

Sermon: “Envy: Counting Someone Else’s Blessings”
Rev. Martha Hodges Dec. 27, 2009

Greek mythology describes Envy in this story.

The goddess Athena was angry at the young woman Aglaurus for betraying her and decided to seek revenge. So Athena went to visit Envy in her cave. Envy’s home, filthy with black gore, is hidden in a valley where no sun shines, and no breeze blows. When Athena came through the thick black fog that wrapped the place, she beat upon the door with the end of her spear, and when the doors opened she stood without, not wishing to enter such a disgraceful abode. Envy sat within, eating her usual food, snakes' flesh, but when she saw the goddess, she came out with her teeth foul with mould, her venom dripping down from her tongue, and looked at her with her awry eyes.

They say Envy never smiles except at the sight of someone else's troubles. She never sleeps either, because she is too disturbed with wakeful cares. She hates the success of others because at its sight she pines away. She is herself her own punishment because as much as she gnaws she is herself gnawed.

Athena got down to business very quickly, and asked Envy to infect with her venom the heart of Aglaurus. And having set her the task, Athena returned to Olympus. Not being even able to think about the goddess' splendor and triumph, Envy took her staff, thick-set with thorns, and left for Athens. On her way, she trampled down the flowers and caused the grass to wither, polluting with her foul breath countries, cities and homes.

Having arrived in Aglaurus's bedroom, Envy touched her breast with her festering hand, and took care to fill her heart with pricking thorns. Then she breathed her poisonous breath into the girl's nostrils, and spread her venom through her heart and bones. Envy's final touch consisted in fixing a cause for Aglaurus's grief. So Envy pictured to her imagination the marriage of Hermes and Herse, the sister of Aglaurus, taking care to magnify the excellence and beauty of everything.

When the venom of Envy took possession of Aglaurus, she started eating her own heart. Careworn by day and by night, she could not stop envying her sister's happiness, pictured in her own head. She even thought about dying so that she might not behold such happiness implemented in life.

Finally, she sat down at the threshold, trying to prevent Hermes from coming in and meeting Herse, and declared that she would not move from the spot until she had foiled the god's purpose. And while Hermes opened the door with a touch of his wand, Aglaurus discovered she could not move any more. Her limbs stiffened, stopping her heart and choking off her breath. She turned into a lifeless statue, and

it is said that the stone was not white in color because her soul had stained it black.

What is this creature Envy, with her power to blight all signs of health and life? To fill a heart with thorns and choke the life out of a human being?

Aristotle (in *Rhetoric*) defined envy "as the pain caused by the good fortune of others", while Immanuel Kant defined it as "a reluctance to see our own well-being overshadowed by another's because the standard we use to see how well off we are is not the intrinsic worth of our own well-being but how it compares with that of others" (in *Metaphysics of Morals*).

Contrary to her twin sister Jealousy, with which she is often confused, Envy does not compete for the affections of a loved one. Envy has little to do with love. I may be jealous of my friend if I wish that her mate loved me instead of her. But I am envious of my friend if I wish I had her life, including her marriage. We're jealous of people whose love and attention we desire; we're envious of relationships, or of qualities or circumstances or objects that another possesses.

Nor is Envy the same as Greed, another of the so-called deadly sins. Greed is the craving for more than one needs or can use, the desire for more than one's share. I may be *greedy* for luxury, or money, or power, but I don't care if you have those things or not. If I envy you your fine house or your achievements or status, however, I want to obtain those things at your expense. It's not enough that I obtain the objects of my desire; I must surpass you. Envy cannot rejoice in the happiness of a friend. It doesn't say, "Oh, I want a house like that someday, or a marriage like yours, or success like yours!" It says, "Oh, I want *your* house, *your* marriage, *your* success!" Jealousy and greed are poisonous, no doubt. But Envy, as in the story we just heard, makes us devour our own hearts, turns our living selves to stone.

What a novel and ingenious punishment Athena dreams up for her poor enemy, the selfish Aglaurus! She doesn't beset her with ill fortune, no plagues or boils. She doesn't have her pursued by wild beasts or deprive her of the power of speech. These would be too crude for the crafty goddess Athena. No, she has envy plant itself in her victim's heart and destroys her from within.

Let's take a closer look at the monster Envy as depicted by the Greeks in this story. She lives in a cave – an airless and sunless cave swathed in black fog. Sun and air and light, essential to life and growth, are missing from the home of Envy. The envious person cannot breathe in the pleasures of nature or take any joy in the process of living. Envy is stagnant, and putrid. There is no potential for new life here.

Her eyes are awry and her vision is obscured by the fog of her own poisonous breath. The envious one in this metaphor literally cannot see straight. Envy lives on a diet of snakes, of venom. Her very words carry venom and she blights the ground she walks upon. Her presence spreads death to those she touches.

