

ENVY: THE VELVET OPPRESSION

A Sermon Delivered for
First Parish in Needham, MA
Sunday, April 6, 2008
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Reading/Story

The Curse of Blessings

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There was an Officer of the Law, a recent graduate, proud as you can imagine, in his uniform of blue with brass buttons and gold epaulets. He wore a hat with a plume and a sword with a gold and ivory handle. He was as pompous as could be. He was arrogant and bold and callous. Every letter of the alphabet served only to demonstrate his authority and exalt his being.

One day he was walking his beat and heard a commotion in an alley. He ventured into the darkness, and there in the distance saw a man in rags. "Come forward!" he yelled. "Come forward now!" But the man in rags did not come forward. "I am an Officer of the Law, and I command you, come forward!"

The man in rags did not move. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and spoke, "I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

"Do with me?" the Officer of the Law mocked. "Do with me? You don't do with me! I do with you! I am an Officer of the Law and I command you to come forward."

"Now I know what to do with you," the man in rags said, and as he spoke, he drew his sword. "Now I know what to do." Without further word he moved to attack.

The Officer of the Law drew his own sword in defense. "Stop that!" he ordered. "Put your sword down right now!" But the man in rags did not stop. The Officer of the Law had to parry thrusts left and right. "Stop!" he said again, but to no avail. The Officer of the Law was forced to retreat.

When it seemed the man in rags would prevail, he lowered his guard, and what the Officer of the Law had intended as a parry became a thrust. His sword ran through the man in rags. "I didn't mean that," the Officer of the Law said. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Why didn't you stop when I ordered you to? Why did you attack me?"

The man in rags waved the words away. "I am leaving you," he said, "and as I do, I put upon you the Curse of Blessings."

"What do you mean?" asked the Officer of the Law, now quite confused.

"The Curse of Blessings. Every day you must say a new blessing, one you have never said before. On the day you do not say a new blessing, on that day you will die."

The man in rags closed his eyes. The Officer of the Law looked about for help. There was none to be found. When he turned back, the man in rags had disappeared. Gone.

"It was a dream," the Officer of the Law thought. "Only a dream. I imagined it."

The time was late in the afternoon. The sun was setting. As much as the Officer of the Law tried to ignore his experience, he could not. The Jewish day ends with the sunset. The Officer of the Law felt his body growing cold and knew from the chill that his life was leaving him. In a panic, he uttered these words of blessing, "Blessed art thou, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has created such a beautiful sunset." At once warmth and life flowed back into him. He realized, with shock and relief, the curse had been real.

The next morning he did not delay. He woke with words of blessing. "You . . . You are blessed that You let me wake up this morning." His life felt safe the whole day. The next dawn he blessed his ability to rise from bed, the next that he could tie his shoes.

Day after day he found things and abilities that he could bless. That he could go to the bathroom, had teeth to brush, that each finger of his hands still worked, more or less, that he had toes on his feet and hair – a little – still on his head. He blessed his clothes, every garment, his house, the roof and floor, his furniture, every table and chair.

And when he ran out of things, he began to bless relationships: his family and friends, and fellow workers, and those who worked for him; the mailman and clerks. Surprised to find that they appreciated his blessings, he learned that his words had power. Word went out that the Officer of the Law was a source of blessing.

Years passed, decades. The Officer had to go further afield to find new sources of blessing. He blessed town councils and school buildings, scientists and their discoveries. As he traveled, he became in awe of its beauty and balance and blessed all that. The more he learned, the more he had to bless. His life was long, and he had many opportunities.

He passed the age of 100. Most of his friends were gone. His time was now given to searching for the purpose in his life and the one source from which all blessings flow.

He had long since realized that he himself was not the source but only a conduit, and even that realization was welcomed with a blessing that sustained him yet another day.

As he approached the age of 120, he considered that his life was long enough. Even Moses himself had not lived longer. On his birthday he made a conscious decision to utter no new blessing and to allow his life to come to an end. Still he could recite old blessings, and throughout the day he reviewed them, all the blessings for his body and his possessions, for relationships that spread throughout the world, for the awesome beauty of creation, for the deep resonance and pulse of purpose that now pervaded his very being – but no new blessing passed his lips.

As the sun was setting, a chill progressed from his extremities. He did not resist it. In the twilight a figure appeared, the man in rags! “You!” our Officer of the Law sighed. “I have thought about you every day for a hundred years. I never meant to harm you. Please, forgive me!”

