

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 24, 2017

“Green with Envy or Thankful with Gratitude.”

Matthew 20:1-16

The sun is shining and the sky is clear. As a landowner Joe consumes his breakfast he knows he must, likewise, seize the day. My dad called it “Making hay while the sun shines.” Joe might refer to it as “Making wine before the grapes rot.” Whatever the phrase, the focus is the same. Harvest won’t wait.

Joe finishes breakfast, climbs into his pickup truck and drives down Northern Ave where the day laborers assemble looking for work. Well, the time and place may be different, but the story is the same.

And sure enough, on the street corner, a number of early risers are ready to go. So, Joe hires them for the normal wage of a denarius a day. He comes back 9:00 and hires more, and again at 12 noon, and once more at 3:00. Then one more time at 5 p.m., one hour before closing time, he still finds stragglers on the corner, so he sends them to the vineyard to work as well.

Here the story takes a strange twist. At 6 o’clock quitting time, Joe instructs his foreman to pay the workers starting with the last hired and pay them first. Now you know something is going on in the story, that’s exactly the opposite of the way things normally happen. The one hour workers receive a denarius, the normal day wage for a laborer. Hopes rise in the hearts of the others. “We hit the jackpot today, we’ve been here three, six, nine hours. If he’s going to give somebody a whole day’s wage for one hour of work, think about what we’re going to make.” But when their turn comes to be paid, they too receive a denarius, even the 12 hour workers who have labored through the heat of the day.

Well, you can imagine the reaction. Grumble, grumble, gripe, gripe, complain, complain, who wouldn’t? It’s well—unfair! Unjust! Unacceptable! What’s going on in this story? What’s the punch line? Here it is: “Are you envious because I am generous?”

Envy, that’s the spiritual makeover we want to look at today. Why is it easier to weep with those who weep than it is to rejoice with those who rejoice? I know we don’t want to admit that, but it’s reality. It’s easier to weep with those who weep than it is to rejoice with those who rejoice, especially for good, upright people, church-going people, people who live a good life and try to do what’s right for the world.

At the core is this deadly sin that the church fathers called ENVY. It’s a fundamental sadness at the good fortune of another. It’s a weird kind of sin. If you lust you might get happy for a little while. If you are greedy, you might enjoy the money for a season. There is no joy in envy. We even look sick when we have it. So, the expression of being “green with envy.” You’ll never be happy as an envious person. Yet, it lies in the hearts and minds of fair-minded people, people like you and me. Let’s probe a little deeper.

Envy runs in the family. Cain and Abel were brothers, the sons of Adam and Eve. Abel was a shepherd. Cain was a gardener. Cain offered some grain to the Lord. Abel brought a prize lamb, the best of his flock. God was pleased with Abel’s offering, but rejected the offering of Cain. The pain of rejection was too much. A few days later, Cain coaxes Abel into the desert where the first murder in the history of the world takes place. It’s cause? Jealousy, Envy. It seeps around the cracks of the soul it runs in the family.

Jesus told a story about a father who had two sons. One son, wrapped up in himself, rebelled, ran away, wasted his life on loose living. Yet, at the end of himself, he came to himself, and realized he could go home and be a servant and be in better shape than he was on his own. He returned home. While he was still a long way off, the father spotted him, ran to meet him, threw his arms around him, put a ring on his finger, a robe on his back, shoes on his feet, and welcomed him home with a party. This is my son, who was lost but now has come home again.

Great story, except that this son had an older brother. He was out on the farm working, as he has done all his life. When he heard the music and saw the dancing, he was angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out to fetch him, but to no avail. All the father heard was one long outburst of anger about how the son had slaved all these years and never even had a goat for a feast with his friends. Jealousy—envy—hatred—resentment. It runs in the family.

It runs in the Christian family. Grace is a wonderful idea until you try to put it into practice. Some of us have been Christians all our lives. We’ve hung in there through trials and temptations that were strong. We thought about quitting several times, but we just never quite got around to it. So the years have gone by and we have kept the faith. One day, hopefully, we will finish the course. Is it really fair that we should wind up in the same subdivision of heaven with some scoundrel who lived like the devil but repented on his deathbed and accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior?

Let’s be honest, the unmerited, unearned, grace of the Lord does not leave good church—going, right—living, honest folks amazed. It leaves us green with envy. May the Lord have mercy.

Envy runs in the workplace. I don't really have to tell you this. It's grumbling can be heard among the employees. We don't try to keep salaries a secret. And they've got it figured out just like the workers in the vineyard. They know who makes what, and the grumbling and griping happens. "How come I'm not making more than they are? I know I agreed to a denarius a day, but, good Lord, a man works only one hour and he gets the same. There's something wrong with that."

Envy lurks around schools, in the market place where we compete with one another and wonder why we didn't get a better shake. There is a Jewish folktale about two merchants who were always in competition with each other. One day God decided to put an end to their foolishness. He had an angel deliver this message to one of the merchants. The message went as follows: "I the Lord Almighty have decided you can have anything you want in this world—riches, wisdom, long life, children—whatever you wish, but on one condition. Whatever you get, your competitor will get double. If you get 10 million dollars, he gets 20 million. Understand?" The merchant thought for a moment and said, "Would you be willing to make me blind in one eye?"

Envy, the green-eyed monster. So, we need a spiritual makeover. What we need is a makeover of gratitude. A deep abiding appreciation for life. Gratitude is that deep abiding sense that I am blessed to be alive. Gratitude is a language we learn. Thank you, Dankeschoen, Gracias, Mille Grazie, Merci beaucoup. Whatever language, it's probably enough. David said in the Psalm where he confesses his sins: "O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise." Meister Eckhart once said, "If the only prayer you ever pray is 'thank you' that it would suffice." Gratitude is a life we live. A quote from John Kennedy, "We must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words of gratitude, but to live them."

Saying Thank you is more than good manners, it is a genuine expression of spirituality that touches the soul. Thank you, Jesus. It should be the language of your heart. It should be on your mind in the morning when you wake up. It should be the language of my heart. One of the advantages of being alive at 67 is the opportunity to look back over the years and see how I might have done better. I learned a few things over the years. When I look back over my life I think I should have preached fewer sermons and written more thank you notes. I think I would express more appreciation and less expectations. I think I would give praise as ready as I offer criticism. I think I would rejoice more readily at the success of others and be less cynical about their success. If I had to do it all over again, I think I'd live a more grateful life.

Have you learned how to say thank you? Does it bubble up in your soul? Does it flow from your lips? Thank you, Jesus. Gratitude is a language we learn. I Thessalonians 4:18 says, Give thanks in all circumstances. Not for all circumstances, but in all circumstances. I hope we understand the difference. Gratitude is a way of living.

I don't know where I found it, but I've had it for a number of years. I want to share it with you. It's called "Anyway."

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered—love them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives—be kind anyway.

Honesty and rankness will make you vulnerable—be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed over night—build anyway.

People need help, but may attack you if you try to help them—help them anyway.

In the final analysis, it's between you and God.

It's never between you and them anyway.

I started with a question and I want to end with one. Are you going to sell your soul to envy, or fill your life with gratitude?