

Cinderella and Christ: Envy¹ and the Good

Genesis 30:1-3 (Rachel is envious of women with children.)

Mark 1:4-8 (John the Baptist baptized Jesus and enjoys naming Jesus as “good.”)

I Corinthians 13:4-7 (Love that is patient, not “envious”--hopes and endures.)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler

August 1, 2010

Redlands First United Methodist Church

This past week our Vacation Bible Arts produced the musical *Character Matters II*, which many of us saw Friday evening. All of us got a taste of their music today. The drama is about Fairytale characters that learn that they should undergo a bit of character development. According to the musical, some of the positive aspects of ones character that matter are self-esteem, not bullying, never giving up, taking care of people and things, and gratitude. Each morning we named a biblical character that had developed the character that mattered. Deborah had self-esteem, Paul learned not to bully, Miriam never gave up, Joanna cared for Jesus, and the one out of ten whom Jesus healed came back to thank Jesus. Evidently the children paid attention. One mother told me that on Wednesday morning her pre-Kindergarten son thanked her for breakfast. He told his mom he was learning about gratitude. The mom melted.

Anticipating all this talk of fairytales and character reminded me of a book that I did not just read and enjoy or even read and learn from. This book got inside me, changed me in a creative way, and I want to share the main ideas of the book with you--hoping you, too, will benefit. The title of the book is *Cinderella and Her Sisters*²--what a funny title for a psychology book. The entire book is about **envy**. *The authors look at envy not just from the viewpoint of envying, but also from the perspective of the one who is being envied.*

In the Bible there are people who envied others. The story of Rachel and Jacob is precious. They have had no children, in a society which places enormous value upon progeny, so Rachel envies her sister who does have children. At one point Rachel is radically honest with her husband Jacob: “Give me children, or I shall die!” Jacob responds that it is not up to him, but to God, who gives children. Rachel comes up with an idea that is equivalent today to having alternative means of conception--she asks Jacob to have a child with their maid, Bilhah. Eventually Rachel does have a child, whom we know as Joseph.

In order to address this topic of envy with you, I decided that I myself needed to reflect upon any envy in my own heart and mind. I confess it did not take long to recall a time when I was sort of pre-occupied with envy. It was early in the summer of 2003; we were getting ready to leave Ohio to come to California, and our “empty nest” years were about to begin, as both our children would be in college. There was a specific incident that taught me a lot. As I walked around a jogging path on the seminary grounds where I taught, I walked past the low-maintenance baseball diamond where two guys--about 10 or 11 years old--were pitching and batting to each other. **I felt a big dose of envy.** For years I had enjoyed standing in the outfield chasing after balls. Now I was just looking at two guys pitching and batting as I walked around the neighborhood. **I envied parents who still had children at home with whom they could play ball.**

Most all of us envy something at some time in our lives.

The thesis of this book, *Cinderella and Her Sisters*, is that there cannot be envy if there is not something someone thinks of as “good.”

If Karen sat up here wolfing down anchovies on crackers, the only people who might feel any envy would be those of you who consider anchovies on crackers “good.” She would have a good which you recognize and would like as well.

I think people are beautiful who have black hair or blonde hair, but I don’t envy them their hair color, because I don’t think of blonde or black as a good for me. Now, someone who *really* has red hair, I might envy.

If we were asked to quickly name where “envy” is mentioned in the Bible, most of us would recall something about the Corinthian passage, “Love is patient, not ‘envious.’” That “love” passage is often read at weddings. We get the message that we are NOT to envy. We assume that envy is the opposite of love. So, we try to squelch envy, whenever it occurs. We consider it bad and ourselves bad for feeling it.

However, here’s an amazing fact about envy: if we stare it in the face and see it for what it is, then we are likely to actually end up being blessed! It’s true. Rather than trying to get rid of envy, if we have it, we can ask, “*What can we learn from it?*”

Look at Cinderella. She is beautiful. She is also gentle and kind--even the little mice are her friends.

Look at Jesus. He is all good. He loves all people, goes beyond barriers to be kind, heals and speaks up for people. He risks his own life to bring greater justice and peace, for all, even for us.

Cinderella and Christ are both so good that they were both envied. The stepsisters envied Cinderella; they wanted her beauty. The political leaders envied Jesus; they wanted his power with people.

I know this is an unusual set of two people to compare, but notice *how* each of them inhabits their goodness. **They are good and they accept it.**

Sometimes when we have a good others envy, we do some odd things. 1) We might **deny the good.** (The intelligent person might say, “I’m **not** intelligent.”)

