

"The Seven Deadly Sins: Envy"

Genesis 4:1-17, Luke 9:28-36

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Transfiguration of the Lord

In our "I'm OK, You're OK," culture, where being judgmental is nearly a crime, and everyone is supposed to accept everything, the whole idea of sin is meticulously avoided. But when you encounter a horrible person, or when horrible things in the world happen, we do not even have the language to describe what is going on. People just shrug and mumble and say, "Gosh, I just don't know."

So I am taking a countercultural look at updating a very old theological idea called the 7 Deadly Sins to help us be able to think more clearly and articulate some of the dynamics of sin and evil in the world. Today we are taking a look at Envy. I'd like to start with the cover quote on the bulletin by Henry Fairlie.

"If all the Seven Deadly sins are loveless, envy's eyes are peculiarly so. They seem to find nothing to love in the world, not in the whole of creation, not in anyone else, not even when they are turned up to what is lovely. The other sins have been celebrated, however perversely, in popular song down the ages, but Envy has no song."

Envy is about loveless eyes. Envy is not the small, everyday whims we have: we see some clothing, a car, a house, something that we momentarily think: "I'd like that!" That is a fun whim, not envy.

Real envy is when someone says, "I do not have that (clothing, car, house) and I wish they did not have that either." Envy looks at the world with loveless eyes. Envy comes from the root word "Invidia" which means to look at with malice.

Envy is discontented with everything other people have or do. Theologian Paul Holmer writes, "One of envy's first features is that it hardly allows any thinking about oneself." (p. 70). Deep down, Envy is insecure about its own self.

Envy is so focused on the other, that it cannot think about the self. Envy always feels like someone else is better off. Envy is ceaselessly alert to what it resents.

It even feels a sense of Sorrow for someone else's good. Envy is not just wanting something that someone else has. Envy is feeling that, if someone else has something good, it must diminish me.

Envy is pictured with a hunched over back, with the neck down, but the head contorted looking up. Envy is always looking up at someone else, feeling as if they have it better, and resenting them for it. Envy has no song; but its voice is filled with backbiting comments. Spite. Resentment. Slander: taking away someone's good name.

Gossip columns: TMZ video clip of some celebrity's momentary lapse. Kanye's new hairdo. Brad and Angelina's tiff. The problem is not with Brad and Angelina: it is with the envious lens through which they are pictured. Can't we just give them some privacy and peace? Envy can't.

Envy has to do with intense issues of power. Or rather, an intense feeling of a lack of power. Envy is rooted in discontent: Discontent with everything successful people do, or poor people do, and they resent them either way.

It is rooted in a deep insecurity about who they are. It begins with an insecure self that seeks absolute security. Since it can never feel secure, it must bring down others security. So you see envy around comparison and competition.

Envy can never win. "Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" There is always some mousey little Snow White that drives the Queen of Envy crazy. That's the thing. Our culture of envy is always looking for imperfections. It's based on surface agenda. It is not based on honor, depth, goodness. It's about celebrity. Comparison and competition.

The envious are sure that others have something we do not. Envy is not rational.

Author Joseph Epstein writes about his childhood in a large city. He had good parents, but he was always convinced that other parents were more desirable. Yes, he loved his parents, but they did not stack up to other parents. As a child, he was convinced that the smiles on the faces of other children meant that their parents had given them a palomino pony that lived in their two bedroom apartment. (Epstein, p. 85). Envy is not rational. It is, however, pervasive.

The football player who shows great potential, but then becomes vicious on the field where it is not enough just to stop the forward movement of the ball; one must slam the opponent to the ground and risking a career ending injury. Why? Envy of what they might achieve in the future. Competition for no purpose. Even willing to harm the other. Tanya Harding taking out a contract on Nancy Kerrigan. Envy.

In one of the first story of the Bible, two brothers: Cain slays Abel out of envy. But look at the subtlety of the story: Two farmers: Abel gives a gift out of the joy of his heart. Cain just throws some kernels of wheat into the offering plate. You can see in Cain's heart: the envy from the beginning.

Our conversation partner this Lenten season is Dante. In Dante's Inferno, his description of hell, there is one level specifically reserved for those who spent their lives practicing envy. On this level, everyone has their eyes sewn shut with iron thread. There is just a tiny crack left open for them to see

through. The eyes of Envy see through a tiny slit: envy can only see a small piece of reality. Envy keeps us from seeing the world of wonder before us.

You see, while they lived, "The eyes of the envious ... could not bear to look upon joy, especially the joy of others, which might have shone one them; so now in purgatory, their eyes are closed, so that they may not look on the light of the sun, and others may not look into their eyes, with the happiness that might have greeted them." (Fairlie, p. 68)

Henry Fairlie: This sin is deadly, not because it destroys us, but more because it will not let us really live." (Fairlie, p. 67)

So what spiritual practice does our Christian faith offer us to counter our temptation to envy? Jesus on the Mountaintop: we see A VISION! Of Jesus, shining white: encountering Moses and Elijah! It is a moment of Divine Transcendence. A moment of absolute wonder!

