

## Want What You Have

Readings: 'Once the World was Perfect' by Joy Harjo  
'Desire' by Michael Blumenthal

Of the seven deadly sins, envy is the one that gives the least pleasure. There's the deliciousness of gluttony, the relaxation of sloth, the righteousness of anger, the self-esteem boost of pride, the daydreaming of greed, and the joys of lust. But there is very little pleasure in envy, it is a belittling of ourselves, it is a coming up short in comparison, it "creates sorrow out of joy" the wise ones tell us.

And yet, envy is a near-universal experience. There is no human language without a word for envy. <sup>1</sup>We've all felt that discontented murmur when we see someone else's beautiful possession or heard someone's wonderful news. Maybe you've been the one envying another man's girlfriend or another man's chicken. Maybe you want to be a prince or a cloud or the sun. Maybe your envy takes a different form, maybe you, through hard work, have overcome it.

I called envy a sin. We don't use that word a lot around here. To me, sin is a shorthand to talk about all of the behaviors that keep us from living out of our most deeply held values, all of the patterns and systems of oppression that keep the Beloved Community from being realized. I know there's a lot of definitions. If sin is a word that stands between you and the ability to sink into this topic, I offer these words from American writer Joseph Epstein, who wrote a wonderful little book on envy:

'[I]f the very notion of "sin," original or unoriginal, as damning simply makes no sense to you, I would invite you instead to consider envy less as a sin than as very poor mental hygiene. It blocks out clarity, both about oneself and the people one envies, and it ends by giving a poor opinion of oneself. No one can see clearly anything he or she envies. Envy clouds thought, clobbers generosity, precludes any hope of serenity, and ends in shriveling the heart—reasons enough to fight free of it with all one's mental strength.'<sup>2</sup>

Envy, whether we think of it as sin or poor mental hygiene, clouds thought, clobbers generosity, precludes any hope of serenity, and ends in shriveling the heart. The central simple question of envy, the question that makes all of that possible is, 'why not me?' We see someone's wealth, achievement, talent, good fortune, their chicken or their girlfriend and think, 'why not me?' Why didn't I get that lucky break?

Most of the time, most of us have that passing thought and we continue on, but sometimes the question lingers, it festers and grows from an idle wondering to a belittling of ourselves.

And the structure of the American system we live in encourages envy – and is, in turn, fueled by envy. Envy is the strongest between near-equals. Helmut Schoeck, an Austrian-German sociologist wrote, "Overwhelming and astounding inequality, especially when it has the element of the unattainable, arouses far less envy than minimal inequality, which inevitably causes the envious to think: 'I might have been in his place.'"<sup>3</sup> And while there is overwhelming and astounding inequality in our country, those are not the stories we grow up with, the stories that get imbedded deep inside us. We hear stories about being near-equals. Our culture is full of stories that we are more equal than we are. We are told that we

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<sup>1</sup> Epstein, Joseph. *Envy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Page 2

<sup>2</sup> Epstein, 98

<sup>3</sup> quoted in Epstein, 32

live in a meritocracy, where the best people rise to the top because of their hard work, regardless of the circumstances they were born into. Perhaps our parents or teachers or other trustworthy adults told us that if we worked hard, we were sure to be successful. Now, many of us know intellectually that the up-by-your-bootstraps myth is just that, but we might still look at one another and start comparing. This is compounded by the reality that many of our markers of class are not as rigid as they once were. Who even are our peers? Who do we compare ourselves to for reassurance that we're on the right track, for inspiration to do better, for that quick jolt of pleasure that comes with feeling like we're doing better than someone else? When we assume people who aren't our peers are our peers, when we assume the unequal is equal, the 'why not me?' comes, the envy comes.

And layer on top of this the reality that our economy thrives on envy. The consumer consumption that our economy is dependent on is rooted in envy, in getting us to feel envy and then act on it. Advertising of all sorts is rooted in envy. We see the people in advertisements, with their beautiful worry-free lives, beautiful and worry free because they are not real, and we get that murmur of envy Henry Fairlie describes that moment of murmur like this. "No sooner is it said than one hears the sound of murmuring in one's own day, as Envy, does its work, and laps-laps-laps against the few shore-defenses, we have built around us, eroding them slowly but certainly, whispering its doubts and suspicion and gossip, until we begin to believe and look forward to them."<sup>4</sup>

We might act on our envy – buying that advertised thing, gossiping about someone who is getting better than they deserve, belittling ourselves for not measuring up or, like the stonecutter in our story today, get ourselves turned into a prince or a cloud—but if we struggle with envy, we know that those actions only quiet the murmuring for a minute. The murmur of envy is relentless.

And the murmur of envy hurts us all. The envious impulse often makes things worse for everyone. American philosopher John Rawls writes "Envy is collectively disadvantageous; the individual who envies another is prepared to do things that make them both worse off, if only the discrepancy between them is sufficiently reduced."<sup>5</sup> Studies bear this out. Economists have found that people would rather be in the situation of earning 85,000 dollars per year with their neighbor earning 75,000 dollars than earning 100,000 dollars per year and their neighbor earning 125,000 dollars.<sup>6</sup> Envy wants us to view everything as a competition—and we all end up losing.

So what do we do to manage envy if it feels unmanageable? There are a number of ways to manage it, to mute the murmurs.

One way is to explore if your envy is a messenger. Perhaps there is someone in particular you feel most envious of that person who just seems to have it all together. Ask what it is that you're envious of. What is the murmuring about? Does his job seem fulfilling? Does she travel a lot? Use that information. Maybe it's time to ponder a career transition, or explore how you might be able to take a trip somewhere. One of the clues that led me into ministry was feeling jealous of a preacher.