Yet Envy is to be pitied. She never sleeps, consumed with thoughts of the other's good fortune. The envious one is obsessed; her thoughts, her days and nights, are consumed with exaggerated images of what she imagines someone else enjoys. The one infected with envy takes no joy in life except in the losses of others and the happiness of others makes her even wish for death. Envy is herself her own punishment, the story tells us. Her torture is self-imposed and drives her to spread her misery to all around her. And her misery is life-defeating, life-devouring.

This grotesque description makes the most generous among us squirm just a bit. Which one of us has never been touched by envy? Especially those of us with siblings. After all, it was envy that drove Cain to take a rock to Abel's head. It's all too natural to want what someone else has. If only we had our brother's athleticism or our sister's brains or our best friend's good looks, life would be perfect. Envy is the curse of the young, in particular, because in our innocence, we believe that the object of our envy is happier than they really are. As we gain experience of life, we learn that no one has the perfect existence that they may appear to have. We know, in our moments of clarity, that the people on the hill also suffer betrayal and loss, loneliness and disappointment. And yet we humans love to be reminded of these truths. This is the reason for *schadenfreude*, the pleasure we take in the disasters suffered by others.

I won't say we've all done it, but I dare say most of us have – avidly followed the shocking crime story or the disgrace of a sports hero, gawked at the traffic accident, repressed a smile when describing a friend's weight gain, cheered when a wealthy person is found guilty of corruption or a politician is brought low by his sexual behavior. What is this most unpleasant form of pleasure all about, and how is it related to envy?

Let's take another look at Kant's definition of envy: "a reluctance to see our own well-being overshadowed by another's because we measure our well-being only in comparison to that of others." He hit the nail squarely on the head here, don't you think? If we measure our success only in comparison to others, of course we will rise only as others fall. It's no accident that envy and its flip side, *schadenfreude*, are most likely to prey upon people with low self-esteem – people whose self-worth is perilously linked to external factors. We place ourselves in a precarious position when we allow our value to be defined by others' attainments, and yet, in a competitive society such as ours, this is how we learn to measure our own achievements from our earliest years. Try as parents may to avoid comparing their children, try as teachers may to foster an ethic of cooperation in the classroom, it is impossible to escape the lesson that success and happiness and love are zero-sum games. Your gain is my loss, and therefore, your loss is my gain. Power, influence, and status are, in fact, relative, and grown-ups are by no means immune to this fact.

As workers, we measure our achievements against those of our colleagues. Who is paid more? Who has higher standing in our profession? Ministers, I'm sorry to say, are as vulnerable to professional envy as anyone else. We may have the good sense to be ashamed of these feelings, but any minister who is not insecure is either a saint or an arrogant fool. Ministry is by definition a calling in which one can never be as skilled, as

compassionate, as giving and as wise as one would like. And insecurity, in any profession or in any field of endeavor, makes us vulnerable to those resentments, to the joyless and fearful ravages of envy.

So if envy is a universal emotion, it must have some evolutionary value, you might think. Well, envy is in fact not a mere aberration of our culture. Researchers have found that envy and schadenfreude can actually be observed in MRI images of the brain.

A 2009 article in the *New York Times* made this observation: If the deadly sins (lust, gluttony, greed and sloth, for example) didn't feel so good, we wouldn't have to be warned against them by church and society. Where would the temptation be? The exception is envy. Envy doesn't feel good, as we have seen. So why is it so popular? In the words of the author, "It is a vice few can avoid yet nobody craves, for to experience envy is to feel small and inferior, a loser shrink-wrapped in spite." Envy prevents us from enjoying life. So why do we do it? Well, it seems we can't help it.

The article reports on research at the National Institute of Radiological Sciences in Japan. Brain scans of subjects who were told to imagine themselves in situations with characters of greater or lesser status or achievement were studied. When confronting characters that the participants admitted to envying, brain regions involved in registering physical pain were aroused: the higher the subjects rated their envy, the more vigorously flared the pain nodes in the brain's dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and related areas.

Conversely, the researchers said, when subjects were given a chance to imagine the golden one's downfall, the brain's reward circuits were activated, again in proportion to the strength of envy's sting: the subjects who felt the greatest envy the first time around reacted to news of their rival's misfortune with a comparatively livelier response in the dopamine-rich pleasure centers... "We have a saying in Japanese, 'The misfortunes of others are the taste of honey,' " said Hidehiko Takahashi, the first author of the report.

Evolutionary scientists propose that envy's persistence and universality suggest that it serves a deep social role. They propose that envy may be linked to a democratizing principle that is peculiar to humans. As a species, we tend to rebel against what we perceive to be unfair inequalities of power, wealth and advantage. This may have stood us in good stead as we evolved, pushing us to less rigidly hierarchical social structures in which all are driven by impulses to compete for success. If Mary didn't envy Sam, she wouldn't strive as hard to succeed and surpass him, and society -- and ultimately, the species -- would lose out on the benefits of her efforts.

"If you desire glory, you may envy Napoleon," Bertrand Russell said. "But Napoleon envied Caesar, Caesar envied Alexander, and Alexander, I daresay, envied Hercules, who never existed."