And envious Peter interrupts it to draw attention to himself and says, this is great. I think I could build some shrines here, maybe we could start of Religious Theme Park, and get some other celebrities to come. God interrupts Peter's envy and says: "This is my son. The beloved. LISTEN TO HIM!"

Listen to the one who heads down the mountain toward the cross and toward the crucifixion. Listen to the one who is about to teach you about the wonder, the mystery, the vision of love that knows no boundaries.

Trust in God: gives us the courage to live. Trust in Jesus: who heals our sight, and allows us to see. To see: we are all created in the image of God. To see: we all have equal worth, in the midst of tremendous diversity. Equally loved, vastly different. To see that we are living in God's good creation: see the goodness all around. Feel the healing of Christ: who makes the blind to see.

The classic hymn: Open my eyes that I may see,
glimpses of truth though has for me,
place in my hand the wonderful key,
that shall unlock and set me free.

Christ, who cuts open the iron threads of envy, sets us free and opens our eyes so that we can see, not narrowly, fearfully, through slits, but openly, broadly, widely, through eyes of love.

Theologian Mark Kline Taylor talks about the importance of practicing admiration. Practice looking at the world with a sense of wonder. Amazement. Awe of God's creation. Wonder over our own created and redeemed goodness.

The marvelous diversity of God's creation. The marvelous diversity of human beings. There are some people who do marvelous things. They should be admired. There are lots more people who do average, everyday things. Can we admire them for the simple pleasures of human life?

There was one US Senator who was criticized for being, as his opponent put it, "of average intelligence." The Senator gently replied that he was happy to be a Senator who represented average people. I admire that reply.

To wholeheartedly admire others does not diminish ourselves. If there is one rather classic movie that pictures a person of envy, it is Jack Nicholson's movie: *As Good as It Gets*. It is the story of Melvin Udall, a horrible waste of a human being. He has published 16 novels, but lives behind triple locked doors, afraid to touch anyone, spending his days looking out through the keyhole of his apartment. He snipes with comments like, "What makes it [life] so hard is not that you had it bad, but that you're [angry] that so many others had it good." When a housekeeper suggests opening the draperies to look out on God's good creation, Melvin tells her, "Go sell crazy someplace else; we're all stocked up here."

But Melvin gets drawn in to start seeing the world differently as he learns to care for a dog, and then a neighbor, and especially this waitress Carol. Finally, he comes to see the world differently, as he professes his love to Carol the waitress when he tells her:

"I might be the only one who appreciates how amazing you are in every single thing that you do, and how you are with [your son] Spense, and in every single thought that you have, and how you say what you mean, and how you almost always mean something that's all about being straight and good. I think most people miss that about you, and I watch them, wondering how they can watch you bring their food, and clear their tables, and never get that they just met the greatest woman alive. And that fact that I get it, makes me feel good about me."

Melvin's is the story of a life of envy healed by deep, even transcendent, admiration.

If the vice is envy, the then virtue is admiration. It is a habit of being.

We should stop waiting for people to be perfect: they never are. Start admiring them for who they are right now. Make that our habit of being. An orientation toward life. How we relate to the world. Admiration looks at the world through eyes of love and grace. Taking time to enjoy beauty, wonder, small things. And large things.

With some Oriental pottery: if a prized vase breaks, sometimes they put it back together not with glue, but with gold. The broken places become the most beautiful. Admiration sees the broken places as the most beautiful.

Can you look at other people that way? Can you look at yourself that way? It's not your perfections, but those places where God has put you back together, that's the most beautiful, the most precious part?

Take an attitude of wonder toward life. Kids all love stickers. Animal stickers, insect stickers, faces. I saw a guy going around a while ago, putting a sticker on every child that came along. In bold glitter, the stickers all said the same thing: "Miracle."

That is what you can only see through the eyes of admiration. The world changes when you look through those eyes. With eyes wide open, we can see a new reality.

The brilliance of Christ helps us to see what is true. On the mountaintop. It became clear for a moment. Jesus helps us to see... the transcendence of God.

May we have the eyes to see the wonder God gives us -- the vision-changing love of Jesus Christ to see the world anew today.

"Lord, transfigure our perception with the purest light that shines,
and recast our life's intentions, to the shape of your design."

-Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory

Sources:

Paul L. Holmer. Making Christian Sense, Westminster Press.

Henry Fairlie. The Seven Deadly Sins Today. Notre Dame.

Mark Kline Taylor. Remembering Esperanza. Orbis Press.

