Sunday, September 23, 1990
WHEN LIFE ISN'T FAIR
Matthew 20:1-16

According to a long tradition, there are seven deadly sins. Why seven and not six or eight or nine, I do not know. Nor do I know the origin of the list. Did someone one day sit down and draw up the list, or did it gradually evolve over a period of time? Another tradition has seven virtues. One theory is that there are seven virtues to equal or balance the seven deadly sins.

In case you've forgotten what the seven deadly sins are, here's the list: pride, avarice (often called greed), lust, anger (sometimes called wrath), gluttony, envy, and sloth. Do you have a favorite? Is there one that is more deadly or tempting to you than the others?

People who claim to know a lot more about sin than I have pointed out that envy is the one deadly sin to which no one readily confesses. It seems to be the nastiest, the most grim, the meanest. The face of envy is never beautiful.

Envy also has a mirror image. Have you noticed that when someone we envy gets into trouble, few among us are able to suppress a feeling of satisfaction? A few years ago, I did a sermon on this subject with the title of a German word, "SCHADENFREUDLICHKEIT," which, according to one German scholar, translates as "the enjoyable sin of enjoying others' misfortunes." It's the opposite of envy, but it is envy that causes us to gloat at another's misfortune. Envy, on the other hand, is when we feel bad because of someone else's good fortune.

Few among us can suppress a secret envy at someone else's good fortune or even at someone else's good joke.

It has been said that although the other six deadly sins are morbid and self-destroying, they at least provide some gratification in their early stages. But there is no gratification in envy — nothing it can ever enjoy. We gain nothing from it. Its appetite never ceases, yet its only satisfaction is endless self-torment.

One of the most destructive forms that envy takes today is the widespread assumption that everyone should be able to do and experience and enjoy everything that everyone can do and experience and enjoy.

The worst part of envy is that it is not merely feeling bad because of someone else's good gifts, but that it causes us to devalue our own good gifts. For example, when I come across someone who is a better preacher than I, my first tendency is to think of myself as a worse preacher. What I forget is that hearing someone who is a better preacher does not devalue my gift at all. I am the same person I always was — yet the tendency is for me to think of myself as worse when I meet someone better. That's how insidious envy is.

And there's an even more destructive facet to envy. Merely feeling bad because I do not have something that another has is not the worst part of envy. The worst part is when the envious person wishes that the other did not have it so that I might not suffer my imaginary disadvantage.

Certainly, Jesus knew that one of the most basic elements in the makeup of human beings is envy. Jesus was schooled in the Old Testament, and it has many stories of envy in it. For example, there's the story of Cain and Abel in the book of Genesis, where Cain's envy of his brother led him to kill Abel.

Envy is a major character in the parable that Jesus told about the laborers in the vineyard.

The owner of a vineyard needed to have his grapes picked. So, early in the morning, he went to the local marketplace to hire workers for the day. They agreed on a fair wage for the day's work. Later in the morning, he returned to the same place and hired more workers and told them he would pay them a fair wage at the end of the day. At noon and at three o'clock in the afternoon, the owner did the same. With only one hour remaining in the workday, he returned once more and found still others who had not been able to get work for that day — so he also sent them to the vineyard and promised to pay them at the end of the day.

In the story, Jesus does not tell us why the owner of the vineyard didn't hire all the available workers early in the morning. Maybe he wasn't sure he would need all of them, but as the work progressed, he discovered that if all the grapes were going to be picked, he would need more help.

Or perhaps he didn't need the extra workers at all, but because he was a generous and caring individual, he kept going back to the marketplace at different points during the day to see if there were still people who had not found work. And always finding some individuals who had not yet been hired, and since he knew they needed the work to support their families, he gave them a job.

We have to assume that all those who were waiting to work in the marketplace wanted to work and needed the money. That's why they were there. It was a common practice in those days for those who needed work to come to a central place to be available for those who needed to hire them for the day.

At the end of the day, the owner told his payroll clerk to pay each of the workers, but in reverse order — beginning with those who had been hired last and then on down to those who had been hired early in the morning. Then came the surprise! He paid each man a full day's wages even though some had worked only one hour, some three hours, some six hours, some nine hours, and some twelve hours.

When those who had worked all day discovered that those who had worked shorter hours received the same pay, they were furious. It wasn't fair, and they said that. "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."

