

Scripture: Psalm 73; Genesis 4:1-16; Matthew 20:1-16; Philippians 4:10-14

The Bittering of Oneself

Two stories

Forty years ago, I attended a wedding shower for two college friends. Unlike other showers I'd attended, this one included both men and women, both the bride and the groom. I don't recall much about the event. I'm sure the gifts included many of the usual kitchen, bathroom, and other household items. I imagine many of the men present had never been to a shower and didn't have a clue what to bring.

The gift I remember all these years later was presented to the groom by his father. It was something he thought every workshop needed. On the card he wrote: "To the good son, who has no vise."

I talked to the couple this week to clarify the details. Neither one could remember which spelling he used (vise/vice). I asked my friend if he still has the vise. "Yes," he said. And then his wife chimed in, "Yes, he hangs onto his vises."

The second story is a popular parable of unknown origin, sometimes attributed to the Cherokee people.¹ This story sets the theme for our worship in July and August.²

An old man was teaching his grandson about life, "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

"One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego.

"The other is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

"This same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The grandfather simply replied, "The one you feed."

We'll keep this parable in mind over the course of the next seven weeks as we talk about vices and virtues, sometimes referred to as the "seven deadly sins" and "seven holy virtues." We begin today with envy and contentment.

Envy: Feeling bitter when others have it better³

Envy is a sin that's difficult to confess. We can be light-hearted with our comments: "I wish I had his style or her talent or your car." But the underlying feelings aren't as easily thrown out.

Envy is a deep longing for what someone else has. Envy is filled with "if onlys," "whens," and "whys." If only I had the same phone he does, then I'd be happy. When I make as much money as she does, then we'll be friends. Why do they have the family I'd like to have?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two_Wolves

² Snakes and Ladders: A Worshipful Study of the "Seven Deadly Sins" and "Seven Holy Virtues," *Leader, Summer 2019*, Vol. 16, No. 4, ©2019 MennoMedia, p. 38.

³ Commentary on envy and contentment draws from *Leader, Summer 2019*, pp. 41-42.

Envy has been called “the ulcer of the soul.” Envy takes away joy and gives pain without pleasure. Envy strips us of our ability to love. Envy’s love is devoted only to the bittering of oneself because of what one doesn’t have—eventually leading us into our own individual exile. Paired with jealousy – worrying that someone will take what you possess, envy can be deadly to the soul and to every relationship one has.

The writer of Psalm 73 knew all about envy. Listen to the words as paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*.⁴

*No doubt about it! God is good—
good to good people, good to the good-hearted.
But I nearly missed it,
missed seeing [God’s] goodness.
I was looking the other way,
looking up to the people
At the top,
envying the wicked who have it made,
Who have nothing to worry about,
not a care in the whole wide world.*

*Pretentious with arrogance,
they wear the latest fashions in violence,
Pampered and overfed,
decked out in silk bows of silliness.
They jeer, using words to kill;
they bully their way with words.
They’re full of hot air,
loudmouths disturbing the peace.
People actually listen to them—can you believe it?
Like thirsty puppies, they lap up their words.*

*What’s going on here? Is God out to lunch?
Nobody’s tending the store.
The wicked get by with everything;
they have it made, piling up riches.
I’ve been stupid to play by the rules;
what has it gotten me?
A long run of bad luck, that’s what—
a slap in the face every time I walk out the door.*

*If I’d have given in and talked like this,
I would have betrayed your dear children.
Still, when I tried to figure it out,
all I got was a splitting headache. . .
Until...*

⁴ Psalm 73:1-20, *The Message*

It's easy to identify with the psalmist, envying those who have it made. Strangers out there who we can envy from afar. What's going on here? Is God out to lunch?

Envy is even more toxic when it's up close. Envy was at work in the first family on earth. Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel.⁵ Abel grew up to become a shepherd, and Cain grew up to become a farmer. After he had learned how to produce food from the fields, Cain gave God an offering—some of the crops he had grown from the ground. For his part of the offering, Abel gave God some tender lamb meat—the choicest cuts from the firstborn of his flock. God accepted Abel and his gift of lamb, but had no regard for Cain and what he presented. Because of this, Cain became extremely angry and his face fell. God spoke to Cain, asking why he was angry and despondent and warning him about the sin of envy crouching at the door, ready to pounce. But when they were in the field, Cain's envy of his brother got the better of him. He attacked and killed Abel. And God sentenced Cain to life as a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.

Despite some questions about fairness – Why did God reject Cain's sacrifice? – this story illustrates the tragic effects of envy on both brothers. I wonder what effect envy – or its relative jealousy – has had on your life. When have you experienced it? When have you been the object of it? How have you dealt with it?

Let's return to Psalm 73.⁶ We left the psalmist at a turning point.

