

Sermon Series: Disordered Love

Envy/Jealousy

Genesis 4:1-10/James 3:13-18

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You have probably heard it said, or perhaps you have used the phrase yourself, “He or she is green with envy.” Green and pale were alternate meanings of the same Greek word. In the seventh century BC, the poet Sappho used the word green to describe the complexion of a stricken lover. The ancient Greeks believed that envy or jealousy is accompanied by an overproduction of bile, thus giving the person a pale green appearance. Ovid, Chaucer, and Shakespeare all used the word green to describe jealousy or envy. Othello’s ensign Iago warns,

*O! beware my lord, of Jealousy;
It is the green-e’yd monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. (quoted in Preaching Today)*

When love is ordered well, we love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength and we love our neighbor as ourselves. And you’ll notice love, ordered well, is directed outward toward God and neighbor. It is love that is focused beyond ourselves seeking the glory and honor of God and the benefit of those around us. On the contrary, Dante defines envy as “the love of one’s own good perverted to a desire to deprive other people of theirs.” Envy is “me” centered. It is solely focused on my desires, my needs, my wants, my gain, my benefit to the point that we become bitter, angry, and resentful when we perceive that someone else has gained wealth, or position, or power, or relationship, or anything else that we believe we deserve more. More than simply desiring what our neighbor has, envy takes us to the point that we wish to actively deprive the other person of what they have gained. If I can’t have it, then neither should they.

“Envy is about more for me and less for my neighbor. Envy delights in your neighbor’s misfortune. It is about status. Envy prompts us to compete with others. It causes us to look across the fence to our neighbor’s backyard and conclude that his or her grass is greener than ours. If we’re greedy, we just want our grass to be as green as his. If we’re envious, we just need his grass to turn brown! Envy can be defined simply as ‘an incurable fear that others have it better than you, that you’re missing out.’ While greed is driven by desire, envy is driven by fear, by feelings of insecurity and inferiority. It is about competing with others. You want to look better, feel better, live better, be better than everyone else. Envy is looking over your shoulder at the party or the meeting believing that there must be something you’re missing, a better conversation, a more important person to talk with. It can be related to jealousy but envy and jealousy are slightly different. Jealousy is about holding on to what you have - and there are times that jealousy is appropriate. God is never envious but God is jealous for us.”(Bryan Wilkerson) Scripture tells us “For you shall worship no other god, because the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”(Exodus 34:14) Jesus is the embodiment

of God's jealous love and desire for us, pursuing us and seeking our heart all the way to the cross and beyond the empty tomb. Husbands and wives should be, within reason, jealous or protective of each other's love, not controlling, but living with a healthy desire to guard and protect the gift of their marriage.

“Envy, however, is about wanting what other people have. But if you can't have it, you don't want them to have it, either! There's a story about an old saint who came upon two men arguing about which one of them was the greatest. He said to them, 'Make a wish, and I will give you anything you ask for, providing your adversary is given twice as much.' The first man was given a choice. What would he ask for? If he asked for riches, the other man would have twice as much. If he asked for fame, the other man would be twice as famous. Suddenly, it dawned upon him, and he knew exactly what to ask for. He asked to be made blind in one eye. That's what envy does to you. It only makes you miserable - because no matter how much you have, achieve, or enjoy, you can't be happy because there's always someone else who has more, achieves more, or enjoys more. When you think about it, envy is the only one of the seven deadly sins, or the seven principle ways love becomes disordered, that gives you no pleasure at all, right? All the others offer at least temporary or shallow rewards—pride feels good, anger lets off steam, gluttony tastes good going down, lust gets your blood going—but envy never feels good.” (Bryan Wilkerson) Envy makes us miserable. The essayist Joseph Epstein writes, 'Of the seven deadly sins, only envy is no fun at all.' And there's plenty of research to back this up. Psychologists have found that envy decreases life satisfaction and depresses well-being. Envy is positively correlated with depression and neuroticism, and the hostility it breeds may *actually make us sick*. Recent research even suggests that envy can help explain our complicated relationship with social media: it often leads to destructive "social comparison," which decreases happiness.¹ You see the success of a friend posted on Facebook or Instagram and you think “Why isn't that me? I'm just as smart, just as hard working. I hope it doesn't last.” Well-ordered love makes our lives beautiful because when we love well our lives resemble God and God is beautiful. Disordered love, like envy, is not beautiful. It's hard to look at. Envy really is an unhappy sin.

