

“Envy” by Rev. Cameron D. St. Michael

Almighty God, bless the hearing and reading of your Word. Let the Holy Spirit descend upon us, that we may understand your Word for us today. As your scriptures are read, as your Word is heard, let the utterances of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sights, O Lord. By your Holy Spirit in your Holy Church and let God’s people say – Amen.

Our scripture reading for today comes from 1 Samuel, chapter 18, verse 6 through 16.

After David came back from killing the Philistine, and as the troops returned home, women from all of Israel’s towns came out to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with tambourines, rejoicing, and musical instruments. The women sang in celebration:

“Saul has killed his thousands,
but David has killed his tens of thousands!”

Saul burned with anger. This song annoyed him. “They’ve credited David with tens of thousands,” he said, “but only credit me with thousands. What’s next for him—the kingdom itself?” So Saul kept a close eye on David from that point on.

The next day an evil spirit from God came over Saul, and he acted like he was in a prophetic frenzy in his house. So David played the lyre as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand, and he threw it, thinking, I’ll pin David to the wall. But David escaped from him two different times.

Saul was afraid of David because the Lord was with David but no longer with Saul. So Saul removed David from his service, placing him in command of a unit of one thousand men. David led the men out to war and back. David was successful in everything he did because the Lord was with him. Saul saw that he was very successful, and he was afraid of him. Everyone in Israel and Judah loved David because he led them out in war and back again. (1 Samuel 18:6-16 CEB)

As we continue in our series on the Seven Deadly Sins, we come to envy, and I’ve been thinking a lot about what to say about envy. One of the first things that I really had to really

straighten out for myself was really figuring out “What is envy and what’s not?” and “What’s healthy, and what’s not?” Envy is a lot like greed and that wanting something and that envy has a distinct *want* to it and wanting what someone else has. The interesting thing about envy is that you don’t have to want it for yourself. Envy can lead you to simply want them to not have it anymore. I started thinking about “What does that make envy itself?” And I started thinking that we often hear about envy when we think about being jealous of someone else. I think that jealousy is an indicator of when envy starts to go wrong. The thing is, I can look up to somebody and I can want to be like them. I can think of some mentors that I look up to and I can say that I am envious of the way that they preach. Now, I know that they have about forty more years of experience than I do but it’d be nice to be able to do what they do. The thing is that there’s nothing wrong with that in itself, but envy has a way of creeping in and making things a little bit worse as we go. Because it’s one thing if I simply want to like my mentors, it’s another if I want them to either be like me or I don’t want them to have their gift at all. It could be that I want them to be on my level, even if that means they have to come down a few notches. It may not even mean that I will be able to do what they do, I just don’t want them to do what they can do anymore.

We like to think about envy as something that happens to those who have a lot, but the scripture today really gives us an idea that anybody can be envious. Here is Saul, the King, envious of his servant, David. When we think about a king, we can’t really think very easily about a king being envious of anybody, they have power, they have control, they can get whatever they want. But Saul wants something that he can’t get. At least, not with the way he’s doing things. He wants the respect that David commands. He wants the respect that David has earned in doing the right thing. Now, the thing is, it’s one thing if Saul were to simply look at David and go, “I wish I was respected like that, and maybe I need to do some of the things David is doing so people will respect me the way they respect him.” Instead, envy gets the best of him and instead of going, “How can I be better?” He goes, “How can I make it so the people won’t like David anymore?” And the solution is to remove David. He tries to kill him, and that fails, so he puts him in charge of troops and sends him out to the front and *that* fails. He tried to get rid of him because if there is no David, then there’s nobody for the people to celebrate

except for the king. And then, it won't matter if David had tens of thousands because nobody will sing about them because they'll just sing about the king, who is still alive.

And this got me thinking about something that we often miss when we think about envy. We often think about envy simply as that wanting what someone else has and we often think about, "If the poor want what the rich have, then they're just envious." But we don't often think about what the cost is of that success. We don't look at the history of how we got to where we are. We don't think about whether or not it's right that somebody has what they have. Too often, we think, "Oh, well if somebody is poor and they're envious of somebody who is rich, they're just jealous of their wealth and they just wanna take it for themselves." Now sometimes, we ignore the justice side of things. Not everyone who wants someone to pay their fair share is envious. Sometimes, the desire is that they do what's right. Sometimes, it's the desire to get something returned to them. If we don't think about how the rich became rich, and we just think about how the poor want something better, we start thinking they're envious when they're not. This often happens when we see the rich get richer by oppressing the poor. When you're rich, it's easy to buy land that's cheaper than it's worth because you can drive the price down and drive people, who have very little, to want whatever you're willing to give them. Even if it's half of what their land is worth, if you're the only one who's willing to pay anything for it, then *you* get to set a price, whether it's fair or not. We see this in industries we have today. We think about something being so far in the past, that they don't matter anymore, but we have industries that were built on slavery, that were built on child labor, that were bringing in immigrants and using them until they were no more and then just moving on to the next. We think that things just go away. When slavery ended, it did not end all the wealth that was already accumulated. When child labor ended, it didn't end the businesses that had become rich off of child labor. People still have a great deal of power and a great deal of money from oppressing others.