2) We might **put down the “good” as unimportant.** (A great puzzle-solver may say puzzle-solving is not important.)

What Christ and Cinderella, in their own--and very different--realms and times did was to graciously *accept* their good. They simply embodied the good they were given. Christ embodied God’s love and healing powers, graciously, generously--and I like to think, serenely.

The intelligent one who simply *is* intelligent doesn’t have to prove it, deny it, diminish it or show it off. He or she just *is* intelligent. The same goes for the one who simply *is* beautiful, or simply *is* kind, or simply *is* generous, or simply *is* creative.

When we envy,³ we begin to feel that we are empty of the good we hunger after--the good the OTHER has. Rachel became, in her own eyes, not Rachel, the beautiful and good wife, but Rachel-the-one-without-a-child. You who would be envying Karen her anchovies would experience yourselves as “we-without-anchovies.” **When we envy, we reduce ourselves to what we do not possess. We are what we are not. We are all envy.**

As the authors of this book on envy point out: “Fairy Godmothers are harder and harder to come by.”

How do we solve this dilemma, this uncomfortable relationship to some “good” that someone else has in abundance and we don’t have as much as we want?

Let’s take a brief look at John the Baptist for an answer. True, we can look to him because he advocated that we “repent,” that is, change our ways. We can change our relationship to envy. However, we can look at him also with regard to how he himself feels and talks about Jesus. John the Baptist does NOT envy Jesus. John ENJOYS Jesus’ goodness; he’s excited about Jesus. He tells others about Jesus; he wants them to know of Jesus’ goodness.

To squeeze a blessing from envy, we can look at envy in a new way. We can think, “This envy that I feel is *pointing me to some good.*” With new eyes, we do not focus upon **who** has the good but on the fact that **this good which we recognize, exists.** That’s what John the Baptist did. He said, “Wow, have you got good awaiting you! It’s in this man, Jesus, who is coming!”

It’s almost humorous how this can help us. We begin to see that **goodness is really quite abundant.** When we envy, we image goodness as in short supply. With new eyes **we realize that if we are able to envy another their good, then we have at least a little of that good in us--enough to recognize it elsewhere. Repeat.** (If we envy someone their ability to be patient, that means we have at least enough patience in us that we can recognize it, value it, and in fact, to be patient to some degree.)

So, the advice for us, when we envy is to

- 1) Recognize our envy non-judgmentally.
- 2) Find and name the “good” that is involved.
- 3) Focus on the good itself, not the people who have it, and
- 4) Appreciate that good--*whoever* has it.

That very good, focused upon, will bring blessings to all who SEE it, not just for all who HAVE it. (When we go to an art museum, we seldom envy the artists their abilities; we appreciate the art we see before us!)

The third time I walked around the block, envying parents of kids with whom they could still play ball, I got an idea. I went over to the two boys, who were looking exasperated, chasing after their ball. I asked if I might play in the outfield. They said, “Yes, but could you pitch instead.” I said I was not very good. The one at bat told me that I would get better with practice. I said okay. They tossed me the ball and I stepped over to “the mound.” We played baseball for at least another half hour. I went home on cloud nine, feeling very good about myself. I realized that I had done something very odd--even for me. What had happened was that (I think, with God’s help) I had pushed through a sadness barrier. What I *learned* from that episode of envy was that the very thing I envied--enjoying playing ball with children--is a good that is still here, in me--both as joyous memories and as a potential--for who knows where or when?

What can YOU learn from whatever or whomever you envy? If you find yourself envying, you, too, might search to change your perspective, to name the good that you value so highly and to celebrate that good, wherever and whenever it occurs.

¹ The Hebrew word for envy *qin’a* means a burning, the color produced in the face by deep emotion, reflecting sorrow that others have what we want. The Greek *zelos*, zeal, in its envious form means carrying things to excess, being inconsiderate of self as well as to others. Another Greek word, *Phthonos*, is the

word for envy in the New Testament, characterized as the unredeemed life and the spirit that crucified Christ in Matt 27:18; Mark 15:10. (Ulanov, p. 92)

² Ulanov, Ann and Barry Ulanov. *Cinderella and Her Sister Envied and the Envyng*. Most of the ideas in this sermon are from this book, including ideas found on pages: 17, 21, 25-27, 32, 116, 122, 125- 127, 136, 156, 162-163.

³ Obviously envy is a close cousin to such experiences as coveting, being jealous and even admiring or wanting something that another person happens to have. But, in a brief sermon I'm leaving it to you to deal with the nuances between all of these.