We see the really ugly and devastating consequences of envy in this morning's reading from Genesis. It's a story as old as, well, as old as us human beings. Now we shouldn't read into the story things that are not there. But what we do know is that Cain is the first-born. Like with Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, things do not fare well in Genesis for the first-born.”² As first-born, Cain should dominate the narrative. And yet he doesn't. Both brothers are faithful in their worship and both bring their best offering to God. As Walter Brueggemann points out, “Both had reason to anticipate acceptance. There is nothing to indicate that God must discriminate or prefer one offering to the other. There is no hint of rivalry or hostility. This is simply a family of faith at

¹ Arthur C. Brooks, “The Downside of Inciting Envy,” *The Wall Street Journal* (3/1/14).

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*. p. 55.

worship. Inexplicably, however, God chooses Abel's offering. We're not told why but life is sometimes unfair, God may even seem unfair, and God, of course, is free. Life, it turns out, is not a party in the garden. Sin has crept in and love has become complicated and disordered. We all know that life will go this way from time to time. There will be disruptions, and tensions, and shadows. And in those moments, we may become angry and our face may fall, like Cain's."³ And in those very same moments we, like Cain, we are offered an invitation. "The LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, if in this moment when life has not gone as planned you love well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not love well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but Cain you must master it'."(Genesis 4:6-7)

"Sin is waiting like a hungry lion ready to leap. Sin is not merely breaking the rules. It is an aggressive force ready to ambush Cain. It is lethal."⁴ And Cain, and we, must be on guard when life doesn't go as planned so that we don't allow love to become disordered and we become envious of others, not only coveting what they have but wanting to deprive them of what they have been given.

The key here is the Hebrew word, *timshel*. It basically means "you may." It implies a choice. By God's grace we may rule over sin, over envy, over the covetous desire that lead Cain to say, "If I can't have it then neither will my brother Abel." God offers that invitation to Cain. If you do well Cain, if you choose to allow love to be ordered well by loving me and loving your brother then you won't be a slave to envy, but a servant of love. But Cain killed Abel. As Brueggemann suggests, with all the ways love becomes disordered and life becomes disordered we, by God's grace, have been given an invitation, a challenge, and a promise that because Jesus has conquered and defeated sin once and for all, sin does not have to rule us. In Christ, we *may* love well. And we may not. But the God-given and God-empowered opportunity is there for us to love well if only we take hold of it.

When we are envious of what others have, when we desire something that doesn't belong to us, when we are being ruled by our passions, by disordered love, it's because our hearts have turned from our one true love. We think that if we just had the success, opportunities, experiences, or fortune of another, we'd be happy. And if we can't have them then neither should they. We should all just be miserable together. In our envy, we are seeking rest for our souls where no rest can be found instead of allowing our hearts to rest in God. So, when we find ourselves on the edge of not loving well, when we find our heart wandering in envy, we need to remember and return to the One who is always jealous for us. (Christina Fox)

When it comes to envy, the remedy, the way we master envy and love well, is by practicing gratitude for Christ's love for us. Envy arises out of a dissatisfaction within our hearts because we've become

³ Ibid. p. 57.

⁴ Ibid.

preoccupied with what we think we are missing, rather than unwaveringly focused on the One who is our all in all. In Christ we lack nothing, we are rich beyond measure, and loved more than we deserve. And when we let our hearts abide in that truth, and we cultivate gratitude for it, instead of being envious of others, we become eager to share with others the one thing we know they may need - the one thing, or the One, who is Life abundant. Jesus makes it possible for us to love well. Don't be envious, but be thankful, because in Christ we lack absolutely nothing. Amen.