

Green with Envy

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Genesis 16:1-6

Sermon Series:
Seven Greatest
Virtues and Vices:
Envy and Kindness

*“Beware, my
lord of
Jealousy;
It is the
green-ey’d
monster....”*

- Shakespear

The phrase, “Green with Envy,” the title of today’s sermon, dates back to the 7th century. The poet Sappho used the word green to describe the complexion of a stricken lover. In earlier times, the Greeks believed jealousy was accompanied by an overproduction of bile, a fluid secreted by the liver, which lends a green cast to a victim’s complexion. Centuries later, the villain Iago coined the phrase “green ey’d monster” in Shakespeare’s play Othello:

“O! Beware, my lord of
Jealousy;
It is the green-ey’d monster
which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.”

The Muppets will return to the big screen this November. The movie “Green with Envy” will feature Jason Segel and Amy Adams as Gary and Mary. They uncover the nefarious plot by a greedy oil tycoon, Tex Richman, to raze the Muppet Theater in his quest for oil. Tex is green with envy, you might say. Gary and Mary stage the greatest Muppet telethon ever to raise ten million dollars to save the theater. They call upon Kermit the Frog to reunite the Muppets, who have gone their separate ways. Fozzie now

performs with a Reno casino house band called the Moopets, Gonzo is a high-powered plumbing mogul, and Miss Piggy is a plus-size fashion editor for Vogue in Paris.

Our sermon series this summer focuses on the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Lively Virtues. These various vices and virtues are prominently on display in Old Testament personages.

There is nobody who looms larger than father Abraham. God promises to Abraham, in Genesis 12, a manifest destiny: “You will become the father of a great nation” (12:2). So many offspring will come from his lineage that they cannot be counted (13:16).

Abraham and his wife, Sarah, believe the promise. But as time passes and they watch their friends making babies, they begin to second-guess the promise. Infertility in those days was believed to be a sign of God’s disfavor. So God revisits Abraham on a starlit night and invites him to count the stars. Then God revisits the promise: “So shall your descendents be!” (Genesis 15:5).

More time passes. Our Scripture lesson opens with the words, “Now Sarai, Abram’s

Abraham and Sarah are tired.... They decide to help God out.

wife, bore him no children” (16:1). Abraham and Sarah are tired of waiting for God to do something. They decide to help God out.

Sarah has a servant maid named Hagar. Sarah proposes that Abraham marry Hagar to conceive a child. Sarah reasons, “It may be that I can obtain children by her” (16:2).

There is nothing immoral or unusual about Sarah’s proposal. Rabbinic commentary on the Old Testament, called the Mishnah, permitted another wife for the sake of children. Surrogate parenthood is not a new idea. On the website of The American Fertility Association, their justification for third party surrogacy refers to Genesis 16.

Abraham’s passivity is striking. He does exactly as he is told. He marries Hagar and promptly conceives a child with her.

O happy day! Everything is proceeding according to Sarah’s plan. But Hagar can’t resist the opportunity to stick it to Sarah, and Sarah resents her for it. What we have is the makings of a family triangle. A passive husband and two feuding wives is a recipe for disaster.

Sarah complains to Abraham, “This slave girl is treating me with contempt. So what are you going to do about it?”

Abraham, true to form, offers nothing. Since the

surrogacy arrangement is her idea and Hagar is her maid, he advises her to do as she pleases. So, Sarah gives full vent to her envy and mistreats her. Hagar flees to the desert.

An angel of the Lord comes to Hagar in the desert: “I will greatly multiply your offspring... You will bear a son and call him Ishmael” (16:10). She returns to Abraham as instructed and gives birth to Ishmael.

The promised child to Abraham and Sarah is not realized until 14 years later when Isaac is born. Muslims claim Mohammad is a descendent of Abraham’s son Ishmael. While Christians and Jews establish their lineage through Isaac, Muslims trace their ancestry through Ishmael. Who knew a family triangle could generate this much chaos.

Hagar treats Sarah with contempt and Sarah reacts with jealousy. Hagar’s good fortune becomes an affront to Sarah.

