

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Being Human: Envy vs. The Mourner”

Rev. Dr. John Judson

February 25, 2018

Genesis 4:1-16; Romans 17:9-21

I want to begin with a diagnostic test this morning. What I want you to do is to write down the numbers 1 – 7. Then if you answer in the affirmative to any of the following questions, either circle or place a check mark by the number. Question one, did you root for the Philadelphia Eagles in this year’s Super Bowl? Question two, did you root for the New England Patriots? Question three, did you not care at all? Question four, if you rooted for the Eagles did you do so because you wanted to see the Patriots and Tom Brady lose? Be honest now, no one will see your answers. Question five, if you rooted for the New England Patriots were you angry that the Eagles won? Question six, if you rooted for the New England Patriots do you believe that they were cheated out of a victory by the referees? OK, if you checked even one of questions four, five or six then you have confirmed case of the sin of envy. And not only that, but it may be that those of you who checked question one and not two, might have a slight case as well.

I realize that this may seem like an odd way to start off a talk about envy, but it gets to the heart of envy because envy is one of those sins that is diagnosed by its symptoms, more than clarified by a definition, and the symptoms are all there. So, what are the symptoms? They can be summed up in the letters, RPD, which stand for Resent, Prevent and Destroy. First there is resentment of the good fortune of others. Envy resents the fact that someone else might have something, or has achieved something that we have not. Thus, people resent Brady because he is successful, rich, good looking and married to one of the world’s great super models, or people resent the Eagles because they won. Second, is prevent, which is what happens when we resent. We are prevented from enjoying and sharing in the success of others. Those who don’t like Brady and Patriots cannot enjoy the quality of their game or his amazing abilities. Those who resent the Eagles can’t share in their amazing victory. Thus, they cannot share joy. Finally, there is destroy. This is where envy leads. It leads to a desire to destroy, or in this case, defeat the enemy; defeat the one we resent.

We can see RPD at work in our story from Genesis this morning. The background is that Cain and Abel are brothers. Each has been assigned a different way of providing for themselves. Cain is a farmer and Abel is a shepherd. Each decides to bring to God an offering of their produce. Abel’s is accepted and Cain’s is not. We have no idea why this is so. We have no idea how they know that one’s was accepted but the other’s was not. All we have before us is the story. Needless to say, Cain begins to become envious of Abel. Why was Abel’s accepted and his was not? Why does God think that Cain is not as good as Abel? After all Cain probably worked harder than Abel. All Abel did was following some smelly sheep around. The story tells us that his countenance fell. Here we can see the resentment building. Here we can see that Cain is prevented from being happy for his brother that God had accepted his brother’s offering. God tells Cain that, “*Sin is lurking at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must master it.*” The sin here is the green-eyed monster, which is slowly consuming him on the inside.

Finally, this envy moves to the final step, where Cain takes Abel out into the field and kills him; the first case of domestic abuse.

If you want to see this in the real world there are two places to which I would point you. The first is to a bumper sticker I saw on a semi-regular basis in Texas. It read, my kid can beat up your honor roll student. Here is envy for those whose children had done well and whose cars sported a bumper sticker saying, I am proud of my honor roll student. The second is in cases of domestic abuse. Envy is at the heart of this epidemic and happens when one partner resents the other's success, friends, happiness, joy and is thus prevented from celebrating those things with them and this leads to destruction through mental, verbal, emotional or physical abuse. Envy is not pretty.

Once again then, we ask, what is the antidote to this sin. The answer is to mourn, for when we mourn we are comforted. Again, this may appear to be a very strange way to look at escaping from the trap of envy, but bear with me. First, the word Jesus uses for "mourn" is a Greek word that connotes the deepest kind of mourning or grief. It was the kind of mourning one did at the death of a family member or close friend. So why, we might ask, would that sort of mourning free us from envy. The answer comes in the other way in which this word is used in scripture. It is used to describe the mourning the people of God did when they sinned. They mourned for their disobedience to God and their worship of other gods. We can also see how mourning is used in the story of Jonah. Jonah is sent to the people of Nineveh, the capital of the brutal regime of Assyria, to tell them to repent. Their response to this message was to mourn by covering themselves, and even their animals (a nice story telling touch) in sack-cloth and ashes as they mourned their sins. And when they did so, God forgave them. What mourning for our sins does is to move us out of the inward, all-consuming spiral of envy, and move us to spiraling outward to God who is ready to heal us.

Again, we can see this movement in the story of Cain. God confronts Cain about his misdeed. At first Cain pretends he has no clue as to the whereabouts of his brother. When God reveals that creation itself, is crying out because of Cain's murderous act, God pronounces his fate. Cain will be all alone. He will be vulnerable and could be killed at any moment. Cain's response is to cry out. To mourn his fate. He mourns the reality of where his envy has led him. *"Today,"* he says, *"You have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face."* In that moment of mourning, his deliverance comes. He has ceased to turn inward and has turned outward toward God. He seeks God's protection. And God gives it. The one who mourns is comforted. The Greek word for comforted means to have someone come along side of you, of us. When Jesus speaks of blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted, he tells his listeners and us, that whether we mourn from the loss of someone we love, or for our sins, God will draw alongside of us. God will hold us up and restore us to full humanity.

If we want to see what this restoration looks like, we need look no further than Paul's letter to the Romans, where Paul reminds us that we are to weep when others weep and rejoice when others rejoice. We are to mourn our sin of envy to the point where we emerge from RPD and exercise LOVE instead. When we are able to do this, we will know that we are cured.

The challenge I want to offer you this morning is this, to ask yourselves, how I am mourning my sin of envy, such that I rediscover my full humanity as one who loves rather than envys.