

# Faith & Fables

By Eugene Curtin



A coal-black squirrel crouched outside Ignatius House, the Jesuit residence at Creighton University. It sat stone still, cradling an acorn, lifting it slowly to its mouth. It looked exactly like a toy, a suspicion dispelled when it dashed away and fled up a tree.

Anyone who has spent time with Greg Carlson, S.J., could be forgiven for suspecting the squirrel's authenticity. Wherever Fr. Carlson is found, a toy will not be far behind.

His office in the Jesuit rectory is a haven for toys, often related to classical literature, sometimes brain teasers, and very often related to the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine.

And therein lies a tale.

In Creighton University's Reinert-Alumni Memorial Library, in a small but cozy rectangular room lined with shelves, there rests one of the world's great collections of fables. More than 7,600 books, ranging in value from \$10 to \$4,000, reflect Fr. Carlson's immersion in the world of the morality tale and his love of short literature.

About two years ago, at the urging of friends and fellow Jesuits, he began a labor of love that has resulted in a series of 12, 25-minute lectures illustrating how Aesop's fables can help people understand the Gospels and Christian teaching about meaning, gratitude, value and spirituality.

The series is called, "Fables and Faith: Understanding the Gospel with Aesop's Fables."

Considering that Fr. Carlson, a professor of English and a co-founder of Creighton's Degelman Center for Ignatian Spirituality, has been enthralled by short literature for decades, the idea of marrying fables and faith came late.

"Very late," Fr. Carlson says. "Professionally, I'm a literary critic and I'm very protective of fables and their purpose. I thought a fable was a fable and preaching was preaching."

He distinguishes fables from the parables of Jesus Christ as the difference between observations about the tendency toward foolish behavior (fables) and an inspirational encouragement to become selfless people more closely aligned with God's purpose of creation (parables).

The two did not seem a comfortable fit to Fr. Carlson, who worried about compromising the integrity of the fables, which can be harsh and self-centered, in a forced effort to get them to illustrate Christian teaching that focuses on selflessness.

But then he began, and the result is a series of homiletic lectures that meld millennia of pre-Christian wisdom with Christian virtue.

Take the fable of the "Man and the Wooden God," in which the man, fueled by frustration at his god's ineffectiveness,



Photo by Jim Fackler  
Greg Carlson, S.J., reads from *The Aesop for Children*, originally published in 1919. The cover art, by Milo Winter, is pictured on page 18.

destroys the idol and finds to his astonishment that it was stuffed all along with treasure.

Here, Fr. Carlson finds opportunity to critique the remote deistic god (false) that emerged from the Enlightenment and to stress the personal and involved God (true) of Christian teaching.

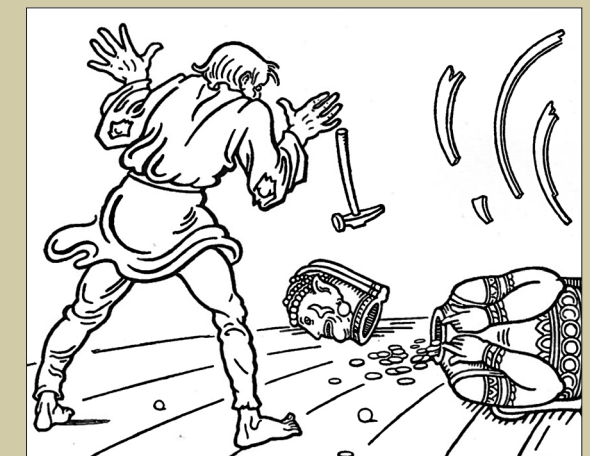
Or "The Fox and the Raven," in which the fox persuades the raven to open its mouth (and thus drop the piece of cheese it is carrying) by praising the quality of the raven's song.

Here lies an opportunity to illustrate the Christian virtue of humility, and the importance of looking to God for a sense of personal worth and not to ill-intentioned flatterers.