I’m fine with my piece of the pie until I have discovered that you own a larger portion of the pie. Suddenly, I’m no longer satisfied with what I have. I want what you have. Envy is unrestrained desire.

The first sin in the Bible results from envy. Cain kills Abel in a fit of jealousy. Envy begrudges other people their possessions and abilities.

During Jesus’ arrest and subsequent trial, Matthew reports in his gospel, “It was

***“Few of us
can stand
prosperity.
Another
man’s I
mean.”***

- Mark Twain

out of envy that they handed Jesus over to Pilate” (27:18). The religious leaders were jealous of Jesus. The crowds were flocking to Jesus and they were envious enough to orchestrate his death.

In a medieval story, Envy and Greed are walking down the road and are met by an angel. The angel offers one of them anything he could wish for. The only condition is that the other one would receive twice as much. Greed knew what he wanted, but didn’t want Envy to have twice as much, so he kept silent. Envy was also unwilling to volunteer his wish, since he would become envious that Greed would have more. They feud until Envy concedes, “Very well, I’ll make my wish. I wish to be made blind in one eye.” Envy wishes something horrible upon himself. The loss of sight in one eye is bad enough. Yet, what he wishes for his traveling companion is something far worse, blindness in both eyes.

The story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs turns bad on account of envy. Every morning, the queen goes through the same ritual of consulting her magic mirror: “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” The queen is satisfied as long as she receives her daily dose of affirmation. But one day when she asks about the fairest of them all, she is stunned with the response. “You, my queen,

are fair, ‘tis true, but Snow White is the fairest of them all.” This sends the queen into a jealous rage. She cannot stand the thought that she isn’t the most beautiful woman in the world and plots Snow White’s demise. Despite her beauty, wealth and royalty, envy consumes her.

The Tenth Commandment declares plainly, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or slave or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17). Is there anything about this command you don’t understand?

I came across an online clothing company in researching this sermon called “Eyes of Envy.” Their ads certainly qualify as “truth in advertising.” The tag line for this apparel store, “Thou Shall Desire,” appears everywhere. The fine print in the ad is just as striking: “Everybody wants what they cannot have. Everybody has eyes of envy.”

When a coworker is promoted to a job you want for yourself, you have eyes of envy. When a friend establishes a love relationship while you remain single, you have eyes of envy. When your neighbor pulls up in a new car that you want but can’t afford, you have eyes of envy. Mark Twain said it well: “Few of us can stand prosperity. Another man’s I mean.”

Envy keeps us from sharing in each other's joy.

So far, we've examined the deadly sins of pride and lust. Today and next Sunday, we're focusing on envy. Next Sunday, we'll consider Saul's insane jealousy of David. I invite you to the second installment in this sermon on envy where our focus will be the real meaning of contentment.

Each of these Seven Deadly Sins has a counter-balancing lively virtue associated with it. These virtues are called lively for the simple reason that they give life to people. Each of these seven lively virtues is life-giving.

The counter-balancing virtue of envy is kindness. There is nothing soft about Biblical kindness. Kindness in Scripture is robust and tenacious. Kindness is coming to the place where we are able to join with Paul in "weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice" (Romans 12.15). It's far easier for us to weep with people over their misfortune than to enter into other people's success. We identify with people's misfortune, but resent their achievements. Envy keeps us from sharing in each other's joy.

We are not preaching on these seven deadly sins so that you will endeavor by the sheer force of your will to become kinder. We cannot simply will kindness in our lives. Rather, as

we open ourselves to God's grace, God produces in us greater capacities for kindness. We are asking God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

I invite you to identify an area of your life where you struggle with envy. Perhaps someone is coming to mind right now toward whom you have jealous feelings. Ask God to pour kindness into you. Don't feed envy. Love kindness.

There is a well-known legend about a Native American Cherokee who told his grandson about a battle raging inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two wolves inside of us. One is evil—it is pride, lust, envy, jealousy, greed and anger. The other is peace, love, hope, humility, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about what his grandfather said and then asked, "Which wolf wins?" His wise old grandfather replied, "The one you feed."

Don't feed envy. Love kindness.