*If I'd have given in and talked like this,
I would have betrayed your dear children.
Still, when I tried to figure it out,
all I got was a splitting headache. . .
Until...*

*Until I entered the sanctuary of God.
Then I saw the whole picture:
The slippery road you've put them on,
with a final crash in a ditch of delusions.
In the blink of an eye, disaster!
A blind curve in the dark, and—nightmare!
We wake up and rub our eyes. . . . Nothing.
There's nothing to them. And there never was.*

*When I was beleaguered and bitter,
totally consumed by envy,
I was totally ignorant, a dumb ox
in your very presence.
I'm still in your presence,
but you've taken my hand.
You wisely and tenderly lead me,
and then you bless me.*

⁵ Genesis 4:1-16, abridged and adapted from *The Voice*

⁶ Psalm 73:20-28, *The Message*

*You're all I want in heaven!
You're all I want on earth!
When my skin sags and my bones get brittle,
GOD is rock-firm and faithful.
Look! Those who left you are falling apart!
Deserters, they'll never be heard from again.
But I'm in the very presence of GOD—
oh, how refreshing it is!
I've made Lord GOD my home.
GOD, I'm telling the world what you do!*

Contentment: Loving what's right in front of you

Contentment, in contrast to envy, is a form of gratitude and appreciation. If envy is feeling bitter about what one doesn't have and blaming God for it, then contentment is appreciating what one does have, and thanking God for it.

The Apostle Paul wrote about this in a letter to the Christians in Philippi. Paul wrote these words while he was a prisoner, probably in house arrest in Rome. One of his purposes in writing to the Philippians was to thank them for a gift they sent to him there.⁷

I could hardly contain my joy in the Lord when I realized you have started to show your care for me once again. Since you have not had the opportunity to show how much you cared until now, I want you to know how it touched me. I am not saying this because I am in need. I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances. I know how to survive in tight situations, and I know how to enjoy having plenty. In fact, I have learned how to face any circumstances: fed or hungry, with or without. I can be content in any and every situation through [Christ] who is my power and strength. Nevertheless, it was admirable of you to participate in my affliction.

Throughout his life, Paul experienced a variety of circumstances – plenty and want, with and without. And he had learned to live in contentment – appreciating what he had, thanking God for strength, and expressing gratitude for help he received from other people. He found joy even when living in lockdown imposed on him by governmental authorities.

Jesus alluded to envy and contentment in a parable recorded in Matthew 10.⁸

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily

⁷ Philippians 4:10-14, *The Voice*

⁸ Matthew 20:1-16, *New Revised Standard Version*

wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The first workers hired in this story were content with their initial agreement to receive a day's pay for a day's work. It was when they looked at what everyone else received that their discontent set in. They envied the generosity the landowner displayed to the other workers.

Of course, we could talk about other issues in this story – issues of fairness, equality, equity, and justice. The workers didn't receive equal pay for equal work. However, we don't know why no one hired the ones left standing in the marketplace. Perhaps there was unfair treatment there as well. I can't imagine God wants us to be content with unfair hiring practices and salary schedules.

When we read the parable from Matthew alongside Psalm 73, we see other factors at work as well. The objects of the psalmist's bitterness gained their possessions and power through dishonesty, arrogance, bullying, and oppression. I can't imagine God wants us to find contentment by gaining wealth in those ways nor to be content with those who do.

It's also possible to use the vice of envy and the virtue of contentment as a means of keeping people in their place and releasing ourselves from responsibility. Telling people who don't have adequate food, housing, clothing, transportation, and medical treatment to be content with what they have keeps them in need and prevents us from working to make sure everyone's basic needs are met. Telling people who fear mistreatment based on their skin color, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability keeps them living in fear and prevents us from working to remove the barriers built into our culture and social structures.

In these stories and scriptures, I hear God telling us to appreciate the possessions and relationships we have instead of wasting energy and emotion longing for what belongs to someone else. I see God demonstrating how envy blocks us from giving and receiving the compassion, love, and acceptance that we all need. Envy prevents our most vital relationships from thriving.

Perhaps a bit of envy that motivates us to set worthy goals and actively work to achieve them is an asset. But envy that embitters strips us of joy and the ability to love. It's deadly to the soul and the relationships we have. Eventually it leads us into our own individual exile.

Let's strive for contentment. Let's practice gratitude and appreciation. Let's value what's right in front of us, thanking God and each other for what we have.

One way to do this is through the spiritual practice of gratitude.⁹ I talked about this in May, May 24th to be exact. Take a moment out of each day or week to answer two questions. What am I grateful for? How have I seen God at work in my life and the world around me? It might be helpful to share your answers with someone or record them in a gratitude notebook. This practice helps us appreciate what we have. It helps us keep envy in its place. It helps us see how God is at work in our challenges, transforming them into moments of contentment.

May it be so.

⁹ Description draws from *Leader, Summer 2019*, p. 41.