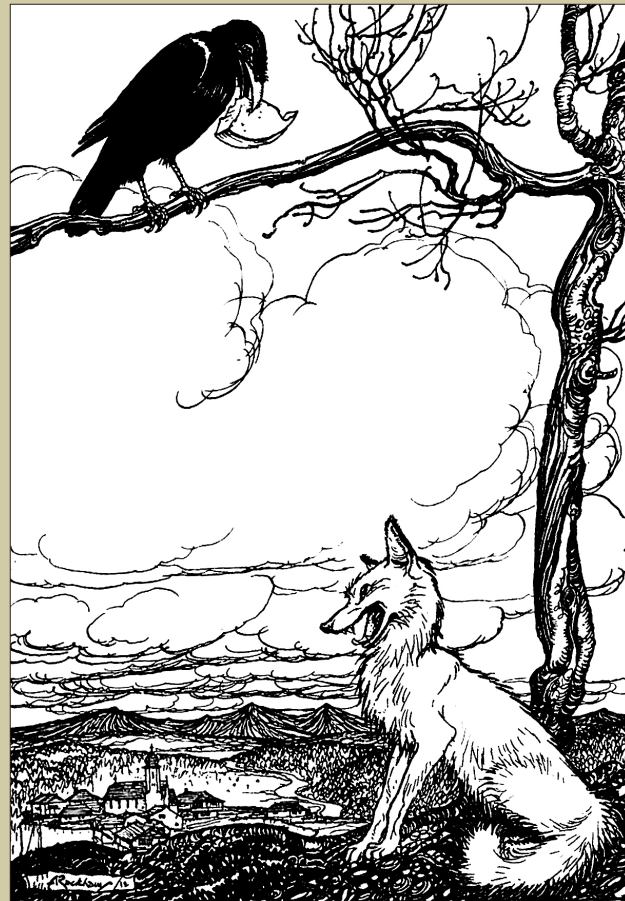
And so on, through dozens of classic tales, molded into Christian exegesis by an experienced homilist.

The use of fables to illustrate faith reflects Fr. Carlson's career-long conviction that stories, toys and play smooth the path of learning. It is a conviction encountered by all his students who find they are required to build a toy, or structure of some sort, in order to graduate from his literature classes.

Those creations, he believes, cement into young minds the Jesuit message that true wisdom, and meaning, comes from service to others.



"The Man and the Wooden God" —  
*The Fables of Aesop*,  
illustrated by  
Richard Heighway,  
1894



“The satanic strategy in life is to capture people with riches, honors and pride,” Fr. Carlson says. “Jesus’ strategy, and the strategy of Ignatius (founder of the Jesuits) concerning the strategy of Jesus, is to give people a kind of freedom that leads them to be humble enough to serve others.”

Discernment, a key Jesuit value, is a powerful tool in recognizing worldly flattery, and the fables of Aesop and others struck Fr. Carlson as a useful tool in freeing people from the shackles of blindness.

The fable of “The Lion in Love,” for example, posits a lion who wishes to marry a beautiful young woman, an obviously inappropriate union that the clever father avoids by welcoming the offer but objecting that the lion’s claws and teeth might hurt his daughter. The lion addresses the objection by having his teeth and claws removed, whereupon the father beats the now-defenseless lion to death.

“That story invites perception about what might be going on here,” Fr. Carlson says. “That’s what fables do. They ask, ‘Can you open your eyes, even in the middle of an infatuation, and see what’s really happening?’”

That fable captures Fr. Carlson’s goal in devising his “Fables and Faith” lecture series, which he says is to encourage people to develop their spirituality.

The human wisdom contained in these ancient tales is not merely for children, he says.

