Sunday, September 18, 2005
WHEN UNFAIR IS FAIR
Matthew 20:1-16

According to a long tradition, there are seven deadly sins. Why seven and not eight, nine, or ten, I do not know. Maybe there are seven because a week has seven days, and it's a nice round number. Another tradition has seven virtues. This implies there is one virtue to counteract each deadly sin.

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. The seven virtues to counter the seven sins are: humility against pride, kindness against envy, abstinence against gluttony, liberality against greed, and diligence against sloth.

Is any one of the seven deadly sins more tempting or harmful to you than the others? Do you have a favorite? It's been my experience that "envy" is the one deadly sin to which no one readily confesses. It is one of the most subtle, grim, and meanest of them all. The face of envy is never beautiful.

Envy also has a mirror image. When someone you envy gets into trouble, it's difficult to suppress a feeling of satisfaction. Some years ago, I did a sermon on this temptation. The title was a German word, Schadenfreude, which according to one German scholar translates to "the enjoyment of someone else's misfortune." That's the flip side of envy. Envy is when you feel bad because of someone else's good fortune.

There are few people who are able to suppress a secret and oftentimes not-so-secret envy because of someone else's good fortune.

Envy is unique. The other six deadly sins are morbid and destructive in the long run, but they at least provide some gratification in their early stages. But where is the gratification in envy? Does envy ever make you feel better? You gain nothing from it, yet its appetite never ceases. What you get from it is endless self-torment.

One of the most powerful drivers of envy today is the widespread assumption that everyone should be able to do, experience, and enjoy everything.

The worst part of envy is that it is not merely feeling bad because of someone else's good gifts or good fortune; at the same time, it can cause you to devalue your own gifts. For example, when I come across someone who is an outstanding preacher and I am envious, my first tendency is to think of myself as not a very good preacher. What I forget is that hearing someone who is a very good preacher does not devalue my preaching. I am the same person I always was. That preacher didn't steal their preaching skills from me. Yet the more you envy those you consider to have more gifts than you, the more you think of yourself as having fewer gifts. That's how insidious envy can be.

There's also another destructive facet to envy. Merely feeling bad because you do not have something that another person has is not the worst part of envy. The worst part is when you wish that the other person did not have it, so you wouldn't suffer from your imaginary disadvantage.

Jesus knew how harmful envy could be. He was schooled in the Hebrew religious tradition, and it has many stories about the destructive power of envy. There's the story of Cain and Abel in the book of Genesis. Cain was so envious of his brother Abel's relationship with God that it led him to murder him.

The 10th commandment is about envy—"You shall not covet." Envy can cause you to break the 8th commandment, "You shall not steal."

Envy is a major factor in the parable that Jesus told about the laborers in the vineyard. The owner of the vineyard needed to have his grapes picked. So early in the morning, he went to the local marketplace to hire workers for the day. The workers and the owner agreed on a fair wage for the day. Later in the morning, he saw that he was going to need more workers, so he hired more. At noontime, he needed still more, and at three o'clock, he needed more. With only one hour left in the day, he hired the last group of workers who had been looking for work all day.

At the end of the day, the owner said to his manager, "Call the workers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." Then came the surprise. He paid each worker a full day's wages, even though some had only worked one hour, some three hours, some six, some nine, and some twelve.

As you would expect, when those who had worked all day discovered that those who worked fewer hours received the same pay — they were furious. They said it wasn't fair. "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 reminded them that he had not defrauded them in any way. He paid them according to what they had agreed. He went on to say, "Why are you envious because I am generous?"

The same envy is displayed by the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. He said to his father, "It isn't fair that my younger brother should receive a welcome like you gave him — a big party — when I have stayed home all these years and worked hard, and you have not given a party in my honor."

