

*A sermon given on Sunday, February 22, 2009  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

***The Seven Deadly Sins:  
Part 2: Envy***

In his book *Disordered Loves*, William Stafford gives the account of a family which was as happy as any other – the parents, loving and giving; their three children, normal and nice. As the years passed, however, all three children headed in bad directions which no one could understand. They grew alienated from their parents. They dropped out of school, used and sold drugs. In the end, one of them drifted into prostitution and two became gang members. The family was utterly destroyed, and there was no explaining it.

Some years later, the children's aunt died. In the last days before her death she called her sister, who was the mother of the three. The aunt disclosed that she had always despised her sister's happiness, so seemingly neat and perfect, and had set about to destroy that happiness by corrupting her sister's children. Over the years she had invited the three to her city apartment in ways that had seemed perfectly natural. There she treated them royally, instilling in them a resentment of the simpler lifestyle that their lowly-paid parents lived. She introduced them gradually to her animosity, to lies about their parents, and eventually to illicit so-called pleasures of drinking, drugs, and careless sexuality. The aunt told all this to her sister from her deathbed as a final act of triumphant bitterness. The family had been destroyed beyond reconciling. It was destroyed by sin, and that sin is called envy.<sup>1</sup>

Those of you who were here last week know that I got an early start on a Lenten sermon series. We are taking seven Sundays to consider the Seven Deadly Sins. These seven, worked out by the church over centuries of tradition, represent seven ways that we separate ourselves from one another and from God. While we think about sin most often in terms of sinful actions or misdemeanors, these sins are but the outward manifestation of our interior character. Sinful actions are signs of a sinful disposition, expressions of a heart alienated from God. Not misbehavior but alienation and separation from God – this is what sin is all about. Last week we talked about the sin of Anger. In coming weeks we will consider the other cardinal sins of Greed, Gluttony, Lust, Sloth, and Pride. Today we contemplate an illness of the heart and soul which is called Envy.

We should distinguish the sin of envy from a related but relatively benign emotion which is the natural human experience of jealousy. When we see others enjoying something which we wish we had, we are apt to be jealous. Good looks, fortune, a really nice home, the perfect job. We can't help wishing. Tonight the Academy Awards will be broadcast, and many of us will watch the Beautiful People parade across the screen, admiring their elegant clothing, their beautiful companions, their professional accomplishments. It's pretty harmless, mostly, this kind of jealousy. It's a sort of yearning, wishing. It's akin to what we feel in the restaurant when, no matter what we order, the plates come out and we decide that we'd really rather have what our companion ordered. Someone has called this "entrée envy."<sup>iii</sup>

From this frustrating but harmless sort of wishing, we move to envy in which we are focused not so much on the thing we want, as on the other person who has it. We become resentful or contemptuous of the other person whom we envy. Our envy may be disguised by arrogant put-downs. When I was in high school the scholars and the athletes related to each

other with this kind of envy. “Who cares what you can do on the playing field,” was the attitude of the scholars, “we’re the ones with the brains.” “Yeah, right,” said the jocks, “studying is what you settle for if you don’t have the right stuff to kick rump on the field.” Our mutual envy was hidden under the guise of contempt.

The deepest envy develops beyond jealousy and beyond contempt to active malice. It’s not just that we want what someone else has. We develop the secret (or not so secret) hope that something bad will happen to take away the happiness of their possession. Author Joseph Epstein offers this anecdote to illustrate.<sup>iii</sup> An Englishwoman, a Frenchman, and a Russian are each given a single wish by one of those genies that pop out of a bottle. The Englishwoman says that a friend of hers has a charming cottage in the Cotswolds, and that she would like a similar one, maybe with a couple more bedrooms. The Frenchman says that his best friend has a beautiful mistress, and that he would like such a mistress himself, except maybe redheaded instead of blonde. The Russian, when asked what he would like, relates that his neighbor has a cow that gives a vast quantity of the richest milk, which yields the heaviest cream and the purest butter. The Russian tells the genie, “I want dat cow,” the Russian tells the genie, “dead.” He doesn’t have it; he wants it dead.

Our resentment, then, can lead us to wish ill to those we envy. Not death, necessarily, but some nasty turn. Am I the only one who must confess a certain guilty pleasure at the sudden disgrace of Alex Rodriguez? It’s not just a question of his playing for the Yankees. It’s that the man is enviably good-looking, accomplished, and ridiculously over paid. But now the mighty A-Rod is exposed as a cheat and a liar, and we find his humiliation sweet.

Psychologists tell us, however, that the most dangerous envy is not that of distant celebrities. At some level we know it’s foolish to envy A-Rod, or Bill Gates. “Real envy is reserved not for the great or the greatly gifted, but for those whose situation seems only slightly better than ours,”<sup>iv</sup> someone whom we see as a near-equal. We envy the professional colleague who advances more quickly; the neighbor who can afford the gorgeous new kitchen when we cannot; the college classmate whose grades were always below our own but who is now endowing a new facility at the school. It feels colossally unjust. *Why them? Why not me?*

Here, amongst those closest to us, perhaps, is where we most risk the deep bitterness of envy. At the least, such bitterness becomes a consuming obsession, destroying our own happiness. At the worst, this bitterness actually leads us to plot against the happiness of the other. The aunt who corrupted her sister’s children was a chilling example. She did not simply wish for a happy family life of her own.