“The Fox and the Raven” — *Aesop’s Fables*, illustrated by Arthur Rackham, 1912

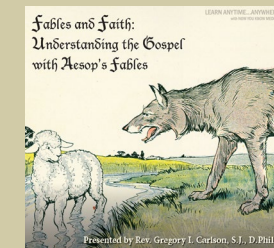
“The question I asked myself was, ‘How could I use fables to get at what I consider a mature spirituality?’” Fr. Carlson says.

“Somewhere in the 18th century people decided that fables were kids’ stuff, but in the ancient world they were not considered kids’ stuff. They were a way of giving talks — political or rhetorical talks. They were a way of passing around concrete information, of making important points about life.

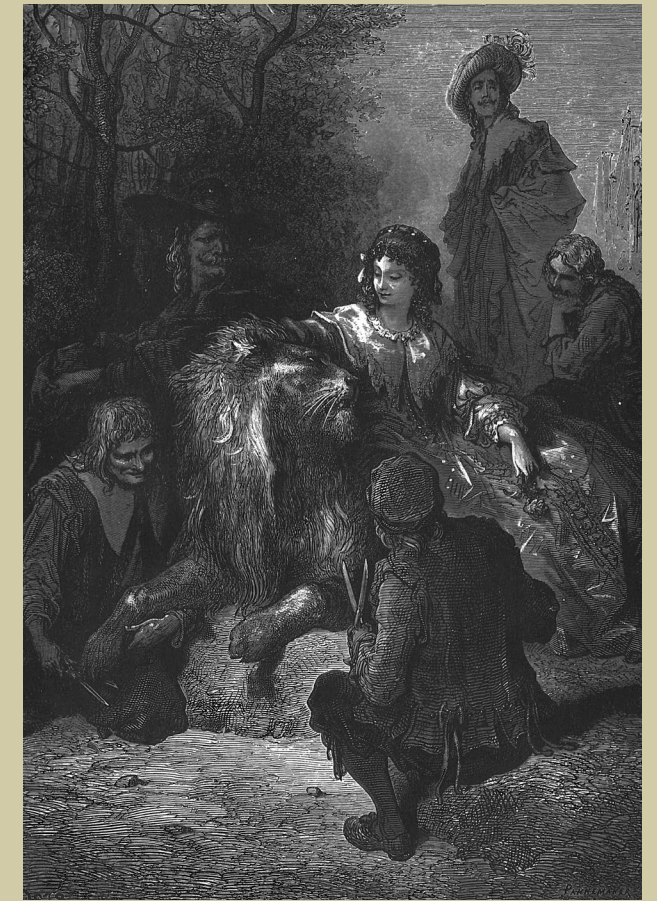
“That’s what I want this series to do, to take what I know about fables and about the Christian faith, and help people develop a mature spirituality.”

### The Lecture Series

Fr. Carlson’s 12-part lecture series, “Fables and Faith: Understanding the Gospels with Aesop’s Fables,” is available for purchase at [NowYouKnowMedia.com](http://NowYouKnowMedia.com).



NowYouKnowMedia is a Catholic website offering audio and visual programs created by, or featuring, the world’s leading Catholic thinkers and teachers. The company selected Fr. Carlson’s lecture series for a 2013 Teaching Excellence Award.



“The Lion in Love” — *Fables de La Fontaine*, illustrated by Gustave Doré, 1889

# A Unique Collection

During the past 30 years, Fr. Carlson has accumulated more than 7,600 books in multiple languages penned by multiple authors, all dealing with fables.

But they do not inhabit their fabulist world alone.

To the books, Fr. Carlson has added about 4,000 fable-related artifacts, all viewable at [www.creighton.edu/aesop](http://www.creighton.edu/aesop) by clicking the Aesop’s Artifacts link.

Here reside expressions of the human imagination inspired by the world’s most ancient morality tales.

Playing cards, movie posters, cookie tins, matchboxes, clothing, masks, stamps and tableware constitute but a small contingent of the massive parade of artifacts gathered from around the globe, a fascinating testimony to the ubiquitous influence of stories on human culture.