The owner, however, reminded them that he had not defrauded them in any way. He paid them exactly what they had agreed on as a fair wage. And he added, "Why should you be envious because I choose to be generous to those who have stood all day in the marketplace looking for work, worrying that they would not be able to earn enough to keep themselves and feed their families? Why are you so envious of my generosity and their good fortune?"

The same envy is displayed by the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son, which Jesus told in another place. He said, "It isn't fair that my younger brother should receive a welcome

like this when I have stayed home all these years and worked hard, yet no one ever gave a party in my honor."

There are a number of things in life that aren't fair, especially when we begin making comparisons. The workers had a point. The elder brother had a point. Someone said, "If life were fair, all men would look like Robert Redford and all women like Bo Derek." If that were so, however, the world would certainly be dull, and even then, not nearly all people would agree that it was fair. They would say that it's unfair that all of us look the same.

Life isn't fair. The question is, why does it bother us when someone else has what we don't, especially when we already have enough? The workers in the story that Jesus told had agreed to work for a certain wage, and they received that wage. What kept them from rejoicing with the others who received the same wage, although they had worked a shorter day? Why is it so difficult to rejoice at another's good fortune?

Could it be that envy springs from a feeling of insecurity about our own worth as human beings? If we truly felt good about ourselves, would we always be comparing ourselves to others? If we felt good about ourselves, would we worry so much about other people's accomplishments, position, or whether they were getting paid more or less than we?

Could it be that whenever we are envious of another's gifts, it's because we have not fully recognized or accepted our own gifts?

Unfortunately, our efforts to bolster our self-esteem at the expense of the one we envy do more harm to us than to anyone else.

However, this parable that Jesus told is more than a story about envy and what a deadly sin it is. It's also a story about God's response to our envy, about God's generosity, God's grace. Jesus began the parable by saying, "The Realm of God is like a householder who went out early in the morning..."

Jesus wanted to remind his disciples and us that God loves us all equally.

God loves those who decide to take God seriously in only the last moments of our lives as much as God loves others who have been open to God from the beginning.

This story also reminds us that we do not earn God's love — it is always given to us, and God gives each one of us as much as we need. All we have to do is to be open to it and accept it.

It's a story that rejects a "reward" religion. It rejects the heresy that God loves some people more than others because they are more religious than the rest of us, or because they attend the "right" church, or because they earned God's love in some other way. Too many people still think of religion as something to be done to earn God's favor. It's like the stockbroker's commercial we used to hear so often, "We get God's love the old-fashioned way, we earn it." It may be the old-fashioned way, but it's not what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about.

Secondly, this story of God's generosity is an answer to our envy because it reminds us that God's ways are frequently a startling reversal of our own usual way of doing things. Jesus said to Peter as a prelude to this story, "Many that are first will be last and the last first."

One Christian writer put it this way: “God is the eccentric host who goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards and brings home a freak show. The man with no legs who sells shoelaces at the corner. The old woman in the moth-eaten fur coat who makes her daily round at the garbage cans. The old wino with the brown paper bag... They are all seated at the banquet table in the great hall. The candles are all lit and the champagne glasses filled. At a sign from the host, the musicians in the gallery strike up, ‘Amazing Grace.’ Is that good news?”

For us in the kingdoms of this world, success is usually measured by how much a person can get and keep. But God’s way is the opposite, said Jesus. The more you give away, the less comparing you do with others, the more you appreciate and use what God has given you, the more you will find meaning and purpose in life, and the less envious you will be of others.

Note thirdly, because God’s ways are quite different from ours, we tend to forget that finding oneself early in life, working in God’s vineyard, following God’s will, is in itself a gift and carries with it its own reward.

Why do we almost automatically assume that the person who hasn’t been able to find work, or find direction in his or her life, or find God, is happier or better off than we are? Why do we assume that an individual who has seemingly wasted most of his or her life and only begins to be productive late in life has had more fun and joy than the rest of us who have been responsible human beings?

The biggest problem with envy as a response to life’s unfairness is that it blocks our vision and understanding. When we are envious, we can no longer see the goodness and grace of God. Anyone who looks at God’s blessings with one eye and with the other eye tries to keep track of whether others are receiving a little bit more than oneself, soon becomes incapable of recognizing any blessings in this life at all. We become scorekeepers rather than those who know that we are infinitely loved by God.

The good news is that we don’t need to compare ourselves with others. God doesn’t. We don’t have to prove that we are somebody. We don’t need to tear others down to build ourselves up. We are loved with an everlasting love. Amen.