

Jealousy

Luke 11:14-23

March 10, 2013

What color is love? (Red)

What color is anger? (Red)

So, are love and anger related? Both involve a deep emotional engagement with another person.

What color is grief? (Black)

What color is joy? (Yellow? Orange? Blue?) Joy has many colors and shades and manifestations!

What color is envy? (Green) Why green? Because green is what you look when you are sick! Envy is a sickness!

Envy leaves me feeling sick and miserable and pitiful, because I don't have what you have: your beautiful house, your prestigious job, your wealth, your talent, your success, your friends, your health, your good looks.

Envy is a terrible disease. When I am filled with envy, I resent your good fortune and, even worse, rejoice in your misfortune. And when I am filled with envy, I despise myself. I disparage what I have and who I am, which means I disparage God, because what I have and who I am are God's gift. Envy says: It's not enough! God has not been good enough to me! Envy is a terrible disease.

We have been talking together about the things we need to give up for Lent. We need to give up our need for control. We need to give up our fear of rejection. We need to give up our need to justify ourselves by discriminating between those who deserve our love and those who do not. And we would do well to give up envy for Lent, but envy is not our subject today. The scripture lesson from Luke is not about envy, but about jealousy.

But, you may ask, aren't they really the same thing? We do use "jealousy" and "envy" almost interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. Envy is this: I want what you have. Jealousy is this: I don't want you to have what I have. Envy is bitter, while jealousy is protective.

But isn't being protective a good thing? Sometimes it is, which is why God can be described as a jealous God, protective and possessive of what rightly belongs to him, namely us! But when we are jealous, protective and possessive, of what should not be ours alone, of what rightly should be shared, then jealousy, like envy, may be fierce and cruel and destructive.

The religious leaders who witnessed the exorcism described in today's gospel lesson were jealous. They were not envious of Jesus. They did not want anything he had that they did not have, except perhaps his popularity among the Jewish people. But that too was not something they lacked, but something he had taken from them, at least from their point of view. They were jealous, they were protective, of their turf, their spiritual authority, their prerogative, their entitlement as the chosen stewards of God's law and God's kingdom, and Jesus was a threat.

Jesus was driving out a demon, setting a man free of its torments and the people who watched were amazed, but some among them, some of these leaders no doubt, grumbled: "It is Beelzebul, the chief of demons who gives him the power to drive them out!" It wasn't what Jesus was doing that was the problem -- their own followers drove out demons too -- but that he was doing it. Jesus was encroaching on their territory, Jesus was usurping their authority.

And look at how fierce and cruel and destructive jealousy is! Jesus is healing a man, setting him free, making him well, doing the very work of the kingdom of God itself, but they accuse him of doing the devil's work! Envy disparages God's good gifts. Jealousy defames God's good work. And, in the end, both dishonor God.

In and through the ministry of Jesus, God is going about doing good, and they cannot see it. Or they refuse to see it. Jealousy has blinded their eyes and clouded their judgment. Where beauty is, they see ugliness. Where God is, they see demons.

And the upshot of it all is this: by not acknowledging the good work of the kingdom of God where it is indeed happening, they are actually working against the kingdom. "Anyone who is not for me," Jesus said, "is really against me. Anyone who does not help me gather is really scattering."

God is still going about doing good in lots of different ways, in lots of different places, among and through lots of different people. Jesus is still present among us, teaching and healing and gathering, and he shows many faces. And if we are not for him -- wherever he is, whoever he is, whatever he is doing -- then we are against him. If we are not helping him gather by encouraging and

supporting those who are doing the work of God's kingdom in his name -- wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever they are doing -- then we are scattering.

The church has done a lot of scattering. And it still does, because jealousy is still a problem.

The Roman Catholic Church is jealous, protective, possessive of its turf, of its historical authority, of its sole proprietorship of the stewardship of the kingdom of God on earth.

The evangelical church is jealous, protective, possessive of its turf, of its biblical authority, of its sole proprietorship of the stewardship of the kingdom of God on earth.

The liberal mainline church is jealous, protective, possessive of its turf, of its moral authority, of its sole proprietorship of the stewardship of the kingdom of God on earth.

Do you detect a pattern? And what do we do? We call each other names! Papist, bible basher, holy roller, leftist, marxist, literalist, right wing extremist, reactionary, wing nut, bigot, backslider. At least we don't accuse each other of doing the devil's work

God is going about doing good in lots of different places among lots of different people, and in too many cases we attribute it to anything and everything except God!

A house divided against itself cannot stand. Who said that? Jesus did! And Christ's house is divided against itself! "Anyone who is not for me is against me." Are you for Jesus? Then be for him, wherever and whatever and with whomever he is at work!

By the way, what color is jealousy? White! From holding on so tightly to what we are afraid of losing. But it will only be lost if we don't let go of it. So let go! Open your hands! What is yours is yours because it has come from God, and God has given the same gifts and the same calling and the same honor to many others like you. So praise God and give God thanks for what God is doing through them, too.

The opposite of envy is gratitude, and the opposite of jealousy is generosity. Among the prayers we say each Wednesday evening during Lent at our Simple Evening Liturgy is this:

*We bring ourselves to God
that we might grow in generosity of spirit,
clarity of mind,
and warmth of affection ...*

That's what we need: generosity, generosity of spirit, generosity of spirit that allows us to see God wherever God is. May God fill us with generosity of spirit!