And so it goes, almost endlessly, a carefully catalogued and comprehensive accounting of 30 years of collecting, open now to public inspection at any time and from any place via the Internet.

A few items in Fr. Carlson’s collection are pictured.



A French bonbon tin from approximately 1930, illustrating Jean de La Fontaine’s tale of “The Fox and the Crow.” Obtained for \$7.

A bronze letter opener (12” long) from approximately 1910. Depicting “The Fox and the Grapes,” the handle is a fox and on the blade are grapes which the fox seeks. Obtained via eBay for \$49.99.



A child’s thermos and lunch box with the same artwork as the pink and white thermos below of “The Tortoise and the Hare” from the late 1950s/early 1960s. Obtained via eBay for \$3.99.



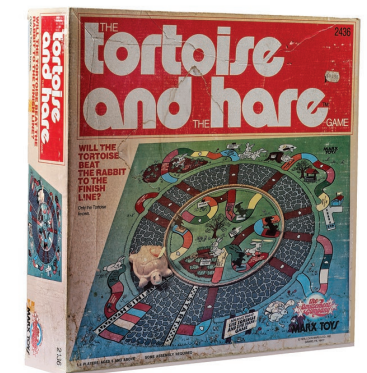
A child’s thermos in pretty pink, dated about 1950 and displaying the fable of “The Tortoise and the Hare.” Obtained for \$2 via eBay.



A Belgian bubble gum tin (10”x6½”x2½”) from approximately 1970 features an opening book with “Fables de Jean de La Fontaine” on the cover. Obtained for \$10.



Japanese salt and pepper shakers depicting “The Goose That Laid the Golden Eggs,” obtained for \$5.50 via eBay.



A “Tortoise and the Hare” board game from 1970 featuring a wind-up tortoise and obtained for \$2 through eBay.



A 55c French stamp from 1938 featuring a portrait of Jean de La Fontaine, obtained for \$2.25 via eBay.

# One Fable, Many Stories By Greg Carlson, S.J.

We tend to think that there is one version — or perhaps one “right” version — of any given fable. Actually, the simple fables associated with Aesop often spawn competing stories — embellishing, expanding, changing or contradicting earlier versions. Part of the fun is watching how diverse people and artists respond to the same story.

“The Grasshopper and the Ant” provides an excellent example.

The first set of published fables in English came from William Caxton in 1484. His version of “The Grasshopper and the Ant” represents a common telling of the fable through the Middle Ages. A cicada (or grasshopper or cricket) that has sung all summer without working faces dire hunger in winter. “If you have sung all summer, you can dance in winter,” responds the ant, who refuses to give a handout to the starving and freezing cicada. The fable world often presents harsh realities of life and death. Get smart or die. The stakes are high! As Charles Bennett moralizes in 1857: “As the world dispenses its payments, it is decreed that the Poet who sings for his breakfast shall whistle for his dinner.”



Photo by Jim Fackler

Greg Carlson, S.J., in the Reinert-Alumni Memorial Library, where his collection of books and artifacts is stored.

The great French fabulist Jean de La Fontaine treats the story differently. His fable continues to convey the wisdom that this starving insect needs to learn for survival. Next summer, one can hope, she will prepare better for the future. But La Fontaine makes four subtle additions to the traditional fable.

First, he makes it clear that the starving cicada is asking for a loan, not a gift. Secondly, this cicada will pay back not only the principal but interest as well. She will be grateful, and the ant stands to profit from a moment of life-saving kindness. Thirdly, La Fontaine goes out of his way to present the ant as niggardly and condemns her for it. She is as small of heart as she is of stature.