“You don’t understand,” said the man in rags. “Or know who I am, do you? I am the angel sent a hundred years ago to harvest your soul, but when I looked at you, so pompous and proud, there was nothing there to harvest. An empty uniform was all I saw. So I put upon you the Curse of Blessings, and now look what you’ve become!”

The Officer of the Law grasped in an instant all that had happened and why. Overwhelmed he said, “You are blessed, my God, ruler of the Universe, that You have kept me alive and sustained me so that I could attain this moment.”

“Now look what you’ve done!” the man in rags exclaimed. “A new blessing!”

Life flowed back into the Officer of the Law, and he and the man in rags looked at each other, neither of them knowing quite what to do.

Here ends our reading. Our morning offering for the continued work and ministry of this parish may now be both given and received. Blessed are those who are generous!

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He was a well-known preacher; a big man, of obviously large appetites, who had come to be a guest in my pulpit when I was serving our church in Dallas. And he certainly had a bold way of starting a conversation. He had no sooner settled into the passenger seat of my little car, after I picked him up at the airport that day, than he turned to me and said, “So tell me: of the Seven Deadlies, which is your besetting sin?”

I remember stammering something about how I could be grateful that enough sloth and gluttony had somehow at least saved me from getting into too much trouble with lust – and that no one motivated chiefly by avarice was ever well-advised to become a minister. But these we agreed, are the so-called “warm” sins -- those of the flesh. The harder ones to deal with are the spiritual sins, which so often start out as natural and even necessary, but easily slide toward making us miserable in the end.

Take pride, for example. Arrogance is clearly one form; callousness and coldness, others. But don't we also try to teach our children to have a certain decent pride in themselves and in their abilities? Of course we do! And as for anger, well, storing up grievances, nurturing rage and wrath is clearly destructive. But even the Bible advises, “Be angry. But do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” But by the time we had driven by some of the Texas-size mansions on the way to my modest parsonage, and I had pointed out which one belonged this oilman or that heiress, I had settled on envy – perhaps as not only the sin I chiefly wrestle with, but as a problem in our whole culture. For what can begin innocently as mere admiration, even emulation, too easily slides toward coveting and resenting what someone else has. And as my preacher friend noted, “Envy is the one sin that has its punishment built right in. It makes you feel unhappy.”

A joke I once heard from a wealthy woman: Two old sorority sisters are having a reunion on the veranda of a mansion belonging to one of them. “My Henry built me this house, says the hostess, “after I birthed our first baby.” “Well, isn’t that nice!” says her friend. “Yes,” said the hostess, “and after the second, he bought me that Bentley in the drive. “Well, isn’t *that* nice!” says her friend. “Yes, and after our third child, he bought me this diamond. “Isn’t that *nice!*” “So tell me, did your husband do nice things for you when you birthed his children?” “Not really,” says her friend. “But after a while George did send me off to a finishing school.” “A finishing school! Why, whatever for! You and I were in a perfectly proper sorority! You didn’t need any finishing!” “Oh, but I did, too!” Why, when people rubbed my nose in their good fortune I’d often say dreadful things or make vulgar gestures behind their back, but there I just learned to say, “Isn’t that nice!”

And surely we often do feel envy even when we are too polite or controlled to express it. Tuesday, for example, I had lunch with a minister friend just back from sabbatical leave. He wanted someone to share how nice it was, while on leave, to do just one thing at a time, while in the work of ministry often seems like keeping 12 plates spinning at once. Even before we sat down, we ran into a rather affluent lay leader that we both know well. Just back from a winter vacation in the Caribbean – where he reported running into another UU minister we know! Frankly, this has been happening to me too much lately! When we sat down, I reminded my friend that some wit once defined Puritanism as the deep suspicion that someone, somewhere is having a good time. So that maybe what we were both feeling was just the flip side of our Puritan work ethic!

But I don’t think it’s just me, or just my fellow clergy. When Lucas saw my sermon title, he said it sounded like a rock band, “The Velvet Oppression,” with a lead song, “Envy.” The reference, for those of you who were not here last Sunday, is to a phrase that our guest preacher, Tom Stites, borrowed from Black liberation theologian James Cone. He suggests that even those of us who are relatively privileged in this society are trapped in forms of “velvet oppression.” Excessive work and multi-tasking, excessive debt loads, excessive worry about ourselves, and our kids, keeping up with the Joneses, or whoever. Ah, yes, I thought, and what runs through much of our self-oppression are forms of envy.

