

## WORSHIP SERVICE JULY 26, 2020 – ENVY AND CONTENTMENT

### MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

God of all goodness, we thank you for your love for us and blessings to us. You are the one who knit us together in our mothers' womb, you gifted us each as unique, creative, quirky, special people. Thank you for the amazing ways you've created us! Thank you for the bounty and the beauty of ALL of creation, for the ways the earth moves in and out of the seasons, for the ways the ocean tides move with the moon, for the ways the stars hang in their places and the comets shoot across the sky. We're grateful for the mid-summer rains we've had that have kept our landscape green and full of life. We're grateful for the gifts of music, for the ways they help us to worship you and to celebrate significant milestones in our lives. Thank you for the gifts of modern medicine that can keep us healthy, bring us back to health when we're ill and even offer us new body parts when our own wear out! Thank you for the healing that Rod Peters has experienced – we ask for continued healing and return to health for him. We pray also for Margie Young this week. Be near to her as she anticipates relief from neck and back pain. Continue to comfort and guide her.

O God, we are grateful for celebrations and accomplishments! Thank you again for Glen Unrau and his 90 faithful years of discipleship and life. Thank you that Lucia could play and offer her music as a gift – for him and for us. We thank you for Agatha and Duane and for their 50 years together. Continue to bless them in their marriage.

Gracious Lord, we also ask for on-going wisdom, clarity and blessing on those making decisions about how to re-open the schools. We pray for those here, in our local school systems as well as state-wide and nation-wide. Be with all who are involved in those decisions. Calm anxieties, give clear, thoughtful guidance and openness to creative, outside-the-box possibilities.

We pray for guidance and wisdom also as the Covid-19 virus rages on, bringing illness, fear and chaos in its wake. Be with any who are suffering from the virus and all who suffer from its consequences. Grant us courage, compassion and common sense as we struggle.

Be with us now as we continue on in this worship service. May you be glorified by the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts. Amen.

### ENVY – PASTOR CALEB

#### **Genesis 4:1-10**

Friends, it's good to be back after some quality time with my family in Iowa. It was especially great for Austin to interact with his cousin, and to have a bit of time away at the same camp where I once was both a camper and a counselor.

As a precaution, I'm not with the rest of the group recording at the church, and am instead recording from home. This is the part of the service where we will focus on the sin of envy,

before moving on to learning to re-center ourselves in God's love in order to arrive at a place of contentment.

Envy is one of the seven deadly sins, while its counterpart virtue is contentment. In Galatians 5:25, after describing the fruit of the Spirit, the apostle Paul says, *"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."*

Right here we see contrast between the fruit that comes from a Spirit-filled life and the sin of envy.

Envy is wanting what another has, leading to a bitterness of spirit that eventually alienates us from others and from God. It is a condition of one's inner self, but it leads to consequences for how we live in community.

I'm defining sin to be a falling short of relationships characterized by love along any of these four dimensions: 1) relationship with God, 2) relationship with others, 3) relationship with yourself, 4) relationship with God's creation. Envy certainly qualifies as this kind of falling short.

The scripture passage that Lynel read is the story of the first murder in the Bible. It is the tragic story of Cain killing his brother Abel.

You might say that the story is about murder – and why focus on this sin, since none of us are likely to murder anyone? Probably not, but before the murder there is envy.

And while I don't dispute that many sins take the form of a wrong action, sin begins in the heart, where it may be difficult for us to identify. We like having an easy boundary line to identify. I remember as an overly-scrupulous youth, trying to regularly go over my day and confess to God if anything I did was a sin. Most of the time, I couldn't think of anything – I hadn't done anything that clearly crossed a line, but I also knew I wasn't perfect.

It takes honesty and courage to notice a wrong motivation from within us, regardless of whether we act on it.

Cain and Abel were the first sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was the firstborn and had the more prestigious role of farming ground. Abel as the younger was relegated to watching the sheep. Both give offerings to God from their work. Abel brought the firstlings and Cain simply brought fruit of the ground.

God looks at Abel's offering favorably, but not Cain's, and this angers Cain. We don't know a lot about God's reasons. Many interpreters find a way to blame Cain so as to defend what seems like an arbitrary preference on God's part.

It might be significant that Cain's gift isn't called the "first fruits" of the crop, while Abel's is. The story doesn't seem to want us to dwell on why Cain's offering wasn't accepted. Is anyone after all *entitled* to God's approval and acceptance? The issue is that Cain becomes bitter over it. God confronts Cain: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

I love the depth of insight of this line. Sin is not far from us, but we can actually make concrete choices in what to do with it.

In Cain's case, he succumbs to his anger and resentment, actually striking his brother and killing him. In Hebrew, the name "Abel" means "vapor," "mist," or "vanity." Abel's life does not last.