The fourth change may be the subtlest but the most important. What, the ant asks, did the cicada do all summer? The answer: “Night and day/I sang my song for all to hear.” She was not just selfishly amusing herself; rather, she was offering an artistic gift to anyone who would receive it. This story, then, carries its long-time lesson of preparing for hard times, as it always will, but now there is an added message. An artist has been serving anyone willing to listen to a song. And the artist deserves his sustenance. It is no coincidence that this fable stands first in La Fontaine’s collection. La Fontaine is the cicada, the artist, singing for the pleasure of anyone who comes by. This view challenges the reader to think about what kind of ant she or he wants to be.

La Fontaine’s account has given rise to a number of French and English versions, including some parodies. One French advertisement has the cicada, a year later, claiming that Germalyne food supplements made her strong enough to withstand the tough winter. “Now I can dance without fear!” she proclaims. Another modern French advertisement has a young cicada, unlike her mother, remembering winter while she sings all summer. To avoid having to cry famine, she trusts in the Credit Cooperative to have a house on long-term credit. She can sing in peace for years!

Aesop shows up regularly in cartoons, too. A great Far Side cartoon shows the grasshopper walking away, grain bag in hand, from the ant he has just murdered with his guitar!

American writer Ambrose Bierce, known for his sardonic, cynical wit, in his 1899 book *Fantastic Fables*, twists the story so that when the ant asks the grasshopper why he didn’t store up food for the winter (instead of singing), the grasshopper responds: “So I did, but you fellows broke in and carried it all away.” Bierce’s commentary: The high-minded, industrious ant was really a thief in the first place, a thief responsible for the artist’s starvation!

In Walt Disney’s cartoon and books from 1932, the ants bring the grasshopper, at last, into their home, put his shivering feet into hot water and revive him. The grasshopper is contrite. He begs forgiveness for his ways, fiddles for their dances and changes his tune from “The world owes me a living” to “I owe the world a living.”

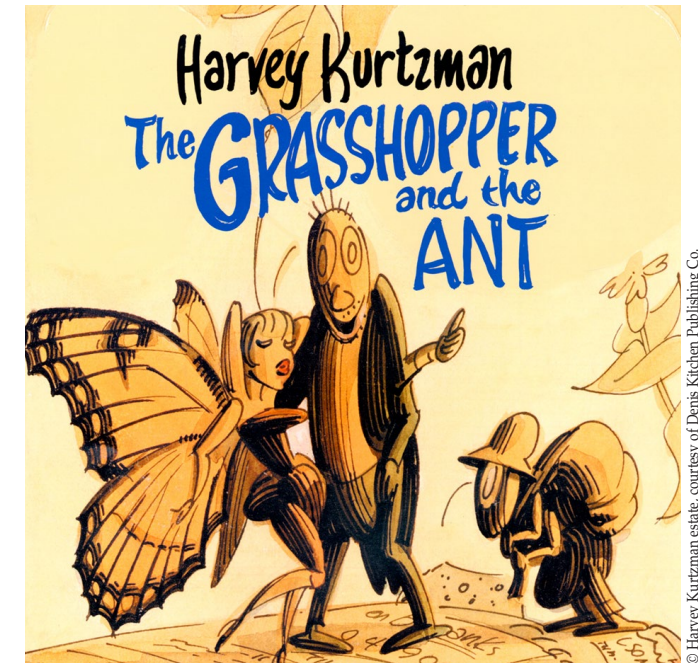
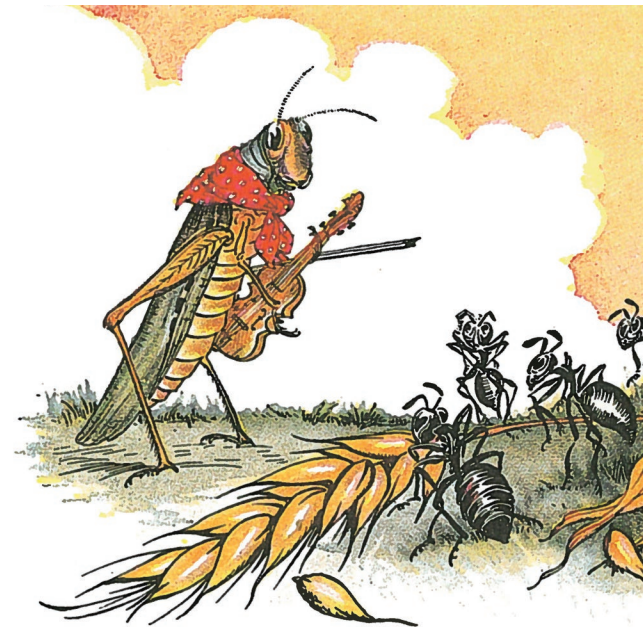
German-American illustrator Fritz Eichenberg in his 1979 book *Endangered Species and Other Fables with a Twist* gives a comical twist to the tale when his grasshopper tells the ant: “Hey Auntie, take your duds, dress up, let’s go/to gay Paree, with all expenses paid!/I was discovered by the Rolling Stones.”

