

February 11 2018

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

This first Sunday in Lent, our scripture passage addresses the reality that many people just don't think like Christians. They can't wrap their heads around what the gospel preaches, because it is so counter to what society teaches. But, Paul says, when we absorb the practices and principles of Christianity, our lives begin to reflect the light of Christ in the world so that others can see. They can get a glimpse of the truth that lies beneath the principles we practice. Hear these words from 2nd Corinthians:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. (They can't see that the good news is life, because they live in the ways of death.) In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As we enter the season of Lent – which began Wednesday – we're going to think about the things that tend to keep people from seeing and experiencing the good news of God. Throughout history, church leaders have tried to identify some of the big obstacles to embracing and living a Christian life.

Somewhere between 400-600 AD a list of 7 deadly sins was compiled and then instituted by Pope Gregory. The sins include envy, gluttony, greed, lust, pride, sloth, and wrath.

This week we'll explore envy. (Next week we may take on wrath, and talk about it in the context of the school shootings.) Envy is widely present in society and it is encouraged and used by advertisers to get us to buy stuff we really can't afford. Most people would say we **should** want the good life – whether it is material goods or achievement. The route to happiness is getting what we want, what we

see that others have. Sometimes, maybe, happiness is seeing someone else who thinks they're all that cuz they are so successful, brought down a peg or two.

Parul Sehgal in her Ted Talk on envy tells this story about when she was 8:

So when I was eight years old, a new girl came to join the class, and she was so impressive, as the new girl always seems to be. She had vast quantities of very shiny hair and a cute little pencil case, super strong on state capitals, just a great speller. And I just curdled with jealousy that year, until I hatched my devious plan. So one day I stayed a little late after school, a little too late, and I lurked in the girls' bathroom. When the coast was clear, I emerged, crept into the classroom, and took from my teacher's desk the grade book. And then I did it. I fiddled with my rival's grades, just a little, just demoted some of those A's. All of those A's. (Laughter) And I got ready to return the book to the drawer, when hang on, some of my other classmates had appallingly good grades too. So, in a frenzy, I corrected everybody's marks, not imaginatively. I gave everybody a row of D's and I gave myself a row of A's, just because I was there, you know, might as well. And I am still baffled by my behavior. I don't understand where the idea came from. I don't understand why I felt so great doing it. I felt great.

But most of all, I am baffled by, why did it bother me so much that this little girl, this tiny little girl, was so good at spelling? Jealousy baffles me. It's so mysterious, and it's so pervasive. (She goes on to name how prevalent jealousy is down and reminds us jealousy is the number one cause of spousal murder in the United States.)

Everyone is vulnerable to envy although we may not envy the same things. The end result is when you're obsessed with someone else's success or stuff, it can damage relationships, your ability to function well, and damage you. One of the reasons envy is difficult to manage is because it's hard to talk about or even admit to.

We can say when we're jealous of someone who is totally out of our league. But we know we aren't ever going to ski like a gold medalist, or dress like the princess in England. But that is more like admiration. Jealousy tends to be more personal. It's about the girl in your class with the long hair who all the boys like, or the colleague down the hall who gets all the praise at meetings.

Envy is all over scripture, beginning with Cain and Abel, when Cain is jealous cuz Abel gets praised more. It's in the story of Jacob and Esau when Jacob steals Esau's birthright. It's in stories of men with two wives who love one wife more, or one of the wives has children and the other is barren. It's the story of the people of Israel who feel small and powerless in the face of surrounding nations and want to be like the nations around them.

When we're jealous we tend to distort the truth. They don't really deserve those A's. I deserve A's. Because we don't know their story, we don't know the truth. We find ourselves making up stories and assuming they are true. And then – sometimes - those stories lead us to do crazy stuff.

About once every two years I watch an episode of Keeping up with the Kardashians just for a tune in. Last week it was time. Mother and daughters each have their own incredibly lavish homes in their neighborhood in sunny California. The episode I watched was a Christmas one. And they 1. compete with each other to have the best Christmas decorations and its not just a friendly competition. 2. They steal ideas from each other, and they steal Santa's from each other 3. spend a lot time accusing each other of stealing ideas and they're mean about it – seriously unpleasant 4. spy on each other in order to one up each other. There's a part of it that is kind of fun, but it's also kind of insane. In this episode Kris, the mom, found out that daughter Kim was going to put a skating rink in her back yard for Christmas, so Kris decides to one up her and put in her own outdoor skating rink – but bigger and better. This is in California by the way so its sunny and 70 outside. She surrounds the rink it with a beautiful hedge – I can't even imagine how much it cost - and a snow machine, a hot chocolate station, and even hires Nancy Kerrigan to skate with her family. Cuz she wasn't gonna let daughter Kim outdo her. And that was only one part of the crazy.

