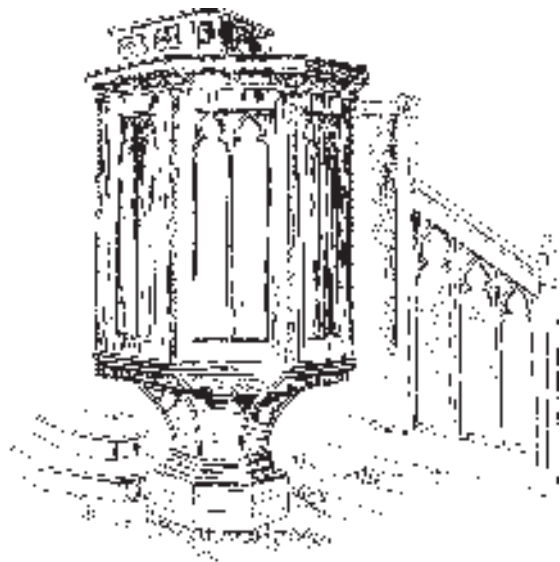


September 6, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

One Calm Summer Night
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

I Samuel 18:6-9

When I was in grade school, the week after Christmas was almost as much fun as Christmas itself. That was the week I would visit friends “to see what they got.” We didn’t “over do” Christmas at our house, but it sure was fun visiting those who did. Often I’d come back with “why” questions. “Why can’t we get a color television?” was the question one year when our neighbor, a scientist at Westinghouse Electric, got the first color set in the neighborhood. “Why can’t we play balloon tennis in the living room?” was the question I’d ask after visiting my best friend’s house. His mom always let us turn their living room into a gym at Christmas.

I learned later that those comparison visits were motivated by envy. Funny, now that I’m almost grown up, I look back at our family’s Christmases and wouldn’t trade them for anything. In fact, a lot of December is spent trying to recreate Christmas like it used to be.

That’s not to say I’ve conquered envy. Hidden among the bookshelves at my brother’s house in Easton, Maryland is the best stereo system I’ve ever seen. In his library there are Bang & Olufsen speakers hidden everywhere. With a hand-held remote control monitor my brother can turn his library into any one of 28 performing centers around the world. When listening to the *Messiah*, for instance, you can press a button and it sounds just the same as if you were transported to Westminster Abbey. When you listen to Crosby, Stills and Nash—press a button and suddenly you’re hearing them live at a rock concert. For orchestral music there are specific concert halls in Europe or when listening to jazz, a

simple jazz coffee house in Greenwich Village. There's even a button for a stadium so when you watch the Steelers on my brother's huge high definition Sony TV, it sounds exactly like you're in Heinz Stadium.

Well, ever since, when I listen to a song or watch a game on TV, I say to myself, "Yeah, it was great, but think how it would sound on Mike's system." I'll admit it; I'm a little envious. Okay, I'm a lot envious.

Envy is the sin that festers in families and nations. Envy is a desire to have what another person has. It's a sense of discontent or jealousy about another's advantages or possessions. It's a desire to have those advantages or possessions for yourself. Someone put it this way, "Envy is the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are."

The social scientists tell us that envy begins at school age. It is then that we discover that we differ from our classmates in our abilities. Sooner or later we all learn that we are unable to master some area of school life—a certain academic subject, an athletic skill or a special interest. School age children win recognition by producing things. Those who are unable to produce gain notoriety, not recognition, and this makes them feel all the more inferior, and all the more anxious.

While we are "all created equal" in regards to our rights in America, we have different gifts. How we use our own gifts and how we look at the gifts of others will largely determine our happiness.

Do you remember the award winning movie and play *Amadeus*? How it carried the viewer into the subjective conscience of a good man who was destroyed by envy? In the movie, Antonio Salieri, court musician to the King of Austria in Vienna, encountered the teenage musical genius, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Young Mozart was obviously blessed with talents, which set him apart from his contemporaries. His virtuosity on the harpsichord was dazzling. His music was complex, moving, exciting, and reflected his total mastery of all forms of composition. It was clear that God had endowed him with extraordinary gifts. Nevertheless, Mozart was immature, vulgar, and obscene.