On the way back from Iowa on Wednesday, we made several stops that greatly lengthened the overall travel time, but also kept us sane. One of these was at a state park near Excelsior Springs. Austin was on his balance bike, and Josiah was in a carrier on Beth's back. Austin began incessantly asking to be in the carrier. No strategy really worked – whether it was saying no, changing the subject – look at the lake! – or giving alternative options – do you want daddy to carry you on his shoulders?

Austin kept repeating the request, each time announcing it as if we just hadn't heard it 50 times earlier, and all because he saw his brother was in the carrier.

From an early age, it seems we are wired to want whatever others have. There's even an anthropologist named Rene Girard who theorized that competing desires for the same thing would create enough chaos and violence to tear societies apart if we hadn't figured out how to scapegoat certain undesirable people or a common enemy in order to create a false sense of unity.

Cain's envy obviously led to violence, and Cain feared more violence. Though he bears the punishment of becoming a wanderer with no homeland, God graciously promises to protect Cain from further violence.

Jesus was the ultimate scapegoat. The aggression of many were concentrated on him, and Jesus' loving willingness to face this aggression exposed the sin of our scapegoating. As a culture we still scapegoat groups of people that we blame for larger problems. We scapegoat undocumented immigrants, as well as the large number of people we keep behind bars, that we call "criminals."

In many ways, each of the sins we are talking about over these weeks, such as pride or envy, is considered a virtue in our culture.

We make envy into a virtue when we encourage the kind of comparison with the Jones' that drives our consumeristic society. We are a culture obsessed with performance: which is the best team? Who's the best player? Who's the most adept musician? Who's getting the best yield? Who has the nicest house? Who is winning? Who makes the most money?

I invite us to reflect on how much of what we think we need for a good life is defined by comparing ourselves with others? We could ask: do I really want what I think I want, or do I want it because someone else seems to value it? Do I do what I do because of a simple delight in those things, or because I'm trying to meet up to some standard set by others?

If you were a part of the outdoor service last week, you'll remember that with each sin, we'll pause to engage a simple Christian spiritual practice, before moving toward living into the corresponding virtue by the grace of God's Spirit.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICE – PASTOR LOIS

As I mentioned last week, one of the suggestions in this "sins and virtues" curriculum is that we not only think and reflect on the topic but that we actually DO something – a spiritual practice, some sort of spiritual discipline that might help us as we try to move beyond our feelings of envy and move toward contentment. So the practice suggested for today is that we take just a few moments to focus on

ways we've noticed God's love and care for us. Now, I might suggest that you reach for a piece of paper and a pen or pencil so you can jot down your observations. That way you can share it with others, later, if you'd like to. Or, you can return to it sometime when you might find yourself feeling envious, and remind yourself to take some moments, be on the lookout, attentive to finding contentment in God's provisions for you. So let's take about 2 minutes now to focus on reasons you have to be content in God's care...

Feel free to share your reflections – with family or friends.

I invite you now to join me in the prayer of confession...

Gracious God, we confess our temptation to envy. We see what others have, and wish it was ours. We compare ourselves to others, and feel we don't measure up. Forgive us, generous God. Open our eyes to see your bounty in our lives. Open our imaginations to realize how we can join with your Holy Spirit in reflecting your love.

And continuing on, as we remind ourselves with these words of assurance:

Be content; in God we have more than enough.

## CONTENTMENT – PASTOR CALEB

### **Matthew 20:1-16**

In my own life, I haven't so often envied the possessions of others. But I do experience the very human desire to "be like everyone else." More often, I have experienced envy of abilities and traits of others that I wished I had. At an early age, I was labeled as "shy" and quiet, and through school was occasionally made fun of for being too "quiet." I developed deep-set shame for that. As I grew older, I envied peers that were extroverts – who had a facility with words, who could find the right words on the spot, who appeared more self-confident, which tends to give you more opportunities.

Healing this envy has meant accepting myself with my gifts and limitations. It has meant trusting that God is as able to use our limitations and weaknesses as our gifts.

We all have growth areas, but growing toward the healthiest and most whole people possible won't follow the same blueprint for everyone because God also intends us to be a mosaic of different gifts, different experiences, and different life pursuits.

Today, we're proposing that the antidote to envy is contentment.

Contentment isn't a state of having every need and desire met so that you can be happy. Contentment is a cultivated appreciation for the gifts of God *already* present in our lives, even if not everything is the way we would have chosen. It's appreciating God's gifts for what they are, rather than over-looking them.

Beyond that, contentment is knowing deep-down we are loved, which frees us from having to imitate others or grasp at what others seem to have in order to be loveable.

