

Genesis 4:1-8

**The 7 Deadly Sins: Envy**

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Ever since I started practicing yoga, I have been envious of those people in class who can turn into a human pretzel without even warming up. When I started to attend yoga classes my initial goal was to be able to sit in Lotus position – padmasana- cross-legged with the feet resting either on calves or thighs. I thought that this was the quintessential yoga position, and unless I can do that, what is the point of yoga. So, over the years I have tried and tried and tried some more, but to no avail. Now, I know that I am not the bendiest person, but come on, this should not be that hard, right?

Fed up with watching others being able to do it, I went to my teacher and asked about it. She looked at me and said, “Well,” she said, “the only way you will be able to sit in that position is if we were to dislocate your femurs from your hip sockets. Anatomically you won’t be able to do it, even with all the practice in the world. But look on the bright side, you’ve got great balance and you are strong.”

So I decided to lay my envy to rest, because as you know now, I’ve got great balance and strong German quads.

Today we are going to talk about the deadly sin of envy. What is so deadly about envy? It might be hard to see at first – like all the other sins since they are so much of part of our humanity, so commonplace, that they almost seem harmless and trite. We laugh them off. They become the stuff of late-night comics. And maybe, a little envy is okay. Two office colleagues are scheduled to go to conferences ... in February; one of them is going to Fiji, the other to Minnesota. I think a little envy is the appropriate response. Expressing a desire to have something someone else has, can be just a way to compliment them on their good fortune. Friends envy friends all the time. Neighbors envy neighbors all the time. It is part of community living.

Why is it deemed deadly? We are not even three pages into our holy scriptures, and we are confronted with a most tragic outcome of envy – the story of Cain and Abel. We don’t get a curricula vitae of the brothers in chapter 4, but we can safely assume that there was some rivalry going on. Cain the older one vs. Abel the

favorite one. The story tells us that Cain's offering did not meet Godly standards. Cain was envious of his younger brother and his good fortune with God.

As Cain went away angry, God said this to him: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

But rather working on mastering excellence and dealing with his feelings, he takes his brother out on a walk and murders him. The dark side of envy had mastered him, and robbed them both of their full humanity.

Why is envy deadly? Because it diminishes our humanity, our relationships and how we live together in community. We don't generally envy those who are much, much greater than us. We might envy Pavarotti's voice, or Maya Angelou's writing skills, or Warren Buffet's bank account but in reality they are so far beyond our abilities, our achievements, our possessions that their world is practically irrelevant to us.

It is our neighbors, our close friends, our coworkers, our siblings, even our spouses...that we are prone to envy. Aristotle said, "Envy grows naturally in a relationship between equals." Kierkegaard called envy is a "small-town sin." It breeds on proximity.

See, if we can easily see ourselves in the shoes of someone else, and they have something we ourselves desire, be it material possessions, or talent, or prestige, or position, we are tempted to wonder, "Why not me?" What's so special about them? And we convince ourselves that they got their good fortune, purely by dumb luck, or worse, they finagled their way into getting it, even though they didn't deserve it. And soon we begin harboring secret thoughts of their downfall. We diminish their humanity, and ours.

Envy can show up anywhere – in business, in academia, in schools, in church communities, you name it. Wherever people work and live together, envy is a prolific breeder, or as we read in scripture, the demon envy is lurking at the door.

Envy, it seems, will always be with us. Is there any hope for us to overcome it? The Bible is filled with stories about envy, and the Bible is filled with advice of how to deal with envy.

Here is one little line from Matthew that might help: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted".

I could not help but see a connection between envy and mourning: they are both responses to things we lack or to losses in our lives. Both are in positions of want. Our wants, our losses, our pain in life can lead us into exile (away from God) through envy or we can find comfort in our losses by grieving them.

Learning to mourn our losses, whether from a tragedy or a personal failure, is important because if we don't – envy will take us away from God, ourselves, and others.

Envy thrives in an environment where we isolate ourselves from others and bury our pain. When we aren't at home with ourselves we compare ourselves with others and we want what they have and we can't appreciate other people's success.

Comfort, on the other hand, comes to us through confession – where we name and share our hurt and pain and failures with others. Unless we are able to name what is eating us up, we won't get anywhere.

Mourning our losses leads to comfort and eventually to a new start. Envy leads to sadness that keeps us stuck.

Even though envy will always be with us, so will God. Going back to our bible story, after Cain killed Abel, God came to him and gave him the opportunity to take responsibility, show remorse, and repent. Cain did none of these things. And when God exiled Cain to a life of wandering, God marked him to protect him.

Why did God do that? Because God made a promise to always be with us – in the best of times and the worst of time. God made a promise to always love us, and love that encourages us to do our best.

Some say that the antidote to envy is “hesed” – loving kindness. I think that is true.

When we truly love our neighbor, our friends, the work we do, envy gets crowded out. When we truly love we are able to enjoy being in the company of the people, and don't have time to compare ourselves with them. We realize we don't need to have what they have. We don't delight in their failures but we can bring them comfort for we know that God is always with us. And when we are secure in God's love, we can weep with those who weep, and the good of the other becomes our good. Their joy is our joy, and their success is our success.

This is why Paul can write in I Corinthians 13: 4-7 that “(the) Love (of God given to us) is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or

resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Envy simply cannot survive in the context of genuine love and kindness.

Amen.