

“Deadly Sins: Envy”

Date: February 14, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Genesis 4:1-16; Philippians 4:4-13

Theme: Sin, Envy, Jealousy

Occasion: Deadly sins series

Last week we kicked off our series on the Seven Deadly Sins with the message “Taking Sin Seriously.” On Ash Wednesday we were going to consider the first of the seven, called pride. But the service was cancelled. However, I did post the sermon online and you can still access it on our website.

Pride is an especially dangerous sin because it can lead to so many other sins. At the center of the word *sin* is the letter “I” reminding us that preoccupation with *self* is dangerous. Either thinking too much of ourselves, or too little of ourselves can have dangerous consequences. Today we consider the sin of envy.

One of the most basic elements in the make-up of human beings is envy. We see it on the first pages of the Bible. Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a tiller of the ground.

“In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering, he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell...” (Genesis 4:3-5, RSV)

Cain was jealous. Cain was angry. Cain was filled with envy. And Cain had a point. Life isn’t fair. If life were fair we would all be as attractive as handsome actors and beautiful actresses, but we’re not. If life were fair, every child born into this world would be born in America, would live in the suburbs and attend the finest schools.

But life isn't fair. The question is: why does it bother us when someone else has what we don't? God said to Cain, "Why are you angry?...If you do well, will you not be accepted?" Cain was angry though, and it is rare when any of us can help feeling envious when someone else gets what we do not.

In Middle School, why does a certain girl seem to attract all the attention of the boys, and other girls seem to get ignored? Why did he get the part in the play and we didn't, our talents seem to be the same? Why does she have a better job; why does he have a nicer house; and on it goes.

The real question is: why do we feel that way, and is there any hope for us? We need to begin, by noting that envy always springs from a feeling of insecurity about our own self-worth. When we feel confident in ourselves, we don't need to worry about other people's accomplishments, position, giftedness, friends, or whatever.

God asked Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" And Cain had no answer. The truth is that Cain wasn't sure if he was acceptable or not. He was envious of his brother. Envy is a very dangerous emotion that can have deadly consequences. Cain killed his brother.

You had better be careful with envy, because it is deadly stuff. Some years ago a postal worker in Dearborn, Michigan lost a job promotion to a fellow worker. The man became so enraged with envy that he took a gun and shot his fellow co-worker twice in the head and then turned the gun on himself. Envy is a deadly sin.

There was another incident known as the "Pom-Pom Mom" in Texas. This mom was so envious, because her daughter was not

selected to be on the high-school cheer-leading team. So the mother put out a contract to have the girl murdered, whom she identified as the one who took her daughter's place. Thank God this plot was discovered and stopped. But what a monster, envy had created.

Envy is rooted in a basic insecurity about our own self-worth. Whenever a person is envious of another, you can be sure that person has never fully recognized and accepted his or her own gifts.

Tragically, our efforts to bolster our self-esteem, at the expense of the one we envy, usually does more harm to us than it does to them. Dwight L. Moody, the great evangelist, once told a fable about an eagle who was envious of another eagle who could fly better than he could.

One day, the eagle saw a sportsman with a bow and arrow. The eagle said to the hunter, "I wish you would bring down that eagle up there." The man said he would, if he had some feathers for his arrow. So the jealous eagle pulled one out of his own wing. The arrow was shot but didn't quite reach the rival bird, who was flying too high.

The jealous eagle pulled out another feather, then another, until he had lost so many feathers that he himself could not fly. The archer took advantage of the situation and turned around and killed the helpless bird.

Moody concluded, "If you are envious of others, the one you will hurt the most by your actions will be yourself." That has always been true; it's why there are so many fables that deal with envy.

Is there any hope for us in dealing with the demon of envy? The answer is "Yes." There is a man hanging on a cross who says to

us, “You are worth all the world to me. You’re not a failure. You’re not a loser. You are a child of the living God.”

You see, God has created each of us to be beautiful. He has given to each of us eternal value. That is the meaning of the cross. We don’t have to compare ourselves with others. Instead, we need to take our eyes off of them and turn our eyes to Jesus.

We don’t have to prove that we are somebody. We don’t have to tear others down to build ourselves up. We are loved with an everlasting love. If we believe that, it will lift us up to a place where we need never be bothered by envy again.

Only a few months before his death in 1971, Damasus Winzen, Abbot of Mt. Savior, and a beloved member of the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality, told one of his Benedictine brothers:

“When I look back upon the 70 years of my own life, I see quite clearly that I owe my present inner happiness, my peace, my confidence and my joy essentially to one fact: I am certain that I am infinitely loved by God.”

My dear friends, that is the real source of peace, happiness and self-worth: We are infinitely loved by God. May we know it, not only with our heads but also within our hearts. Perhaps then, we can all say with the Apostle Paul:

“I have learned in whatever state I am in, to be content.” May it be so. Amen!