Like all the deadly sins, envy is as old as time. Last week I offered the story of Cain and Abel as a biblical example of anger. Perhaps it is an even more potent example of envy. Cain was envious of God’s apparent favoring of his brother Abel, and that envy led to murder. In the story of King Solomon, a woman so envies another woman’s motherhood that she steals the baby, and when caught, she would sooner see the baby cut in two than allow the other woman her maternal joy. David envies Uriah for his lovely wife Bathsheba, and David has Uriah killed. And so it goes. Envy consumes. The Ten Commandments enjoin us not to covet our neighbor’s possessions. It does not say you cannot wish for such possessions of your own. It says not to covet those of your neighbor. It’s about relationships. It’s about what envy does to those relationships. And, of course, what it does to our own soul.

St. Paul includes envy among the list of things antithetical to love. “Love is patient and kind, and does not envy.” (I Cor 13:4) And Jesus several times rebukes his disciples for displays of envious rivalry, when they dispute amongst themselves about which is the greatest. The sin of

envy is a spiritual disease. It is not just about our relationship with other people. It is very much about our relationship with God.

What, then, is the cure for envy? The healing of envy comes from the cultivation of gratitude, and the discipline of love.

Day in and day out, a steady antidote for envy is to nurture gratitude. Your grandmother probably told you to “count your blessings,” and you know, she was right. When we learn to enjoy and be grateful for the gifts and graces in our lives, we are less obsessed about the gifts possessed by others. At a neighbors’ home, instead of envying the incredible way they can cook, be grateful for the delicious meal. At church, instead of envying someone else’s skill at reading or singing, be glad to have heard the Lord speak to you through them. Remind yourself constantly that your life is filled with good things, and not only empty desires. If our human nature is to compare and to take measure, be sure that you are not just comparing yourself with others who have more, but also taking measure of the hosts of humanity with less. “Envy cannot grow in a thankful heart.”<sup>v</sup>

And then there is love. Psychologist Solomon Schimmel affirms that the moral teachers of old got it right: true love drives out envy. This love, he asserts, is a matter of will, a matter of discipline. “The biblical assumption is that one can and should induce oneself to love others,” he writes.

*It implies that one must acquire skills and strategies for loving. One of the most important of these is training ourselves to look for the positive dimensions of people. Surely we would want to be appreciated for our admirable human qualities, with less attention directed at our weaknesses. We should apply that same standard in loving others. Just as you would want to be loved notwithstanding your faults, love your neighbor in the same manner. Once we become adept at this way of thinking about others, we will find that the feelings that are incompatible with love, such as envy, will eventually succumb to love’s power.*<sup>vi</sup>

As we suggested with the sin of anger, so also with the sin of envy, the place to bring it is to the Cross – the Cross which is God’s sign of radical love.

Psalm 73 is the story of a man who is afflicted with envy, but is finds healing in gratitude and love. I’d like to close with his journey, which I invite you to examine with me.<sup>vii</sup> [Psalm 73, BCP p. 687]

*Vv. 1-3: Truly, God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had nearly slipped; I had almost tripped and fallen, because I envied the proud and saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

The Psalmist sees that the prosperous, healthy, beautiful people are getting along fine. Even though they are openly scornful towards God, they just seem to get richer and richer. Not the Psalmist!

*Vv. 13-14: In vain have I kept my heart clean, and washed my hands in innocence. I have been afflicted all day long, and punished every morning.*

This is not the way it is supposed to work, and the Psalmist is angry and envious. But then he goes to God’s sanctuary, perhaps literally to the Temple, or perhaps he finds the “sanctuary” of God’s presence in prayer. He hears God’s story again, and a new perspective settles upon him.

*Vv. 17-18: I entered the sanctuary of God and discerned the end of the wicked. Surely you set them in slippery places; you cast them down in ruin.*

Now the Psalmist sees things differently.

Vv. 20-22a: *Like a dream when one awakens, O Lord, when you arise you will make their image vanish. When my mind became embittered, I was sorely wounded in my heart. I was stupid and had no understanding.*

When he looks around at other people, he sees one thing; but when he looks to God, he sees another.

Vv. 23-24: *Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You will guide me by your counsel, and afterwards receive me with glory.*

The Psalmist is restored in his perspective on other people by being restored in his perspective on God.

As in today's Gospel, when Christ was received on a mountaintop with glory, so does the Psalmist look to his own encounter with God's glory. And with the Psalmist, so do we.

As Christ's true self was revealed on that mountaintop, so may we climb towards our own truest self – as children of God, healed with gratitude and love.

As Christ was Transfigured, so would we ask God to transfigure us more closely to his likeness, healed of every bitter yearning.

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<sup>i</sup> William Stafford, *Disordered Loves: Healing the Seven Deadly Sins* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1994), p. 95

<sup>ii</sup> Joseph Epstein, *Envy*, in *The Seven Deadly Sins Series*, Elda Rotor, editor (Oxford: NY Public Library and OUP, 2005), p. 31

<sup>iii</sup> Epstein, p. 21

<sup>iv</sup> Epstein, p. 32

<sup>v</sup> Stafford, p. 105

<sup>vi</sup> Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Jewish, Christian, and Classical Reflections on Human Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 77-78.

<sup>vii</sup> Psalm 73 reflection adapted from Stafford, pp. 102-103.