

Taming the Green-Eyed Monster
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There's this hilarious show on the BBC called *Rev.* It chronicles the life of a pastor in the Church of England serving a small inner-city parish. Adam, the pastor, smokes and drinks with homeless parishioners, has a habit of taking off his collar and cursing at construction workers, and possesses a good heart but says and does some questionable things as he tries his best to serve his congregation.

The Archdeacon in his Diocese decides Adam could use some help and arranges for a dynamic, young pastor to join the congregation for an internship to bring new life and new ideas. This new pastor, Abi, ends up adding a family service that is incredibly well attended, a member decides he finally wants to be baptized—by Abi of course, and when asked to reorganize the church office, she does so with perfection. On the one Sunday Adam has off, he sneaks into the balcony and spies on the service Abi's leading. The church is packed and people are moved to tears during her sermon. Adam returns to the parsonage dejected, depressed, and envious.

Later that week, Adam goes into the sanctuary to pray and finds Abi sitting at the piano playing beautiful music. He hides behind a pillar and prays in silence, "Lord, why have you sent this woman? I should be able to love this woman but I can't because I'm jealous of her because she's cleverer than me and kind and hard-working and she brings the liturgy alive and she fills the church. I bet she speaks Hebrew as well, and Aramaic. Why do I find her so irritating? It's pathetic. It's because I'm scared, isn't it? I'm scared I'll be sidelined . . . I've got to rise to the challenge. I've got to try and love her. Love does not envy. I want her to go away, please make her go away."^[1]

Adam's painfully honest prayer captures our final Deadly Sin of Envy this morning. Envy is that green-eyed monster, that pain we feel when we see that someone else has objects, qualities, or some status that we don't. Robin Meyers argues that envy really begins in childhood when we're constantly compared to others.^[2] I always hated the first day of school, when I would meet my teacher and hear, "Oh you're Maureen's little sister" or "Oh, you're Bruce's daughter." I had the double whammy of a successful older sister and my father being a principal, thank goodness my mom was not in our school district or it would have been a trifecta! My dad was my principal in Middle School, as if Middle School isn't hard enough, I had to be embarrassed by him daily (and he loved it, he'll tell you after worship if you'd like his side of the story.)

Thankfully, trying to have my own identity took the form of being an overachiever and just working hard to distinguish myself. This stemmed from cringing at the comparisons and wanting to make a name for myself based on my own merits, not wanting to ride the coattails of anybody. There was some Envy there somewhere and I certainly had a chip on my shoulder, but it fueled me for good, I hope.

Envy takes many forms and is dealt with in many ways. What I find fascinating about our scripture today is that this sinful woman forgiven by Jesus highlights just how envious we can be of one another when mercy is shown to people we deem unworthy. We see that Jesus is in the home of a Pharisee and he sits down for dinner, a woman who had sinned washes his feet with a costly jar of ointment. She begins crying—bathing his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, kissing and anointing them.

Now before we get all creeped out—feet, hair, tears, gross! Let's put this into context—washing someone's feet was a sign of hospitality, and her hair being loose was a sign of grief and pleading.[3] When you greeted a guest in your home in Jesus' day, the custom was to greet them with water for their feet, a kiss, and oil for their head. This woman takes these gestures of hospitality to a whole new level! She's desperate that Jesus will accept her. Yet, she's breaking some rules—she's providing hospitality and it's not even her house. Her hair shouldn't be down, let alone drying Jesus' feet with said hair. And she shouldn't be touching Jesus—she's a sinner! A strict reading of Leviticus Chapter 5 would mean that Jesus would now be defiled because a sinner touched him.[4]

This is what the Pharisee is thinking, and Jesus doesn't let him get away with it. Jesus convicts this man, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven." [5] The Pharisee looked at this situation with envy in his heart. Instead of seeing how extraordinary the mercy of Jesus really is, he sees an unworthy person forgiven for sins she shouldn't have committed in the first place.

