isn't fair either. Jesus' teachings about piety take us beyond fairness and unfairness. They take us deeper than strategies to be righteous before God. They take us to the bedrock of our relationship with God. If God holds you, what do you fear?

None of us can live faith at this level perfectly every day. Pettiness of fairness and strategies to get ahead in life are always pressing on us and often tripping us up. But ultimately who cares? There is no greater dignity or flattery than being useful to God; even when it hurts a lot or doesn't seem fair.

Do you look at the person who's had it easier in life than you have and say, "I wish my life was that way." Or do you say, "God is doing something valuable through me." and just let it at that. For that is the far better way. That is behind everything that Jesus teaches.

Bitterness, envy and jealousy ultimately take us nowhere. Finding our value and security in God are everything.

You may have been dust at one point and to dust you will return. But you truly are God's, held in eternity; and the nature of your dust is God's gracious and precious being able to do eternal work. Amen