



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Jealousy of God Deuteronomy 4:19-24; Matthew 20:1-16

We have all had an “aha” moment at some time or other. Suddenly the light comes on, the fog dissipates, and everything comes into clear relief as never before. It happened to me early last week. I took a chance excursion onto the *Christian Century* website. I use this excellent resource often for research, but when I want to read a journal or magazine or book, for that matter, I prefer to have paper that I can hold in my hands. I like to underline provocative ideas and write questions and thoughts in the margins. For that reason alone, I rarely read articles online when in a day or two I will have the real deal in my own hands.

I was checking my email and *The Christian Century* notice of a new issue appeared. You know how promotional materials are these days: teasers galore tempt you to wander on in and browse all of the wonders of whatever someone is offering. I scanned the table of contents and saw the usual list of excellent articles and authors. Then I saw the name of Sam Wells. I frequently refer to Dr. Wells. As you know, he is the British pastor-theologian who served as the Dean of Duke Chapel for several years before returning to England as Rector of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Anglican Church which is not, as I had once thought, in a rural setting; rather, St. Martin-in-the-Fields is on Trafalgar Square, in the heart of the anything-but-rural city of London. Dr. Well’s name caught my eye, but it was the title of his article that drew me in: “Why God Is Jealous.”¹

Throughout the Old Testament, as we discovered in the reading from Deuteronomy this morning, we find the phrase, “God . . . is a jealous God.” I have generally thought I understood what that phrase means and I expected to find Dr. Wells expounding on God’s desire to have our full attention when we so easily turn our heads toward other interests, even other idols and gods. I was prepared to read reminders of our faithful obligation to give God our time and energy, our money and fidelity, our all.

¹Samuel Wells, “Faith Matters: Why God Is Jealous,” *The Christian Century*, (October 15, 2014):57; available online at: <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-09/why-god-jealous>.

What I was not prepared to read was the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, probably one of the best known and most disliked of Jesus' parables. You remember it. Matthew tells us that Jesus said,

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Matthew 20:1-16

I have always treated this parable carefully because, at first blush, it appears to go against those values with which we grew up: hard work and appropriate reward. I have always known that it was about God's justice which is not always the same as ours. Our justice is generally based on merit while God's justice is centered on love. Still, I never really thought about this parable being about jealousy, much less God's jealousy, until Sam Wells pushed me in that direction. Then lightbulb came on! Aha!

To help us understand his point, Dr. Wells tells a story about a weekend church retreat that he led several years ago. One of the activities he enjoyed

was putting out a hundred or so photos of people showing a variety of strong emotions. Each person present was asked to choose a picture and then briefly explain why they did so. What followed is enlightening. Dr. Wells writes,

I've never forgotten a burly man, age around 30, who picked out a photograph of a smiling child who was tightly embracing a tub of candy. The man explained that he'd been married a year or two and felt he'd received the most fabulous gift in the world. It was clear he wasn't a high achiever or high earner or high anything much. But you couldn't match his smile. His wife looked pretty happy too. There wasn't a hint of boasting: there was just effervescent joy. When you're a pastor who's spent countless hours with couples who've come to see each other as a threat and a curse, you don't forget such a smile.

Later in the weekend I spoke with a man from the retreat who remembered the incident. This man seemed extremely restless and staccato of speech. He needed to share, so I said to him, "Go on, let it all out." What came out was this: "I hate that man for having what I don't have. It feels so unfair—I'm attractive, I'm kind, I'm hard-working, I'm even a virgin, if that helps—so why can't I smile with that kind of joy?"²

It was that day, Dr. Wells observes, that he learned the difference between jealousy and envy. Most of us give little, if any, thought to the distinction between the two emotions. For the most part, we use the words as if they are synonyms. Jealousy may sound a bit more benign than envy, but did not Shakespeare call jealousy "the green eyed monster"?³ And envy, cousin to covetousness, is generally considered a deadly sin.

Yet there is the matter of God being a jealous god. Are we to think that God sits on a cloud pouting and fuming because there are other gods out there who are able to do things better than God or who have something that God wants? Hardly! God has no reason to desire what any other being has. God need not wish to do what some other being can do. Jealousy and envy must not be synonymous then. They must be entirely different emotions, and jealousy must be the positive of the two.

²Wells.

³William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1596; *Othello*, 1604.

Indeed it is. Sam Wells suggests that if we want to understand jealousy, we need to look at the young man overflowing with joy. He is blessed and knows it. He is happy and is thrilled by it. He is in love and not ashamed of it. He is grateful for his life and does not want to lose anything God has given to him and will do whatever is necessary to protect it. The angry young man, on the other hand, equally blessed, is, nevertheless envious. He wants what the happy fellow has but is unwilling to change in order to see that he already has it. He envies the happy fellow for all that he has but all he does is envy. And the envy makes him angry and resentful and unable to enjoy all the blessings God has given him.