Salieri, on the other hand, had dedicated himself to serving God. From his youth he had dreamed of composing music that would lift the hearts of people heavenward. Salieri asked only that God might permit him to create the kind of music that would reflect God's glory. However, Salieri's prayer request was not satisfied. Salieri was able to write pleasant tunes, but not masterpieces. He could compose music that would entertain its hearers, but never immortalize its composer. Despite his immense popularity, Salieri knew that his was a mediocre talent and that his uninspired work would soon be forgotten. He envied Mozart's gifts. In fact, he became obsessed with envy. Soon he began to plot Mozart's destruction. However, before he could act on his plan, Salieri's obsession drove him to insanity.

Envy grows in the deprived and in those who consider themselves deprived. In the movie's climactic monologue, Salieri curses God for denying him the kind of talent, which God granted to Mozart. Sin's ultimate destination is reached—alienation from God.

Jewish folklore has many stories that depict the ugliness of envy. One of the most intriguing is about a certain storeowner who was visited by an angel. The angel offered the man a wish that would give him anything he desired. However, there was one condition—his rival, whom he envied intensely, would receive double what the wish granted. Without hesitation, the envious man wished to be blind in one eye.

The Bible also abounds in stories of envy and their dire consequences. The slaying of Abel by Cain resulted from Cain envying the favor that Abel gained in the eyes of God. Envy is what caused the despondency of the Prodigal's elder brother. Envy is what prompts the servant with the single talent to bury the lone talent and make nothing of it.

Perhaps the most intriguing case of envy in the Bible is that of King Saul for David. Saul was a popular king, but David—David was young, strong, and handsome. David was a military hero. He had a nice voice and would compose songs on the lyre that made the Top 40. In fact, David could charm the birds out of trees. Soon all Israel was in love with David. "Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands," the ladies would dither every time he rounded the bend in his fancy uniform. Saul began to smolder. Finally, one day when David was singing for him, Saul burst into flame. He heaved his spear at him and just missed by a quarter of an inch.

There's no doubt; envy is destructive. It is a deadly sin. The man who envies another man's wife becomes discontented with his own. The student who envies another student's grades underestimates his own abilities. The woman who envies another woman's appearance becomes a supporter of a cultural system, which diminishes her own value and encourages her own unhappiness. The older person who envies another's youth soon becomes bitter. The fact is that if you are more anxious for what you don't have than thankful for what you do have, you will be unhappy.

The Letter of James is wise. Did you hear this verse when it was read earlier? "Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind" (James 3:16).

In the Taoist literature of ancient China is a story that demonstrates how foolish envy really is. It seems that there was a wise man that had many horses. There was one horse, which was so strong, fast, and beautiful that it elicited the envy of the man's neighbor. However, one day this horse escaped from the barn and ran away into the hills. The neighbor's envy changed to pity, but the wise man said, "Who knows if I should be pitied or if I should be envied because of this?"

The next day the horse returned to the wise man leading a herd of 50 equally beautiful wild horses with him. The neighbor once again was filled with envy and once again the wise man said, "Who knows if I should be envied or if I should be pitied because of this?"

Shortly after he said this, his only son tried to ride one of the wild horses, fell off of it and broke his right leg. The neighbor's envy once again turned to pity, but the wise man responded by saying, "Who knows if I should be pitied or if I should be envied because of this?"

The next day the general of the emperor's army came to draft the man's son for an exceedingly dangerous mission, but since the son's leg was broken, he could not be recruited for this mission, which promised certain death. The neighbor, whose own son was taken in the place of the injured young man, envied the wise man; and once again the wise man said, "Who knows if I should be envied or pitied because of this?"

The story goes on and on with similar twists that shift the neighbor's feelings from envy to pity and then back to envy again. But the wisdom of the wise man makes it clear that things are not always what they seem to be, and that what we desire is just as likely to bring us pain and trouble as satisfaction and good fortune.

How many times have we seen people destroyed by the very traits we admire and even perhaps envy?

How often do we encounter people who are too attractive for their own good or so talented that they never learn the discipline of hard work and persistence? How often do we see people destroyed by the riches that made them the envy of others?

Perhaps the American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson summed it up best in a poem later made famous in a song by Simon and Garfunkle. The poem is titled: *Richard Cory*.

Whenever Richard Cory went downtown,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.
And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
“Good morning,” and he glittered when he walked.
And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.
So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935)

Let us pray:

O God, may we be thankful for who we are and what we have been given. With all our abundance we ask for one thing more – the wisdom to be good stewards of what we have and to view properly what others have. Amen.