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Seven Deadly Sins Series: Envy

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“There Is No Pie”

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Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

“There Is No Pie”

Seven Deadly Sins Series: Envy

Genesis 4:1-16, Mark 10:35-45

My senior year in high school, I walked every day through a doorway over which was a banner proclaiming these words: “Comparing yourself with others will only make you vain and bitter, for there will always be those who are worse off and better off than you.” It was no accident that this banner was on the doorway of a program for seniors who were college-bound. The teacher who put it there must have known something about the toll the college admissions process can take on even the most well-adjusted young people.

Some of you know this intimately. Some of you are even living through it right now, this week, as you or your children or someone else close to you anxiously awaits decision letters from college admissions offices.

In the *New York Times*, columnist Frank Bruni recently noted that the majority of applicants to the country’s elite universities will get turned down, and not because they are unqualified. Bruni tells the story of a student named Jenna, who was rejected by her first choice college, as well as by her second, third, fourth, and fifth choice schools, all top tier universities. She ended up choosing between several second-tier schools who had accepted her. At first, she was devastated, she felt worthless...but once she got to college, she thrived. And she discovered that the pain of rejection is fleeting and survivable. So she started fearlessly applying for other opportunities, including, after graduation, a grant to start a charter school, which she received.

“I never would have had the strength, drive or fearlessness to take such a risk if I hadn’t been rejected so intensely before,” she said. “There’s a beauty to that kind of rejection, because it allows you to find the strength within.”¹

All of us can point to times we have been rejected, and often for things much more arbitrary than what can be measured by college admissions counselors: our skin color, our sexuality, our gender, our age, our socioeconomic status, even for no discernible reason whatsoever. Sometimes, as with Jenna, rejection can help us find a reserve of inner strength. But more often than not, our feelings of rejection causes us to look at those who have been accepted and feel envy.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/15/opinion/sunday/frank-bruni-how-to-survive-the-college-admissions-madness.html?&moduleDetail=section-news-0&action=click&contentCollection=Opinion®ion=Footer&module=MoreInSection&pgtype=article&_r=0

At its heart, the story of Cain and Abel is a story of rejection and envy, of being *not* chosen for no discernible reason. It is a story of two brothers, Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve. As young men, both found meaningful work and both brought God an offering from their daily labor. God accepted Abel's offering, but he did not accept Cain's. Over the centuries, there has been fervent speculation as to why this might have been, but in the text itself, no clear reason is given.

Thus follows the first tale of sibling rivalry in the history of our religion. The first, but by no means the last. And like many tales of siblings who end up in deadly conflict, the rivalry between Cain and Abel is rooted in envy. God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's, and we aren't told why. We can understand why Cain might have felt hurt and angry and why he might have looked at Abel with envy, that horrible combination of desire and insecurity that arises in us when we see what someone else has or does or is that we don't have or can't do or will never be.

In his examination of this story, Walter Brueggemann notes that it is not just about brothers or siblings generally. It is about the human race and how God has called us to live in community with one another, especially in the face of unfairness and injustice that often feels arbitrary. When we are confronted with other people who tempt us to envy, we tend to either do damage to them (as Cain did to Abel) or we turn our envy inward and believe that not having whatever it is we see in someone else is a sign of some fundamental deficit in ourselves.

Melanie went to high school at a public school in the Bronx called University Heights. It was a school that served mostly Puerto Rican and Dominican kids from poor neighborhoods, and the school itself was so poor that the cafeteria had been converted to classroom space, there was no library, no Advanced Placement classes. It did have a childcare center, though, for the students who had had babies already. The first day she arrived at the school was a crushing disappointment to Melanie, who had been so excited for high school — excited to learn, to read, to be challenged in her classes. But that first day she realized she would get very little of that at a school so lacking in resources.

One of Melanie's teachers had paired up with a teacher at another school in the Bronx, a private school called Fieldston, and the students of these two teachers became pen pals. Eventually, the teachers made arrangements to have the University Heights students visit Fieldston.

Fieldston is an elite private school, elite to the tune of \$43,000 for one year's tuition. Even though it is just three miles from Melanie's public school, it is a world apart, set on 18 acres of land with stone buildings connected by beautifully landscaped paths. Huge windows let in natural light, there is a dance studio, a pool, a big stone arch with the school's motto on it.

Melanie went with that group of students to visit Fieldston and when she got off the bus and walked onto the campus the envy she felt was so intense that she had a physical reaction — she became hysterical, crying and screaming, nearly hyperventilating. Because *this* was exactly how she had imagined high school. And she would have thrived there. She was a standout student that all of her teachers and classmates admired. But that day at Fieldston, something broke inside her. Seeing what was available to her privileged peers convinced Melanie that she could never have what they had.

