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DEFEATING THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

“.....whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all.” Mark 10:43b-44

I once heard a fascinating story about crabs. A young man was walking on a beach when he encountered an older man getting ready to catch crabs. Since he had never seen anyone catch crabs, the young man was fascinated by the process. The crabber tied a chicken neck on a string, dropped it into the water, and tied the other end securely to the pier. He set up a dozen strings in this manner, and an hour or so later started checking them. Sure enough, there were crabs on several of the strings, so the man scooped them up with a net and threw them into a large bucket.

The young fellow watched this routine for a while. It wasn't long until the bucket was half full and claws and crab legs began to appear at the top. So he became alarmed and said to the crabber, “Mister, you better put a top on your bucket or all your crabs are going to escape!” The older, wiser man replied, “Not a chance, sonny. Every time one of them gets to the top, the others will pull him down!”

This story about crabs is a terrific parable about human nature, because each of us has something of a crab in us. As soon as people become too successful, achieve too much, or accumulate too many things, you and I try to pull them down. This dynamic of human nature is called jealousy. And none of us is exempt from it – even the disciples of Jesus had to contend with this, often called the green-eyed monster.

On one occasion, perhaps just a few weeks before Jesus went to the cross, two of his disciples, James and John, asked him for a special favor. They believed he would establish his kingdom on earth in the near future. Perhaps its consummation was only weeks or months away, so they wanted special places of honor when the kingdom dawned. One wanted to sit at Jesus' right hand, the other at his left. When the other disciples heard what James and John had done, they were furious.

This unfortunate incident could have destroyed the tight little band of intimate followers, but in his ingenious way, Jesus dealt with the ambition of James and John, as well as the jealousy of their colleagues. First he asked the brothers if they were prepared to share his suffering; then he explained that only

God could assign places of honor in the kingdom; and finally, he reminded them that whoever would be great in his scheme of things must be the servant of all.

Against the backdrop of this very human incident, you and I can examine our feelings of jealousy and discover some secrets about how to cope with them.

FIRST OF ALL, JEALOUSY INFECTS EVERYBODY. All of us, regardless of how good we try to be, experience feelings of jealousy. These feelings began when we were children and envied our playmates' toys. In the full bloom of adulthood, they keep us from enjoying the achievements of our friends. Jealousy plagues us in the sunset years of life when we secretly wish we enjoyed the health of one friend, or the financial security of another.

Centuries ago, a very pious man decided to go into the desert to live as a hermit. He retreated to a cave and spent every waking hour in prayer and meditation. Soon he became famous for his sanctity, and people from far and near came to see the holy hermit. Some of them wanted to distract the hermit from his meditations, so they tried a variety of methods to divert his attention. Friends from the city came and chattered about the latest gossip, but the hermit refused to pay any attention. Others brought delicious food, but the hermit did not touch a morsel. Beautiful women walked by, but he ignored them.

One day the Devil arrived on the scene and saw what was going on. He told the hermit's tormentors, "You aren't subtle enough – let me show you how it's done." He slipped up to the hermit and whispered in his ear, "Your brother has been elected the Bishop of Alexandria." In an instant, a frown clouded the hermit's face and the spell of sanctity was broken.

Jealousy infects everybody. I am not immune from jealousy, and neither are you. Do you ever see young men or women and wish you were younger? Do you ever think of people who have more money and wish you had their financial resources? Is there someone at your workplace who gets all the breaks, and you feel they are favored? Is there another person who is beautiful, and you are envious because you feel like an ugly duckling? Each of these feelings is a sign that the green-eyed monster is getting hold of you, just as it gets hold of everybody else.

Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychiatry, was convinced that jealousy is a normal emotional condition. He also believed that people who think they have no feelings of jealousy are suppressing resentments and trying to work

them out at an unconscious level. My own experience as a pastor and as a person confirms that judgment – everyone lives with the curse of jealousy hanging over his or her head. Jealousy infects everybody.

SECOND, JEALOUSY STEMS FROM OUR OWN INSECURITIES.

In the movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, there is a scene in which the queen goes to a secret room to consult a magic mirror. She asks it to name the most beautiful woman in the land. The mirror was supposed to reply that the queen was the fairest, but the magic mirror was honest. One day it told the queen that Snow White was the most beautiful woman in the realm, and that was when the trouble began.

The queen flew into a rage and began to plan Snow White's destruction; she could not bear to think that someone might be better than she was. The jealousy of the queen was the crisis around which the story revolved.