And the question that arose in my head is, "If wanting what is right means they have to give up something, does that make us envious?" For me, the answer is 'no.' The reason is that one of the key things in envy is either wanting to see someone fail or wanting what someone has for yourself. The key part of the justice in that is I want to see people pay their fair share, I

want to see them give back what doesn't belong to them but I want it to go to whoever it belongs to, whoever deserves it. I don't think about wanting it for myself because I don't have a need. I don't have the need, and if somebody wanted to give it to me, I would want to give it to somebody else because I want to see what's right. But too often, we see the rich envy the poor. We see those who are well-to-do envy for what the poor has. Now, the first reaction to this, is to think, "Well, how silly! They have so much, why would they want what the poor have?" But the problem is that it's that little bit more that they could have if only these people weren't in their way. Sometimes we see it in neighborhoods. 'If only we could get rid of these people here, we could this great big building for all of the well-to-do people to enjoy. If only we could take what little these people have.' Sometimes we see it in simple pleasures. Sometimes we see it in charity, that if we give money to somebody, we expect them to do something with it, but if they don't, sometimes we get envious. We get envious that they spend a little bit of money on something for themselves. We're envious of the poor man's pleasure because though he has very little, he didn't do what we wanted him to do, and now we'd like to see him fail because we wanted *our* way to be done. We wanted *our* will to be the will that was followed. And that's one of the biggest problems with envy; we want things to go our way, even if that means hurting somebody else. That evens means wishing somebody else would fail. We would wish harm on someone else, just so we could have things to go the way we wanted them to, because our pride and our greed dictate that we are too proud to admit failure and our greed makes us want success even more. And sometimes, we stop asking, "At what cost?" We simply think about winning. But the question that it comes down to is, "Can you thank God for what you have? Can you truly turn to God if you have made a living by oppressing the poor? Can you turn to God and say, 'God, thank you for giving me these poor people to oppress so that I may have plenty'? Can we truly say, 'Lord, thank you for making my neighbor fail so that I could succeed'?" What good does that bring us? What good does that do to God's kingdom? To pray for the failure of others? To call to be content with what we have been given?

We are called to seek justice but not out of greed, but of wanting of what is right and what is good. If we go after what is right and what is good, then we will do it in our *own* lives. We will give away what we don't need, we will share with all who do not. We will do whatever

we can for whoever we can. We won't think about needing people to do *our* will, that we will simply wish them to do God's will. Instead of making a poor man dance for his supper, we give generously, because we want to be generous people. When we see our brothers and sisters succeed, we wish them all the best. We pray that they, too, will share in those blessings, that their success will lead to success for everyone around them, that their success will be a blessing from the Lord for all of us. That when our brother or sister fails, we comfort them, and we help them, and we share in our own successes that our successes becomes their success. Our blessing becomes their blessing. That we don't envy each other, wanting to tear each other down so that one of us can be standing on top of a heap of people trying to tear us down, but that we build each other up together. Together that we may all stand on sure footing, that we let Christ raise us, that we be raised together. Don't be envious, don't seek to take what someone else has simply because you wish it was yours. If you see somebody that has something you want, think about what you could do that you can have it as well. Be thankful that it's been a part of your life, be thankful for the inspiration to do more, be thankful for the opportunity. Seek justice where it may be found. Leave all that God has given you to help the oppressed, to correct the oppressor, to show them that there is a better way. That then they see your success and say, "How can I have that?" Because of all of the things that I don't have, that joy that comes from the Lord - that might be the one thing they're missing. It's the one thing that cannot be taken away from you. No one can take God's love from you. Nobody may steal it, nobody will trick you out of it, it will always be there. It's what keeps us moving, it's what keeps us going, it's what keeps us sharing, it's what gives us hope when everything seems hopeless. It's what lets us find success when all we can see is failure, because wherever Christ is, love is there. And wherever love is, may we still find justice, and where we find justice, we find hope, and where we find hope, we find Christ. Love your neighbor, celebrate with them, mourn with them, be with them. Be with God's people that we may know God's blessings together. Let us not be greedy and hold pride but let us be generous and humble. That we may not be desired to take what others had but inspire others to share as we share and love as we love. Amen.