Melanie knew there was no innate difference between her and these wealthy kids whose families could send them to Fieldston. She knew this was not a reflection of her worth or even her abilities. But the contrast of what they had and what she did not was paralyzing. Unlike Jenna, who used her rejection, her envy of her Ivy League peers, to find strength within, Melanie's envy caused her to give up. After not getting chosen for a highly competitive program that would have sent her to college for free, she left high school and went to work at a grocery store, burying her gifts as deep as she could.²

Now that we are almost to the end of this series on the seven deadly sins, hopefully you have identified ways that each of these sins tempts you from time to time. But in our particular culture, in our capitalistic society, envy is perhaps the most unavoidable of the seven sins.

In his book *Old Money*, Nelson Aldrich writes that “envy is so integral and painful a part of what animates human behavior in market societies that many people have forgotten the full meaning of the word, simplifying it into one of the symptoms of desire. It is [a symptom of desire], which is why it flourishes in market societies...But envy is more or less than desire. It begins with an almost frantic sense of emptiness inside oneself, as if the pump of one's heart were sucking on air. One has to be blind to perceive the emptiness, of course, but that's what envy is, a selective blindness. *Invidia*, Latin for envy, translates as “nonsight,” and Dante had the envious plodding along under cloaks of lead, their eyes sewn shut with leaden

² <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/550/transcript>

wire. What they are blind to is what they have, God-given and humanly nurtured, in themselves.”³

Envy is indeed a kind of blindness. To envy is to lose sight of what we have and who we are. It is to lose sight of Whose we are. It is to forget what it is that actually gives us worth: we belong to God, we are God’s beloved. And there is always enough of God’s love and acceptance to go around. But envy blinds us to this truth.

The writer Anne Lamott laments in her book *Grace [Eventually]* that “Jealousy always has been my cross, the weakness and woundedness in me that has most often caused me to feel ugly and unlovable, like the Bad Seed. I’ve had many years of recovery and therapy, years filled with intimate and devoted friendships, yet I still struggle. I know that when someone gets a big slice of pie, it doesn’t mean there’s less for me. In fact, I know that there isn’t even a pie, that there’s plenty to go around, enough food and love and air.

“But I don’t believe it for a second.

“I secretly believe there’s a pie. I will go to my grave brandishing my fork.”⁴

James and John were certainly brandishing their forks when they approached Jesus to try to claim their special place in God’s kingdom. Poor Jesus! He keeps trying to explain to his disciples—to us—the trajectory of his life: suffering, rejection, being killed, and then being raised from the dead. He keeps trying to explain to them—to us—the true nature of discipleship: that we must lose our lives to save them, that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all, that we must be willing to leave all our earthly possessions and relationships behind to secure their treasure in heaven. But the disciples—we—just don’t get it! We keep focusing on power, on glory, on getting our piece of the Jesus pie — and ensuring that their piece is the biggest piece, with extra ice cream on the side.

James and John are convinced that there is only so much of Jesus’ glory to go around. They are hoping that if they time their question right, they can get all of the glory with none of the suffering. And the rest of the disciples aren’t appalled that James and John asked for such a thing — they are just angry that they didn’t get to Jesus first!

In these and many other stories from the Bible and from our lives, people act from a mindset of scarcity. This is always where envy comes from: the belief that there is

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Envy>

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*. Riverhead Trade, 2008

only so much to go around, and if someone else has what I want, then I won't be able to get it. Cain was convinced that if God accepted Abel's offering it meant God rejected his once and for all. The disciples were convinced that there were only going to be seats to Jesus right and left in God's kingdom so they had better secure their spots. Living with a mindset of scarcity sets us up to be in constant competition with others.

During this sermon series, we have talked each week about the antidote to each sin, and so far, every antidote has had something to do with community. But envy is different, because envy is a sin that often arises *because* we live in community, because we are surrounded by our brothers and sisters, maybe not by blood but by virtue of the fact that we are all members of the human family. And just like that banner over my school said, there will always be those who are better off and worse off than we are.

Envy might just be the one deadly sin whose antidote requires us to *remove* ourselves from community for a while. Jesus suggests that looking at the natural world might help. In the midst of one sermon he says this: "...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:25, 36)

The antidote to envy is *gratitude*. It is to count our blessings. It's to take time each day to look NOT at what others have that we don't, but to acknowledge what we know to be true, what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have shown us once and for all: that there are no limits to the spaces available in God's kingdom, that God's fundamental, unconditional acceptance and love is available to *all*.

When we stop comparing ourselves to others, when we remember and recognize all the ways God has accepted us, all the ways God has provided for us, we will find the answer to Jesus' question: Are you not of more value than the birds? Are you not of *infinite* value to the one who created you? Have you not been given what you need for today?



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