Another classic study of jealousy – created by insecurity – is played out in the movie *Amadeus*. Though music historians doubt the accuracy of the story, it is a classic study of the way jealousy can poison a relationship and destroy people. The plot of the story concerns Antonio Salieri's all-consuming jealousy of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Salieri was court composer to the emperor of Austria, but his music was dull and uninspired.

Mozart was a frivolous, irreverent genius; nevertheless, he wrote music that angels could sing. When Mozart appeared on the scene in Vienna, he took the city by storm and threatened Salieri's comfortable, mediocre career. For the first time, the court composer was forced to confront his own inadequacies. Jealousy cankered Salieri's soul and finally drove him to a lunatic asylum; his insecurity in the face of Mozart's genius plagued him until the day he died.

Examine your own feelings. Don't many of your feelings of jealousy stem from your own insecurities? Mine do. Insecurity is a fertile soil in which jealousy can grow. Understanding this dynamic about the green-eyed monster goes a long way toward helping us cope with it.

IT ALSO NEEDS TO BE SAID THAT OUR JEALOUSY IS OUR OWN RESPONSIBILITY. Lance Webb, in *Conquering the Seven Deadly Sins*, tells about an encounter with a woman on a train. She was sophisticated, well dressed, and beautifully made up, but her spirits were drooping. She had been

divorced twice and her third marriage was on the rocks. Unaware that Webb was a clergyman, she shared bits of her philosophy with him.

“Love,” she pondered. “What is love?” And without waiting for an answer, she continued:

“Love is a sickly sentiment that puts a romantic wrapping on a shoddy counterfeit. It remains only for a few days until it is discovered to be a sham....If only someone would discover a pill that people could swallow night and morning that would take out all the nasty temper, the venom of envy and green-eyed jealousy, the harsh unkindness, the selfishness and resentment – well, their love could be real and beautiful. Life would be worth living!”

This disappointed, frustrated woman had an excellent idea – I wish there were a pill all of us could take to help us get rid of our personality flaws, but there is no such remedy. Each of us is responsible for our own inner feelings, broken relationships, and hateful attitudes. As Shakespeare wrote, “Our cures oft within ourselves do lie.”

So, the only way to successfully cope with the green-eyed monster is in the arena of our own hearts. Jealousy cannot be cured from the outside in; it must be cured from the inside out. Were we given all the gifts and graces, advantages and opportunities we admire in others and want for ourselves, within a week we would develop a new list of things to envy. To resolve feelings of jealousy, we must face up to it, analyze it, and then plan a strategy to live beyond it.

Jesus offered an unusual solution when his friends began to vie for favored places in the Kingdom. He did not chastise them or embarrass them – he called them to be servants: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all” (Mark 10:43b-44). **JEALOUSY CAN BE CONQUERED ONLY BY SERVING.**

I stumbled across a fascinating footnote to history that helped me understand what Jesus was driving at when he talked about people searching for greatness but having to take second place instead. Charles Lindberg made the first trans-Atlantic flight from New York to Paris in 1927. Overnight, the brave young aviator became an international celebrity. Within a month after his heroic adventure, Colonel Lindberg received 3,500,000 letters, 100,000 telegrams, and 14,000 packages. He was offered a fortune for the story of his flight, and hundreds of poems were written in his honor. He was decorated by Congress and almost every

country in Europe heaped honors on him. Lindberg remained a romantic figure the rest of his life.

But are you aware that just a few weeks after Lindberg made his historic flight, another American, named Chamberlin, flew across the Atlantic and pushed further east than Paris? Newspapers that bothered to report the story gave it only a few lines on the back page. Mr. Chamberlin had a difficult time persuading the United States government to reimburse even a part of the cost of his flight. He was presented with a few modest decorations by foreign governments, but when he came back to America, he had to pay duty on them.

Insofar as I can determine, Chamberlin never complained. No doubt he must have felt some twinges of jealousy, but he managed to resolve them. He always honored and appreciated Charles Lindberg's trail-blazing flight. Chamberlin was content to live with the knowledge that he too had made a contribution in humankind's effort to conquer the skies, even though he never received adequate recognition.

Perhaps you and I can learn a lesson from this man's experience. Jealousy is a normal human emotion, and none of us can escape it – but each of us can rise above it. The green-eyed monster can be defeated; it is not invincible. But to cope with jealousy, we must be willing to serve and share a part of ourselves with others.

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