"If envy is a tax levied by civilization," the *Times* article concludes, "it is one that everyone must pay."

As a rule, we envy those who are like us in most ways — in sex, age, class and life experience. This makes perfect sense if envy is understood as an emotion driven by competition-fueled insecurity. . If the other person is perceived to be similar to ourselves, the envy will be particularly intense because we imagine that it just as well could have been we who enjoyed the desired object.

Similarly, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, a philosophy professor at the University of Haifa, in Israel, says that the people we envy most are those closest to us. "You will envy more a colleague of yours who makes a thousand dollars more a year than you will a C.E.O. who makes a million dollars more than you," he says.

So why are we so fascinated by the rich, the famous and the glamorous? Why do we both envy and recoil at their excesses and take such an interest in their love affairs and divorces, their drug arrests and fashion fiascos? Some would say they are symbols of what we all we should aspire to, according to fawning media and advertising. Others say that, despite the social distance between us, with the artificial intimacy produced by constant media exposure, we regard celebrities, oddly, as peers.

My own take on this is that we regard them as extreme versions of what we, too, might be capable of under different circumstances. They fascinate us because they are at once both the same and different from us. In our consumerist culture, they exist as both role models and warnings against success as measured in terms of acquisition and fame. Whatever the case, our celebrity-obsessed culture is part and parcel of consumerism. Our economy depends on the existence of envy.

Envy, sadly, makes our economy tick. Madison Avenue creates ready-made fantasies for us of lives of glamour, prowess and hyper-sexuality, and invites us to step into them. Like children, we are easily led into a world of make-believe in which possession of the advertised product brings with it an entire life of joy, romance, prestige, friendship, luxury and fulfillment. It's more than a simple matter of greed. We want more than the object being advertised; we want the lives of the characters depicted. We want to assume their characteristics. Of course we don't *really* want to be these fictional creations – we're not stupid -- but our brains respond with those primitive envy responses despite ourselves. When combined with the great leveling principle of our egalitarian society and the learned fantasy that the only difference between us and the rich and famous is the possession of goods, we are sitting ducks for an industry that exploits our childlike envy for profit.

So, what's wrong with that? Well, as we've seen, envy makes us miserable. It makes us feel inadequate. It appeals to our baser nature that does more than want to be *like* someone else – it wants to *be* someone else. It tempts us to delight in the suffering of others. Envy is an ugly emotion. It is more than aspiration. Aspiration inspires us achieve, to change, but envy simply fills us with resentment.

There is an antidote to envy. The Buddha taught that we can also take joy in the success of others, and we know this is true. This emotion – pleasure in the success or

good fortune of someone else – is called Mudita in Sanskrit. Think about it. This joy is available to us at all times, no matter what is happening in our own lives. If I am happy for you as well as for myself, I'll be happy twice as often. If I am happy for the stranger, the potential for joy is virtually infinite. This joy at the well being of others is closely linked to gratitude. If I can be grateful for your happiness, I increase my own happiness and enjoy all the benefits of gratitude: mindfulness, humility and openness to surprise.

Mudita can be taught and learned, I'm convinced. It is based on empathy, and in our human potential for empathy lies the salvation of the world. If we can learn to suffer with the world, we can equally learn to rejoice with it, and in it. The traditional example of the mind-state of mudita is the attitude of a parent observing a growing child's accomplishments and successes. There is no envy in this. Sadly, envy may enter the picture as the child grows and becomes more equal to the parent, more of a potential threat to the parent's self-esteem. But any positive and healthy emotion can be twisted by circumstances. The truth remains that we are capable of altruistic joy, just as certainly as we are capable of envy and resentment and schadenfreude.

And we are capable of regulating our responses. We can train ourselves to experience joy and gratitude. We may be hard-wired for envy, as the brain research suggests, but we are hard-wired for a great many things that we may choose to control.

When Envy comes knocking at our door and places its festering hand on us, seeking to fill our heart with pricking thorns, breathing its poisonous breath into the our nostrils, and spreading its venom through our heart and bones, we can be ready. We can remember that our fantasy of someone else's blessed life is just that – a fantasy. We can remember that no life is free from suffering and that this common suffering makes us kindred, not adversaries. We can remember that happiness is not a zero-sum game, not a fixed commodity in short supply, but an infinitely giving spring. We can remember to practice gratitude for our own blessings and for the blessings of those we know and even those we don't know. We can remember that our worth does not depend on the lack of worth of someone else. We can remember that envy, based on insecurity, is manipulated by those who seek to exploit our desires for gain. We can remember all this, and say no to Envy.

Let our New Year's resolutions be shaped by the words of Eusebius with which we began:

“May I be no one's enemy and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and abides. May I wish for every person's happiness and envy none. May I never rejoice in the ill fortune of one who has wronged me... May I respect myself. May I always keep tame that which rages within me. May I accustom myself to be gentle and never angry with others because of circumstances. May I know good people and follow in their footsteps.”

May your new year be one of abundance, adventure, loving kindness, and joy.
Amen.