This is one example of Jesus talking about mercy or showing mercy and someone reacting badly. But think about the Prodigal Son forgiven by his father only to be met with hostility by his older brother. When Jesus tells the parable of the landowner who pays all the laborers the exact same wage at the end of the day, the landowner responds to complaints by asking, "Are you envious because I am generous?" [6] The answer is, yes we are! Meyers analyzes it like this, "One of the most remarkable discoveries that a serious student of the Bible makes is that in the New Testament more people get mad over God's generous treatment of those who don't deserve it than they do over God's harsh punishment of those who do." [7] We can be so envious that we sit back and begrudge the mercy of God. We ask ourselves if so and so is worthy of being special or liked or forgiven. It's like Adam said in his prayer, "Why do I find her so irritating? It's pathetic. It's because I'm scared, isn't it?" [8] Fear is often at the heart of the Deadly Sin of Envy.

So how can we possibly find a virtue in here somewhere? Well, out of Envy can come the Virtue of Emulation. Emulation takes the nastiness out of Envy because there's no hostility when you truly try to emulate someone, there's no desire to have this person you admire fall from grace or somehow face punishment for doing good in the world and being a person worthy of modeling yourself after. Instead of encountering someone who is talented by begrudging their gifts, we can take a step back and be amazed by them. As Myers says, "When we meet someone who is possessed of great talent or great gifts, or who just seems to have an 'enviable' amount of contentment and peace, we want to be more like them. We want to learn from them, to model ourselves after them, to live as they live. This desire is not sinful envy; it is good envy that motivates us to emulation." [9]

Think about the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King was influenced by Jesus' way of love and he also visited India in 1959 to immerse himself in Gandhi's nonviolence teachings. Dr. King once wrote, "As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love, operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, is one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom." [10] As much as we try to emulate Dr. King in social justice movements today, I've always found it fascinating that he himself emulated others, namely Jesus and Gandhi, in the Civil Rights Movement. This is a classic example of how powerful a virtue Emulation can be! We can tame the green-eyed monster of Envy, we can move to model all that is good and holy in others. And in so doing, we can make our communities better places for all people.

So this is it, my friends! In 7 Sundays, we've covered the 7 Deadly Sins and the 7 Lively Virtues that come out of these sins just in time for the Season of Advent, you'd think I planned it that way or something. I've lifted up the virtues of Communion, Wanting Wisely, Worthiness, Righteous Indignation, Holy Eros, Contentment, and Emulation. Now I'm not fooling myself, I know that we'll never get rid of the human reality of making bad choices, terrible mistakes, and not behaving in ways we're always proud of. Yet, I hope you've seen that we have the capacity to do so much good for ourselves, our families, and our communities when we focus on some of these virtues.

We can lift up Communion in the face of Gluttony, we can differentiate between Wants and needs instead of being Greedy Zebras. We can own our Worthiness and the reality that we are beloved Children of God instead of having false pride. We can stand up and say something—we can be Indignant when we see that someone's dignity is being threatened. We can affirm the Holiness of the human body and healthy, mutual Eros instead of Lust. We can be Content and not let Sloth get the best of us by making us sorrowful or apathetic and ignoring the world around us. And instead of greeting another person who is talented and fabulous with Envy in our hearts, we can seek to Emulate them and make ourselves better people in the process.

I'd end with the instructions of Jesus to the woman caught in adultery to, "Go and sin no more."^[11] But seeing as I've been covering these various sins with you for about two months now and I'm a realist, it seems more appropriate to end with Jesus' words to the woman who anointed him today, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."^[12] Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Rev. Season 2, Episode 2

[2] Robin Meyers, *The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins*, 35.

[3] Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 116.

[4] Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV, 1972.

[5] Luke 7:44-47.

[6] Matthew 20:15.

[7] Robin Meyers, *The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins*, 43.

[8] Rev. Season 2, Episode 2

[9] Robin Meyers, *The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins*, 38.

[10] Gregg Blakley, "The Formative Influences on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.," *Peace Magazine*, Volume 17, 2001, <http://peacemagazine.org/archive/v17n2p21.htm>

[11] John 8:11.

[12] Luke 7:50.