

SERMON TITLE: "The Seven Deadly Sins: Envy"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 37:1-11, 26-28
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 8, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the season of Lent. I know. Those of you who were here on Ash Wednesday and last Sunday are already on board. No doubt, some of you have already been faithfully practicing your Lenten disciplines of giving up some kind of favorite food or other bad habit, or maybe you've been more-intentionally practicing a positive spiritual habit like daily devotions of prayer and Bible reading. But maybe some others of you, like me, have been away on vacation or otherwise occupied in activities and thoughts, and maybe you are just now realizing that we are no longer in Kansas or Oregon or any kind of ordinary time. Instead, we have entered that sacred season of spiritual preparation in which Christians have traditionally repented of their sins and purified their hearts before the solemn remembrance of Jesus' crucifixion and the victorious celebration of his resurrection.

In late January, when I began thinking about a sermon series for Lent, we were just beginning to hear about the coronavirus in Wuhan, China. By February 6, there were already more than 28,000 confirmed cases and 563 dead. About that same time, we learned of the quarantine on the Diamond Princess Cruise ship, and I read an explanation that the word "quarantine" comes from the Latin word for 40. "Aha!" I thought. The ancient practice of a 40-day quarantine and the Christian tradition of a 40-day Lent are really quite similar. One is to limit and heal sickness. The other is to limit and heal sin. And that flight of thought led me to plan this year's Lenten focus on "The Seven Deadly Sins."

As of yesterday afternoon, the coronavirus had infected over 105,000 people around the world—and killed over 3500 people—19 of them in the United States. Until a couple days ago, we here in Utah were feeling pretty safe. But now we know of a case in Davis County, and we all need to step up our sanitation and hygiene efforts to keep the Coronavirus from spreading through the community.

But, as Christians, we also need to do whatever we can to mitigate the spiritually deadly effects of sin in our lives. There are a lot of sins that we could talk about. But, since way back in the 4th century, there has been a classical list of sins that have been considered especially detrimental to our human well-being. In my absence, Rev. Olga Hard covered two of them with you already: Gluttony on Ash Wednesday and Sloth last Sunday. In upcoming services, we'll cover Wrath, Greed, Lust, and Pride. Today, though, I want us to look at the deadly sin of Envy.

1—ENVY IN GENESIS 37

Let's begin with our scripture from Genesis 37. In this well-known Bible story, we are told that Jacob, the father of many sons, loved his 11th son Joseph more than any of the 10 older ones. This special affection was symbolized by the clothing that Jacob gave to Joseph. Some of you may recall this garment, in the language of the old King James translation, as a "coat of many colors." Some of you may be familiar with it from the musical comedy *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible calls Joseph's garment a "long robe with sleeves."

The exact meaning of the Hebrew words is uncertain, but the concern of the brothers is very clear. They felt like their father's love was unfairly focused on their young brother Joseph, and they were desperately jealous and envious of his place in their father's heart. It didn't help, of course, that Joseph rubbed his advantage in their faces, telling them all about his dreams of greatness and how he would rule over them. Joseph definitely played his part in the family feud. But, since today's theme is envy, we'll keep our focus there.

Fortunately, Judah was effective in preventing his siblings from murdering Joseph, but the brothers definitely let their envy run amok when they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelite traders as a slave. What this Bible story tells us is that envy isn't just a harmless little abstract thing that happens in our minds. Envy isn't a victimless crime. Envy is a sin of the heart that has serious consequences to others and to ourselves.

2—ENVY IN OUR LIVES TODAY

Probably the simplest way to think of envy is “Do not covet.” When Moses came down from the mountain carrying the stone tablets, one of those Ten Commandments said, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17).

Envy focuses on what other people have. You’ve probably heard the expressions “green with envy” or the “green-eyed monster.” Both of those images have their roots in the idea that we make ourselves sickly, like green mold or green pus, when we spend too much of our energy looking at what other people have that we don’t. Those sickly comparisons can be about material things like houses and cars and boats. Or those unhealthy fascinations can be about other people’s inherent talents, their power, or their access to opportunities that we are lacking.

I’m not saying that we’re wrong to want good things for ourselves and our families. It’s not wrong to want to have a decent home, quality relationships, a respectable job, and some healthy pleasures. Some things in life—like access to education and healthcare, a living wage and affordable housing, the ability to express one’s voice and make a difference—are equalities and rights that all of us should have.