Three recent Americans artists/writers have given their own distinctive interpretations to this classic fable. Harvey Kurtzman, creator of the humor magazine MAD, in his 2001 book *The Grasshopper and the Ant* transforms the story into a struggle between a 1950s beatnik grasshopper and 9-to-5, slave-to-work ant. Nikki Giovanni in 2008 puts the whole story into a contemporary trial that addresses the question “What is the worth of art?” And Toni Morrison in 2003 updates the story’s characters, probes into play that is work and work that is play, and ends with the book’s title question: “Who’s got game?”

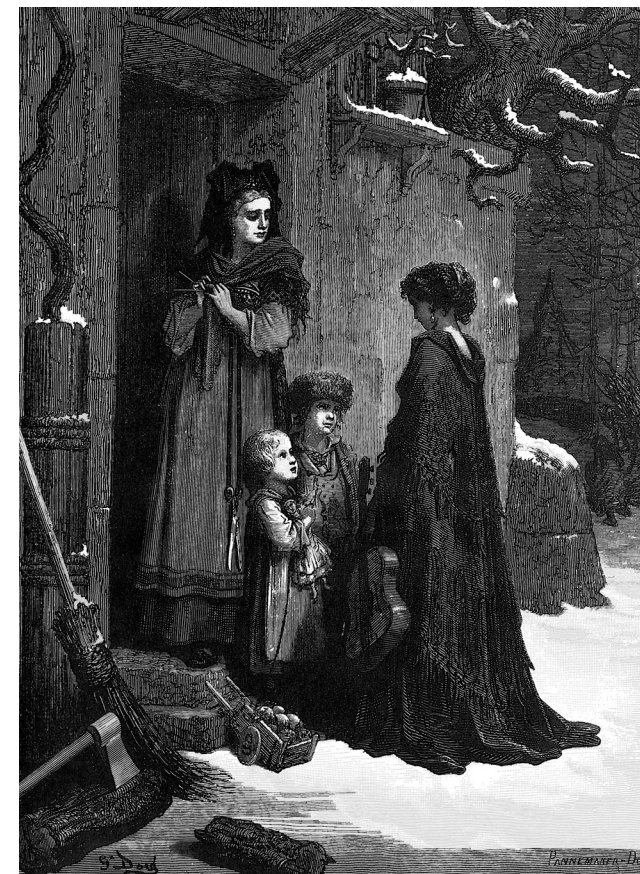
One fable. Many stories. No doubt they will keep coming. What fun!

## “The Grasshopper and the Ant”

as portrayed by various artists



© Harvey Kurtzman estate, courtesy of Denis Kitchin Publishing Co.



Top left: *The Aesop for Children*, illustrated by Milo Winter, 1919

Top right: *The Grasshopper and the Ant*, illustrated by Harvey Kurtzman, 2001

Bottom left: *Fables de La Fontaine*, illustrated by Gustave Doré, 1989

Bottom right: *Fables by Jean de La Fontaine*, illustrated by J.J. Grandville, 1838