The greatest harm this does is says it's normal to one up and outdo the people you care about the most through any means necessary. Was it a friendly competition that just got a little out of hand? I don't know. But watching it you definitely got the impression that crazy as it is, the Kardashians seem to be pretty jealous of each other and it does not bring out the best in them.

So, what can we do about envy? Back to Parul, who changed her friends' grade She comes up with a solution for envy that is in many ways very biblical. Although

she got it from a Sherlock Holmes story. Inspector Lestrade is the rat-faced head of Scotland Yard who needs Holmes' help desperately to solve crimes, needs Holmes' genius, but resents Holmes' genius. It just doesn't seem right or fair that Holmes can figure things out so easily. So Lestrade needs his help, resents him, and sort of seethes with bitterness over the course of the mysteries. But as they work together, something starts to change. Finally, in "The Adventure of the Six Napoleons," when Holmes comes in and does his usual job dazzling everybody with his solution, Lestrade turns to Holmes and he says, "We're not jealous of you, Mr. Holmes. We're proud of you." And he goes on to say that there's not a man at Scotland Yard who wouldn't want to shake Sherlock Holmes' hand.

Parul points out that this scene seems to treat jealousy as a problem of geometry, not emotion. At first, Lestrade is on the other side from Holmes. It's a competition. When Lestrade begins to see himself on the same side as Holmes, then he can admire this mind that he's resented. It raises the question - what if jealousy really is a matter of geometry, a matter of where we allow ourselves to stand in relation to another? That is Biblical.

In their study in the Harvard Business Review, Tanya Menon and Leigh Thompson looked at the impact of jealousy on the workplace. While a little tiny bit of envy can motivate you to work harder, too much can be lethal. So they suggest the following – and again, much of it sounds Biblical:

Don't focus on other people; focus on yourself.

Measure your present self against your past self. When salespeople focused on their own sales performance, they could feel good about what they achieved, and it took the edge off their resentment of the sales leader. They had more accurate information, and a better perspective on the truth.

Affirm yourself.

They also found it made a big difference if a salesperson tended to have knee jerk resentment about a rival, when they reminded themselves of their own strengths (put family first, are great at their hobby and actually have a life....) before an encounter with their colleague.

The gods of this world prevent many from seeing and hearing the good news. Paul suggests that it is the intent of the "god" of this world to blind unbelievers – to distort our vision, to persuade us that envy can lead us to the best possible future instead of twisting us up and making us miserable.

But envy - of all the vices - it is the least fun. Gluttony, sloth, lust, anger... they usually bring some joy – at least momentarily you enjoy pigging out or laying on your couch all day or your witty comeback that just destroys the person you hate. But envy doesn't make you feel better. It makes you feel worse – all the time.

Paul says even though not everyone will listen, it is our proclamation in this world that is the answer to the would-be "gods." We proclaim Christ - The light of creation, Paul says, the light which God first spoke into being to blaze in the empty darkness of a void and formless universe, is the same light that shines now in our hearts. The light that says each of us is beautiful in our own way, and that we don't have to be like others to be happy. That in fact we're so far off the road to happiness if we think happiness is being like the Jones's.

It is our job to proclaim Christ. To proclaim the joy that comes when you realize you don't have to be like the girl with the shiny hair in order to be happy. Who knows how many times that girl cried when her mom pulled the knots out of her hair.

But that is not Paul's only point in these verses and in the larger passage of 2 Corinthians 4. For in reality, the Gospel is hard for people to embrace. It is counter-intuitive. The Son of God came as a humble human being from the backwaters of the Roman Empire. And most people don't aspire to the humble life of Jesus. They aspire to the life of Kim. They don't see the many ways envy leads to death and destruction. A veil covers the mind of the hearer.

It will take more than words to convince most people they'd be happier like Jesus.

So how might we preach the joy that comes when we let go of envy? How do we share the light and joy we have? How do we help people – even ourselves - experience the peace of not needing what others have? (inspector)

Parul Segal an ode to envy, ted.com

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[Tanya Menon](#), [Leigh Thompson](#) APRIL 2010 ISSUE Harvard business review

In Pain and Joy of Envy, the Brain May Play a Role NYT article 2/17/09 Natalie Angier