Another way to manage envy comes to us from a Lutheran pastor who was a mentor to me. The advice was given for a different context, but it applies to envy. When I was doing a hospital chaplain residency, I was working with someone from a strict religious tradition. This coworker had a very rigid understanding of gender roles and what was appropriate interactions between men and women. He believed that it was inappropriate for he and I to be alone in a room together – which was a problem since we, along

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<sup>4</sup> Fairlie, Henry. *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*. Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1978. Page 79

<sup>5</sup> Epstein, 53

<sup>6</sup> Epstein, 33

with the two other residents, had a shared workspace, four desks in one large room. So, if I was working in our office, he wouldn't enter – or if I entered and he was alone in there, he would leave. It was bizarre to be treated like this – it made me question my own actions and motives.

But back to the mentor. I was complaining about this, again, and the mentor said, “what if you don't take it personally?” To me, that was a revelation. Perhaps you all know this already, but to me, it was a new idea. My coworker can cast me in whatever role he wanted – it felt like he had pegged me as some sort of evil temptress—but I don't have to accept it or even acknowledge it. I don't have to reconcile whatever it was I representing to him with my own self-understanding. He's following his rules – and I'm following mine and his rules are a personal attack if I choose to make it so. He still followed his rules, but his decisions to leave our shared office were his choices, not about me.

In regards to envy, not taking it personally means remembering that other's successes are not a personal affront to us. Another's skill at painting or drawing is not a personal attack on us, neither is their lovely beach home, or their chicken or girlfriend or the marriage that seems perfect from the outside. We don't need to jump to internal comparisons when someone else has a beautiful girlfriend or delicious-looking chicken. They're living their life, we're living ours – and it's only a competition if we choose to make it so.

Envy wants us to see the world as a zero-sum game, that there is a set amount of everything and not enough to go around, that we're all competing for what is scarce and precious. That is a lie. That is the lie at the heart of envy. The truth is there is enough. Of everything that matters most, there is enough. There is enough for everyone to have enough. There is enough love for all to be loved. There is enough wisdom for everyone to be wise. There is enough joy for us all to be joyous. There is enough justice for everyone to be treated justly. There is enough beauty for everyone to fill their eyes and ears and bodies with it.

And while this might not be true in all parts of our world right now, here, among us, in Kalamazoo, in Michigan, in the United States, there is also enough of everything we need to ensure our basic survival. There is enough food. There is enough shelter. There are enough clothes. Collectively, we don't distribute these things fairly, so many struggle with hunger and homelessness. Some have full closets and pantries and others have no closets and pantries at all, but there is, fundamentally, enough. Envy and competition and capitalism tell us that these shouldn't be freely given to all who need them, but if we collectively, made another decision, there would be enough for everyone to have enough.

There is enough for everyone to have enough. That's the truth that envy, that poor mental hygiene, that sin, keeps us from knowing. We can get too focused on the competition and forget that we have the power to rewrite the rules entirely. And that work can start in our own hearts.

Forrest Church was the senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. He was a brilliant writer and thinker and a deeply flawed man. He engaged in sexual misconduct within the congregation he served. He hurt his church and people within it. And the authorities within our denomination did not hold him accountable for his misconduct, in part, because he was such a brilliant writer and thinker. This is a long and complicated story, and I needed to name it before I can quote his brilliant writing with integrity.

A brilliant mantra of his speak to overcoming envy, to remembering that it's not a competition, to cultivating the gratitude necessary to move from scarcity to sufficiency. He wrote, 'Want what you have. Be who you are. Do what you can.'

Want what you have. This means noticing, really noticing all that is already good in your life. In a consumer culture that thrives on getting us to want the next thing, this is a radical act. This is a way to cultivate gratitude for all—tangible and intangible—that we already possess. Want what you have. Know that there is enough. Question anyone who tells you there is not enough for everyone to have enough.

Be who you are. So much of envy is rooted in wanting to be someone that you're not, with a different set of skills and talents, abilities and aptitudes, Joseph Epstein writes that as he aged, his envies shifted, he no longer envied people their possessions but their abilities. He writes, 'I envied anyone who could do a backwards summersault in midair from a standing position. I envied people who had fought it a war, had their bravery tested, and came through intact. I envied people who spoke a foreign language easily. I envied performing artists of various kinds who can enthrall an audience to the point where the audience doesn't want the performance to ever end. I envied people who can travel abroad with a single piece of luggage. I envied people who have exceedingly good posture... And, above all, I envied... those people, favorites of the gods, who genuinely understand that life is a fragile bargain, rescindable at any time... and live their lives—day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute—accordingly.'<sup>7</sup>

To be who you are means to recognize one's strengths and weaknesses, flaws and talents, as vital to who one is. It means to strive to be authentically you, as honest with the world as you can muster. It means to remember that you are worthy, just as you are.

Do what you can. We are all called to do what we can to make our values real in the world. Doing what you can might mean doing the hard internal work to overcome envy or other habits of poor mental hygiene. Doing what you can might mean opting out of the competition and deciding not to take others' success or good fortune personally. Doing what you can might mean marching in the streets or calling your representatives or showing up at county commissioners meetings. Doing what you can might mean knowing that there is enough for everyone to have enough – and acting to make it so.

So let us want what we have.

Be who we are.

Do what we can.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Epstein, 97