What’s wrong with envy is when we want things for the wrong reasons or in the wrong ways. If envy is distorting our vision, we’ll always think the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. We’ll always think that the deck is stacked against us. We’ll always think that other people came by their assets easily, while we alone have to struggle constantly.

I’m not only talking about low-income people comparing themselves to high-income people here. Because, if you’re well off, you know that you also are regularly comparing yourself to someone who has just a little bigger house, a little newer car, a little more-fashionable wardrobe, and a few less wrinkles and rolls in their botoxed and cool-sculpted body. The sin of envy has the power to make us

spiritually sick by causing us extra stress, by directing our focus and priorities to matters that aren't beneficial, and by trapping us in a never-ending cycle of spending money and energy that we don't have on things we don't need to impress people who don't even care.

Just recently I've learned about a thing called "FOMO." Have you heard of that? The acronym FOMO stands for Fear of Missing Out. Psychological researchers have discovered that even when people are doing something really great like vacationing in Hawaii or on a pristine Caribbean beach, they might not enjoy it very much if they simultaneously find out that their family or friends back home are getting together for a barbeque. Even when we are spending a lot of money to do something we think will make us feel really good about ourselves, our sense of well-being can be destroyed by our envy of what other people are doing and how we might be missing out.

The truth about envy is that it can't cure the deficit we perceive between us and others. Every time we get where we think we need to be, there will be something else that makes us feel like we're behind or less than. There will always be a new kind of kitchen décor or next generation I-phone. Our American consumer culture is designed to promote and feed on our envy anxieties. Advertising constantly comes at us, now digitally fine-tuned to our most specific interests and temptations.

Because the sin of envy puts us in a never-win situation of comparison and competition, the stress of envy has led people to something the Germans call *Schadenfreude*, which means to rejoice when something bad happens to someone else. When we're caught in the envy trap and can't ever seem to pull ourselves up high enough, we get a sick pleasure from seeing other people fall down. Admit it. We all know what that feels like. When we rejoice (secretly or otherwise) in other people's misery, that's a symptom of envy's spiritual sickness.

Sometimes that symptom isn't merely a passive pleasure, however. Sometimes we allow our envy to actively work against other people's success—like Joseph's brothers putting him in the well and selling him off to the slave traders. Perhaps we do a better job of disguising our envious activity than

they did. Perhaps we tell others and ourselves that we are merely protecting ourselves or our family values. But really, we might be working to structure situations and society against others so that we can somehow feel superior, or at least less inferior.

3—THE CURE FOR ENVY

So, if we are afflicted by this spiritual sickness of envy, what can we do about it? Is there a way to keep it from killing us? Is there a vaccine or treatment? What's the cure? Here are some ideas that might help.

Do what you can to limit your negative self-comparisons with other people. You really don't have to live on Facebook or Instagram. If all those happy pictures of your co-worker's world travels or your sister's successful grandchildren cause you pain, then limit the time you spend looking at all that.

Instead, put yourself to doing good to help someone who is in worse straits than you are. Volunteer with the poor at the Lantern House or Catholic Community Services. Volunteer with the dying through Hospice. Volunteer with the lonely by visiting some shut-ins. Volunteer in a school to help some kids learn how to read and make a better future for themselves.

If worry of spreading the coronavirus prevents us from being able to volunteer out in the community, there are still positive things we can do, even at home by ourselves. We could do some spring cleaning or paint a room that's long been neglected. Soon, we'll be able to plant some garden seeds and flowers out in the yard. Or, we could read a book to learn something new. All these self-improvements will help bolster our sense of well-being.

Since the root of envy is essentially feeling sorry for ourselves, then another good remedy is counting our blessings. When we think of all the amazing talents, opportunities, good luck, and wonderful people that God has given us—how could we not feel more secure about our own place in the world? We do not have the ability to overcome envy's deadly powers all by ourselves. But God's

amazing love overcomes a multitude of troubles. Through the incredible mercy of Christ, we know that we can be forgiven and cleansed of the evils of envy.

CONCLUSION

Earlier in the service, we read a unison prayer. I'd like us to read it together again now.

Gracious God, make me sensitive to all the evidences
of your kind goodness and merciful blessings in my life;
so that, trusting in you,
I may feel free to live intensely, purposefully, and happily
the unique and valuable life that you have given me. Amen.

We don't have to compare ourselves to anyone else. God has made each one of us unique and valuable. We are loved and forgiven. And that reality is the medicine that will heal us from the deadly sin of envy.