It's what caused H.L. Mencken to once write that "contentment in America is making \$10 a week more than your brother-in-law makes." It's behind the mountain of debt that we have piled up in this country, both private and public. And therefore behind a good deal of our current financial crisis. Thanks to envy, without which advertising and our culture of celebrity could hardly exist, nearly everyone believes that they deserve to have a house and a car at least a little better than those their parents had, or they had last year. Plus a flat-screen TV or an iPod or a kitchen as good as their friend's. Not to mention a winter vacation – which I didn't get this year, darn it! The other day, at the gym, as I pedaled the exercise bike, I found myself watching a travel channel program about the top luxury resorts in the islands. Before I stopped myself, and began pondering how the deep ambivalence so much of the world feels toward affluent, powerful America also begins in admiration, even emulation, but easily slides toward understandable resentment.

Certainly it's an old theme in the human spirit, envy. In the Bible, it shows up as early as Cain being envious that his brother Abel's offering seems more pleasing to God than his own. So he kills his own brother! I've also noticed how many of the psalms seem aimed at trying to work through the feeling – rather like I'm doing this morning! "Lord, I've been trying to follow the moral and generous path," says the psalmist. But I've noticed how often it's the wicked and the selfish that seem to prosper! Why not smite them? Oh, I know, "better is a little that a righteous person has than the abundance of many wicked," [Psalm 37:16]. But then, by then of such psalms, as the feelings get worked through, the psalmist is praising God again, just for the gift of life, and for the promise of the future.

So if there is an antidote to the sin of envy, this is surely part of it. Envy, says one writer, is just the feeling of the deprived child lurking in all of us, unhappy and angry, perhaps justifiably so, for some ill treatment or deprivation, some sense of inadequacy we felt or still feel. But when those feelings sneak up on us, and make us miserable, surely part of the solution is to notice what we *do* have to be grateful for, to voice a simple blessing, and to reengage our capacity for gratitude and praise. Or so our story suggests.

Some people, of course, find this hard to do because they think of the Universe or God as having a great, all-controlling plan clearly aimed at benefiting others and short-changing or punishing them. So it can take a huge shift in spiritual perspective for them to realize that purpose is our business, and that the way God really works is by setting before every one of us, every part of creation, a whole range of creative possibilities at every moment. Not a destiny. So the spiritual question is this: can you bless this moment, this day, just enough to stay open to the next one? Can you find a purpose bigger than feeding your own resentment? Can you achieve enough of a God's eye perspective on life to realize that the sun is made to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike.

Or as I'm often heard to repeat: "The rain it falls alike/ on the just and unjust fella. But less falls on the unjust; he has the just's umbrella!"

Surely there is injustice and inequity in the world. But it hardly benefits us spiritually, even in finding the power within ourselves to help correct some of those injustices, if all we do is envy the power of others, and not claim our own; envy the blessings of others, and not count our own; envy the grace that has come into other lives, and not open our own hearts to receive the abundance possibilities set before if, if we can only grateful and gracious enough to receive them.

Toward the end of his life, when he realized that he had been blessed with enough days, and had no desire of any more, the protagonist in our story this morning reviews all the blessings he has ever said, for his body, and its capacities, for the opportunities and gifts and possessions he has been blessed with, for the relationships that connect him to others all throughout the world, for the awesome beauty of creation, and for the deep resonance and pulse of purpose that had come to pervade his very being. And I ask you, Is that not the way that we all should want to end our lives? Not with envy or bitterness, but with praise, with purpose, with perspective! So why not get started now on using those liberating antidotes to start freeing ourselves now from the "velvet oppression" that is the besetting sin of our affluent and grasping culture?

The other night I saw a play that convinced me, more than any other piece of theater that I have seen in years, that inherent even in the most difficult losses and starkest moments of life, there are possibilities for spiritual growth in that direction. But it is also okay to pray that we be spared learning to let go of envy through searing experience.

Sometimes I think that my own children know better than I do how important it is to praise, to have purpose, and maintain perspective. My daughter Mary, for example, who teaches middle school children with special needs in a challenging public school in Boston, once selected as her personal motto some wise words by the poet William Henry Channing, nephew of the founder of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing. Those words are found at number 484 in the hymnal. I invite you to turn to them with me, and to say them with me, almost in the form of a resolution, or a prayer.

To live content with small means;

To seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;

To be worthy, not respectable; and wealthy, not rich;

To study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;

To listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart;

To bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.

To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common.

This is to be my symphony.