

Life is too Short to be Envious

1Romans 12:9-21 (The Message Translation)

This sermon was preached by Pastor Heather Wigdahl on Wednesday, March 30, 2011 at Trinity Lutheran Church.

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant.

Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath.

Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down.

Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone.

If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do.

"I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink.

Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good. *Here ends our reading.*

Grace and peace to you, sisters and brothers, in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

There once were two bakers, who were bitter rivals. Their stores were directly across the street from one another, and they would spend each day keeping track of each other's business. If one got a customer, he would smile in triumph at his rival. Every act, over and against the other.

One night one of the bakers had a dream in which an angel appeared and said, "I will give you anything you ask, but whatever you receive, your rival will receive twice as much. If you wish to be rich, he will be twice as wealthy. If you wish to live a long and healthy life, his life will be longer and healthier. So what, then, is your desire?"

In his dream, he thought, and thought and thought (you know how dreams can be) and then he answered, "**Strike me blind in one eye!**"

huh! Yet that IS the outcome of envy, for even in our waking hours, our *insatiable* appetite to compete, and the *exhaustive* ways we measure ourselves can lead to destruction: in us; to others.

The dictionary tells us envy is: "*a feeling of discontent or resentment, usually with ill-will at seeing another's superiority, advantages or success...desire for some advantage possessed by another.*"

To envy is to covet, as in ...Thou shall not.

Psychologists and sociologists tell us that we are more likely to envy a peer, than a movie star, or a billionaire. That's when it gets complicated: when we envy someone we also admire—even care about.

So *who* do YOU envy, really? What things are YOU envious of? If we're honest, we can all name *something*. I'm not talking about healthy wants or goals, like Sherri taught us. I'm talking about ENVY, as in "covet," as in that which destroys little bits of us at a time.

And that kind of envy, we don't want to admit. We might off-handedly admit jealousy for a fabulous vacation or an extravagant gift; we might even use the word to name the opposite of what we envy, like "I sure wish I could be as unaffected by the world as you are" (i.e. you're not very smart, or you're not paying enough attention). But rarely do we talk about or NAME what we do REALLY do envy—the things that turn us into little green monsters of our making.

Am I the only one who's ever envied someone, for their intellect or self-confidence; for their paycheck or wit; for their natural talent, or just plain good luck? Am I the only one? Am I the only one who, yet again, has something in common with, a monkey?!!

Remember how to catch a monkey, in my sermon from a few weeks ago? Maybe it's because there is a lot of primate study going on these days; maybe it's because I apparently have a secret fascination with monkeys, I don't know, but I have to share another monkey story with you tonight—it's my own subtitle for this series: life's too short to be like a monkey.

In my defense, there is an awful lot of behavioral and brain research being done with monkeys which does bear insight into our human behaviors too. So here's another monkey lesson for you: In one study of Primates, researchers found that, when monitoring a community of monkeys, the monkeys lived happy together, when each of them received, as a reward: a slice of cucumber.

They lived in harmony; they were all satisfied. Until one day, when a certain monkey was given a grape as a reward instead. The other monkeys were not pleased with this, and they exhibited resentment and actually shunned the privileged monkey. Not only that, they also then refused **their** cucumber slices. **Suddenly everyone had to have a grape.**

Perfectly happy with cucumbers until that *glorious* grape appeared; perfectly happy with their monkey cousin until HE had that *precious* grape. (*sounds like a pretty good marketing strategy for the grape industry—thankfully that doesn't work on humans, right?!*)

One Professor of Psychology at University of Kentucky, (Richard H. Smith) points out that most vices (or sins) like lust, gluttony or sloth bring some sort of pleasure to the sinner—*initially*, at least. But that's not the *case* with envy. To feel “envious” is to feel small, petty, and inferior. There's no pleasure when envy takes us over.

Another study on humans, this time, on the brain, showed that when *participants* felt *envy*, the brain regions which signal *pain* lit up...but, here's the clincher, when a *rival* of their's experienced a *downfall...a loss of status or material wealth*...their brain that *was* once envious, would then register *pleasure*. Envy causes pain...but the fall of a competitor brings pleasure. The stronger the envy, the stronger the pleasure.

Our brain chemistry creates for us a serious problem. How can we escape envy? Life may be too short for it, but we are hardwired! Thank God, for religion and ethics, and...therapists, right?

Some suggest that envy serves to increase competition and causes people to try harder...there *is* something to be said for *healthy* competition—we see that in sports, in games, even in business. But how do we keep *healthy competition* in check? How do we *discern* healthy “wants,” from the decisions that lead us down the road of greed, and *consume* us with envy?

I've been thinking a lot about this, these last days. Which is a good thing, as I have to give this sermon. We all know that there aren't any quick fixes; we can't *escape* human nature. But what we **CAN** do—what we must do—is *ask* these hard questions together; we need to think about what kind of life we really want to live.

We need to help one another *define* ourselves by our God-given identity, instead of the one our culture presumes, or we make for ourselves. We **CAN** try to be more thankful, and more generous. And we **CAN** turn to scripture to learn better ways to live.

Our scriptures are packed full of people struggling with the same challenges we are. And there are some wonderful lessons for us to learn there. When we look to Jesus, for example, (which is good for us as Christians to do, right?!) He shows us an alternative to the winner-take-all mentality. Jesus, time and again, presents us an alternative to our *competitive* nature, and that is, the Spirit-given nature of *cooperation*.

When Paul, in our reading from Romans for tonight confronts our human tendencies to compete and measure, *he too*, suggests things like: “practice playing second fiddle,” “share tears” and “laugh with your friends when they are happy.” These are acts of cooperation.

Paul says more, too: “Bless your enemies, no cursing under your breath.” “Don’t hit back,” “discover beauty in everyone.” “Be inventive in hospitality” and “make friends with nobodies, don’t be the great somebody.” AND, “*If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody.*”

Part of our call: to discipleship, is a *call* to practice *cooperation*—one with another, one with our creator. Faith connects us, and reminds us of our dependence and *need* for one another, for God. Envy, according to Aristotle, is PAIN at the good fortune of others—FAITH, according to Jesus, calls us to seek common good.

And while we can’t *escape* human nature, we can be more *honest* about it. We can work at knowing ourselves better. And when that little green monster appears, we can **name** it and **reflect** on it...and work to reshape how it is that we will respond.

In light of God’s love for us, in light of Christ’s hope for us, in light of the Spirit at work in us, we can discover a new attitude of *cooperation*, a new attitude of *gratitude*, a new attitude of *trust* in our God, above all else.

Because God knows, life’s too short to be envious. May you **delight** in the goodness of God; may you delight in your blessings; may you delight in one another, and their blessings, too. Amen.