People are always making comparisons because you can always find someone who is doing better or doing worse than you. The workers in the vineyard had a good point from their perspective. Someone said, "If life was fair, all men would look like Robert Redford, and all women like Princess Diana." If life were completely fair, we would all be like the people in Garrison Keillor's hometown, Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

Life isn't fair. The important question is, why does it bother you when someone else has what you don't, especially when you already have enough? Or in the parable, why did it bother them when the owner paid all the workers the same? They all had families to feed. They all needed work for that day. The workers who worked fewer hours weren't lazy. They had been waiting all day for work. The owner of the vineyard was attempting to make life fair from his perspective. Furthermore, the owner paid the workers who had worked all day the wages according to their agreement. What kept them from rejoicing with the others who received the same pay although they had worked shorter hours? Why is it difficult to be happy with another person's good fortune?

Is it possible that sometimes your envy springs from a feeling of insecurity about your own worth? If you truly felt good about yourself, would you always be comparing yourself to others? If you were secure in your own sense of worth, would you worry so much about other people's accomplishments or good fortune? Is it possible that whenever you are envious or jealous of another person's talents, it's because you have not fully recognized or appreciated your own gifts?

Remember this: your efforts to bolster your self-esteem at the expense of someone you envy do you more harm than good.

This story about the workers in the vineyard has another point to make in addition to reminding you of the danger of envy. It's a story about God's grace, God's generosity. Remember, Jesus began the story by saying, "The realm of God is like a landowner who went out early to hire laborers for his vineyard."

The purpose of the story is not to give you advice on how to run your enterprise or how to operate your payroll but to tell you how God operates in relationship to you and me. Its purpose is to remind you how God dispenses love and grace. The story tells you that the way God works is upside down compared to the way the world usually works. Isaiah the prophet said, "For my ways are not your ways, nor my thoughts your thoughts," says the Lord. Jesus followed in Isaiah's path. The world says, "Hate your enemies." He said, "Love your enemies, and forgive them. Don't be afraid to eat with people who are the outcasts in your world."

I used to wonder why the owner of the vineyard in this parable didn't pay the workers who had worked all day first and then send them away, and after that, pay each group who had worked less, and then pay those who had only worked one hour last. That way, those who had worked longer would not have known what the others received. Then I realized the story would have lost its teaching power. Jesus, in telling the story, wanted everyone to know that God bestows grace on everyone equally and openly.

The story right before this one in Matthew's gospel is about Jesus' encounter with a very rich young man who had everything he needed in this world, but he was still worried and knew he was missing something in life. He was also anxious about what would happen to him and all his wealth after he died. So he asked Jesus, "What do I need to do to find meaning in this life and the next?" He wondered if following all the commandments was enough because he had been doing that, and he knew something was still missing.

Jesus gave him the answer he didn't want to hear, and which you wouldn't want to hear either: "Sell all your possessions. Give the money to the poor, and come and follow me."

The Bible says the young man "went away sorrowful because he had many possessions." I often wonder why people who claim to take the teachings of the Bible literally don't follow this command of Jesus.

Any obsession can become your false god. That's what Jesus was saying to the wealthy young man. He wasn't condemning wealth per se. He was talking about being open to God's grace. This man's wealth was an obstacle.

The parable makes another point. Sometimes in God's realm, it might seem to you that God accepts people and bestows grace on them when they do not deserve it. Or at least, you think

you deserve more of God's grace than they do. To put it plainly, is it difficult for you to accept God's grace toward some people?

With this parable, Jesus is rejecting "reward" religion. It contradicts the idea that God loves some people more than others because they are more religious, or because they attend the right church, or have the correct belief. Too many people still think of the Christian way as something to be done to earn God's favor. It's like the stockbroker commercial you used to hear so often, "We make money the old-fashioned way, we earn it." "We get God's love the old-fashioned way, we earn it." It might be the old-fashioned way, but it's not what Jesus taught and lived.

The good news is that God loves all people equally in spite of life's unfairness. You don't need to count your blessings and then compare them with others. The biggest problem in always comparing yourself with others is that it can block your vision and understanding. When you are envious, you can no longer see the goodness and grace of God. When you look at God's blessings in your life with one eye, and with the other eye try to keep track of whether others are receiving a little bit more than you, or the same as you, and you think you deserve more, you can soon become incapable of recognizing any blessings in your life at all. You become a scorekeeper rather than one who knows you and all others, even those you think don't deserve it, are infinitely loved by God. Amen.