So God is jealous. He is jealous enough to be like the owner who repeatedly goes to the marketplace and hires people to work in his vineyard. Some of them work all day while others work only an hour but, because he values each and every one of them, appreciates their skill and willingness to get the job done, because he sees in them something that no one else may see, he pays each one a full day's wage. In the parable, as well as in real life, the ones who worked all day and hoped to get double their wages were angry. They were envious. They had labored all day for a fair wage, but their co-workers had labored only an hour and received the same pay. It was not fair. It was not right. But the owner's action was not about them.

Jesus tells us that the parable is about the kingdom of God—how things operate when God is around. The point of the parable is that God can do what God wants to do and what God wants to do is to be in relationship with his people—with you and me. The flow of the text suggests that Jesus is speaking this parable to his disciples alone, but most of the time much larger crowds were listening to Jesus. Scribes and Pharisees were often in those crowds and frequently challenged Jesus on his teachings. They would have chafed at the thought that sinners like tax collectors and prostitutes (the workers hired last) could be welcomed into the Kingdom of God without the lifetime of religious observance they themselves had experienced. They would fuss and fume to think that Jesus was selling a convenient salvation to sinners and slackers while the righteous were slogging away day by day in temple, in prayer, in study, and in service.

But it is God's kingdom, God's vineyard, and God is a jealous God. God is like that fellow on the retreat, delightfully happy, grateful for what he has, and willing to protect his gift. God is jealous about you and me and every other person who has, does, or will exist. As Sam Wells says, "A jealous God

is part of the wonder of grace: God doesn't want a hundred other things—God wants us.”⁴

We live in a culture that thrives on getting and having and wanting more. Our economy thrives when we spend and, in order for us to spend, we are tempted to want more. We must have the latest smart phone that our co-worker has. We have to get a new outfit for the party because everyone else will be wearing something new. I remember a Methodist colleague of mine telling me years ago that he and his wife bought a new car and within a week six other families in his relatively small church purchased new cars as well. We try to keep up with not only the Joneses but with the Smiths and Whites and Browns and everyone else in town.

But God whispers to us that we do not have to keep up with anyone. God will provide what we need because of his love for us. It may not be more or better than anyone else, but it will be sufficient for us. God is not looking around for someone else to love. God loves us.

The other day I read a devotion which began with the words, “One time, when I was a child, I was not picked last for a team; I wasn't picked at all.”⁵ The child who was supposed to pick the last player refused to choose this little girl, but a girl named Cheryl who was on the other team, called to her, “Come on Jennifer. You can be on our team.” Jennifer never forgot that kindness. Twenty years later, when she ran into Cheryl in a restaurant, her heart was still full for the compassion she felt as a hurt little girl.

God is a jealous God—jealous about us. Like a child with a big bucket of candy, God grins ear to ear just to think of us. Like a man completely in love with his spouse and happy for anyone to know about it, God adores us. And like someone brimming with the joy of blessedness, God is delighted that we are his children. The parable is about God, to be certain. And because it is about God, it is also about us—whether we are the first to get picked or the last—God chooses us because God loves us each and every one without hesitation or limits. God loves us. God is jealous and looking for you. Aha!

⁴Wells.

⁵Jennifer A. Johnson, “Send Out Compassion,” *The Upper Room Daily Devotional*, The Upper Room, October 11, 2014.

October 12, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

It is no small thing for us to pray to you, O God. We admit that many of our prayers are hurried and rote. We confess that sometimes we forget to pray when we have promised to do so or we lose our train of thought in the middle of a prayer. But when we truly pray, we do not take it for granted. We believe that you hear us. We trust that you pay attention to what we say. And we desperately hope that you respond.

In that sense, we are like people who are thirsty and scrambling for a cup of water. Once our thirst is quenched, we may forget our need for a time, but we do not forget the source of our refreshment. We are grateful, O God, that we have the privilege of coming to you over and over with our hands clasped in desperation, our hearts open in supplication, and our spirits eager for transformation.

So we offer our prayers today. Like us, you are familiar with the names we repeat week after week. You know the specific needs better than we do and you are familiar with all of the resources that are available. You also know those prayers that we dare not utter aloud, those fears and desires and hopes that we admit only to you. Again, you know what is best for us. You know the right choices and the better opportunities and the path of consequences we are likely to walk.

So help us, O God, for we cannot take care of these needs alone. Wrap your arms around this fragile yet amazing world of ours and squeeze into it a sense of your compassion. Cast your eyes over the abundance of resources and call them to meet specific needs. Smile upon us and reassure us that we are not alone and that you will see us through whatever comes our way.

Love us, O God, and do not let us go though we may try to wander or even run away. Remind us that you choose us over and over again for the gift of your love and the grace of your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.