

Proper 20B'18

23 September 2018

Jas. 3.13-4.3,7-8a; Mk. 9.30-37

St. Luke's Episcopal Church

North Little Rock, Arkansas

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O God our Creator, who gives to every person gifts and talents to glorify you and bless the world: Grant us grace as your humble servants to put them to good use without envy or malice towards those whose gifts and talents bring them greater esteem and notoriety, through Jesus, your Son. Amen.

In a story that is more than likely an urban legend, 30th President Calvin Coolidge went to church one Sunday by himself, when he came home his wife asked, "*What subject did the preacher, preach on?*" And Coolidge said, "*Sin.*" She then asked, "*What did he say about it?*" Coolidge answered, "*He was against it.*"

It is true that in some churches people don't feel like they've been to church unless they leave with their toes bleeding, after having the preacher step on them. I'd say most of the time in the Episcopal Church we err on the side of grace and love rather than sin and judgment. But today the light shines into the darkness to point out the sin of envy.

From Church tradition envy is categorized along with greed, lust, sloth, wrath, sloth, gluttony, and pride as one of the seven deadly sins. In the book of Proverbs the writer tells us: "*A sound heart is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones.*"^[1] From this we see that envy has a corrosive effect upon our very souls and bodies and spreads negative energy to all those around us.

From an early age through our families of origin, our peers, and certainly from various forms of media we are given the message that we are somehow not enough. Either we are too young, or too old, too skinny or too plump, too talkative or too quiet, the list could go on and on but you get the picture – basically whatever we are not is what we need to try and become. Then enters someone whom seems to have the qualities, attributes, possessions and positions in spades that we seem to lack. We have now been set up by the perfect storm to envy another person.

The Oscar winning movie *Amadeus* addresses the negative effects of envy. During the time of Mozart there also lived another very gifted musician in his own right by the name of Antonio Salieri. But Salieri has heard Mozart play and believes that he can't hold a candle to him, if only he could play like Mozart. Salieri was a successful composer and court musician for the Austrian Emperor Joseph II, who believed that his ability to compose beautiful music was a reward from God for his piety, that is until he found out that Mozart was not nearly as pious as he was yet God favored him with a superior musical ability.

The corrosive effects of envy took their toll as he grew ever more embittered toward God and obsessed with Mozart *and how he could somehow bring him down. He reportedly said, "God was singing through this little man to all the world, making my defeat more bitter with every passing bar.* "Mozart died at the young age of 35 and it was alleged that Salieri poisoned Mozart but it could never be proven.

James in his letter to the church adds a commentary to this story: *"But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish."*^[2]

If we sometimes struggle with envy we should find some comfort in the fact that the first disciples were not exempt from the same struggle. In today's gospel we are allowed through the words written down by Mark an opportunity to overhear them arguing among themselves about who would be the greatest after Jesus ushered in the kingdom.

Their egos were competing with each other and envying each other's relationship with Jesus. Their minds were set on earthly things not heavenly things and of course Jesus knew this. So what did Jesus do? He used this as an opportunity to teach them again what the kingdom of heaven was like. He turns their worldly wisdom on its head by telling them: *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.* "While the world always points to the top of the ladder and the path of upward mobility, Jesus was pointing to the ground - as author Henri Nouwen refers to it, "downward mobility."

To further bring home his point Jesus picks up a child from the crowd and sets him in their midst and says, *"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*^[3] Children had no social status in the 1st century and there was no way they could possibly do anything to further anyone's career or social status.

Jesus doesn't seem to be overly worried about the propping up of our egos as much as he is interested in humbling our hearts. In the vulnerability of a child we are pointed toward a relationship of dependent trust upon God. From this lowly position we are able to look up and see that our lives truly are gifts and that our only appropriate attitude is one of gratitude. As we follow in the steps of Jesus we are enabled to swallow our pride and rejoice with those who's lives are more fortunate than ours. If Salieri had been able to humble himself and be grateful for the talent that he had been given rather than envying Mozart's the outcome for both of them could have been quite different.

So when you find yourself envying someone else for their gifts, talents, possessions, or whatever it is they have that you wished you did, go to the bottom of the ladder, rejoice with the other for their good fortune and be grateful for what you have been given. God has equipped you and me to do a service for him that no one else can.

In the words of one of Chuck Holman's distant relatives, the poet, theologian, and clergymen Henry Van Dyke: *"Use what talents you possess; the woods would be very silent if no birds sang there except those that sang best."*^[4]

^[1]Proverbs 14.30

^[2]James 4.7

^[3]Mark 9.37

^[4]https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/henry_van_dyke_391213