The second passage that Lynel read for us is the parable of the workers of the vineyard. It is still as shocking of a story as it was when Jesus told it.

In the parable, the owner of the vineyard looks for day laborers to help tend the vineyard. In Ecuador where I lived, there were specific places where underemployed day laborers would congregate in the hopes of being offered a job for the day.

The parable envisions something like that: laborers who have no steady employment, no benefits, looking for the opportunity to work.

The vineyard owner finds some of these workers at dawn and offers them a denarius if they will put in a full day's work.

There are some competing ways of reading this parable, so I'll make a few assumptions for our purposes, without the intent of limiting the possible meanings it could have. I'll assume that the denarius paid to each worker is a basic living wage. Not extravagant, but enough to feed a family. I'll also assume that the problem with the unemployed workers is not laziness, but an economic system unable to give dignified work to everyone.

The owner goes out at 9:00, noon, 3:00, and 5:00, each time promising to pay "what is fair." Both us and Jesus' listeners expect that it will be some proportion of a denarius – that would be fair.

The twist is that the owner pays the same thing to everyone. Everyone after all has families to feed and needed that denarius to do that. Predictably, those who worked the longest are outraged and insulted. They are envious. The owner reminds them that he has the right to be generous. What's that to them if they've not been cheated?

Of course, Jesus wasn't exactly telling business owners how to run their businesses. The parable is highly symbolic. In the book of Isaiah, the vineyard was a metaphor for the nation of Israel. Jesus is making a statement about how God's economy that obviously contrasts with the ways we run human economies. God's economy is built on the grace of God, not on human merit.

We have extraordinary wealth in our country's economy, but fail to make a systematic attempt to allow everyone the same education, stability, and opportunity to work and to have a fair share in the fruit of the economy.

The concept of contentment doesn't directly appear in the parable, but the parable does have something to say about the grace of God – the foundation of contentment.

Since we're on the subject of vineyards anyway, I've found the metaphor of gardening helpful for understanding our emotional and spiritual work.

For one thing, I want to clarify one point. A wise pastor once told me when I was struggling with difficult feelings that feelings are amoral. They aren't good or bad in of themselves. They are telling us something. It's what we do with our feelings and our thoughts that become moral issues.

It's inevitable to *feel* emotions like frustration, disappointment, or shame at different times. We will constantly need to re-center ourselves in our reasons for contentment when that happens. Envy becomes a moral issue at the point where it becomes an attitude that we dwell upon.

Every garden will have weeds pop up. That's not the fault of the gardener. It takes constant work to maintain it – something I can hardly find time to do in our yard.

Every gardener knows that you won't magically have a beautiful result without watering, weeding, fertilizing, planting, or pruning. Contentment, as well as positive thoughts and emotions in general, don't magically appear unless we do the cultivating work that leads to them.

Shaming yourself (or others) if your garden isn't what you'd like it to be isn't going to help. We don't have instant control over our thoughts and feelings any more than a gardener has instant control over the look of the garden. It's a longer process than that.

The kind of practices we need to live in contentment are meditating on God's gifts and love and resting in who God says we are: God's children, bearers of the divine image. Sometimes I've imagined God saying these words: "You're my son, I love you, you're enough," using this as a repeated prayer, knowing it's a process to truly believe it.

One more thing: any teaching about contentment shouldn't be abused by telling marginalized people to simply accept the systemic forms of injustice that they face. Spiritual contentment is rather an energy that frees me to love others and to work for peace, justice, and wholeness because I'm no longer so fixated on the needs of my own ego.

When we do that work together, we find freedom together. I believe I've said this before, and I'll say it again: we need to our own individual repentance, confession, and spiritual growth at the same time that we want to work for change in the church, our communities, and in our culture.

It's easy to feel angry at people out there that we see as the problem with this country: maybe you're upset about the protesters reported to be acting violently or destroying property. Or maybe it's the militarized police and federal response to even peaceful demonstrators. Maybe it's the people adamantly refusing to wear masks. Or... the list could go on of classes of people to be angry out.

Outrage can be justified. The harder realization is that in our common humanity, we all participate in the brokenness of this world. The systemic sins of our culture are more complex and nefarious than the individuals that we want to blame them on. If we play the blame-game honest and fairly, it won't be long before we are forced to recognize our own complicity. The seeds of the world's problems lie in each of us – not because we are shameful, horrible people, but because we share a human condition that chooses control over radical trust in God's love.

Engaging our own sin, struggles, and weakness gives us empathy and compassion for "those people" out there that we perceive to be the "problem."

When we make progress toward contentment, those of us with greater privilege and resources can loosen our grip on our power and control in a way that can allow all who desire to live in the way of God's kingdom – God's beloved community that is that mosaic of redeemed people with distinct personalities, identities, cultures, and gifts.