

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 21
RCL Lectionary, Year B
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 / Psalm 19:7-14 / James 5:13-20 / Mark 9:38-50
September 27th, 2009
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

The Gospel and the Ouroboros

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Well? What do you think? Today's gospel is one that an undergraduate professor of mine used to reference when we would discuss biblical literalism. He would simply remark that he had yet to meet a fundamentalist walking around missing a hand, foot, or an eye for cause of sin!

So to paraphrase another friend, as Christians, we don't necessarily take scripture literally, but we do for sure take it seriously. And today's gospel is serious. Quite serious, indeed.

Hanging on the wall of my chaplain's home while I was studying music was a painting of an ancient symbol: the Ouroboros. It was an emerald green dragon, vividly detailed, wrapped around in an almost perfect circle, and busy swallowing its own tail. In some mythic depictions, the Ouroboros symbolizes the cycles of life, ongoing renewal, even eternity. But our chaplain's daughter had painted it – beautiful as it was – during a turbulent time in her teenage years. “Jana” had struggled with learning differences, as many artistic personalities do. She had faced the enormous challenge of feeling alone in her perception of the world, in the unique ways her brain processed information, in the way she engaged in relationship that seemed strange to just about everyone else...day after day, week after week, year after lonely year.

And so Jana had titled the great green dragon eating its own tail quite simply. “Envy” she named the painting, that hideously self-consuming emotion. What she must have felt herself many times as she watched her peers forging ahead in learning and fitting in at school while she was left struggling with her teachers and parents over the basics of academics and life. . .She was told by the wider world in ways both subtle and overt that there was something wrong with her...that she simply didn't fit the norm. How could she avoid being jealous of those who seemed able to handle the schoolwork and the social challenges of growing up with ease?

Envy. . .jealousy. . .they are spiritual themes at work in today's gospel, echoing the themes of today's reading from Numbers. In looking at the passage of Mark immediately before today's, we witness the disciples trying to heal an epileptic child – and, much to Jesus' frustration, failing. “Casting out demons” does not seem to be their strong suit at this point, so when John approaches Jesus to report that there are unknown people outside the circle of disciples casting out demons in Jesus' name, we can well imagine John's jealousy. He's nursing envy, just as his spiritual ancestor, Joshua, did when Eldad and Medad – outside the seventy elders – began prophesying amongst the Israelites. As a solution to his jealous feelings, John wants Jesus to approve the condemnation of these outsiders who are so much more successful, it seems, at the spiritual arts, than the disciples themselves.

Betsy and I went to clergy conference this week. Really, it's not as bad as I've heard as it once was a number of years ago, when senior clergy were known for hosing down the decks with testosterone. We're a much more collegial group now. But clergy can still be notoriously competitive – and spiritual competition can produce one of the worst sorts of envy. We are, after all, servants of the servants of God in an unusual diocese where there are many more clergy – priests in particular – than ecclesiastical positions. My old joke – probably wearing a bit thin these days of budget and staffing cuts – is if you shake a tree in the Diocese of California, a dozen priests will fall out. The lesson is that our part of the Christian world can easily turn into a hotbed of clerical jealousies. If we're not envious of each other having paid positions, we lead our communities to be jealous of the neighboring parish that has more money, a larger staff, more members, a nicer facility. . . the list of envies goes on and on, looping endlessly like the Ouroboros.

We're especially prone in established communities like this one to be envious of the new and the successful. How much of our "mainline church" disdain for our evangelical sisters and brothers is borne of jealousy, I wonder? How many ways do we subtly but "officially" keep out the unauthorized, the innovative, the surprising and Spirit-filled? And how do we long-time Christians often judge the simplicity, zeal, and excitement of a fresh faith? "Oh," we sometimes say to ourselves, "*She'll get over it.*"

Fortunately, as I said, this year's Clergy Conference wasn't so bad in this regard. But I watched myself closely and noticed how easily I still fell into the trap of mentally monitoring who was getting the most attention from the Bishop, who was getting the most "floor time" in our plenaries, who was getting the public compliments and kudos. How sorely I was tempted to work the social hour to score points, tell folk how well things are going at Church of Our Saviour, get my foot in the door on somebody's "good boy" list, as though anyone actually keeps that list anymore. The old performer in me, the old competitive spirit, is constantly on the lookout for such things. Envy is an insidious beast, isn't it? And to live in envy for any length of time at all is to be like the dragon eating its own tail, the absorbing bitterness of self-consumption.

Most if not all of you probably know exactly what I mean. We can easily spend an inordinate amount of time turning green as we watch peers advance ahead of us in rank or position, in compensation, in station, whether societal or vocational. We can too easily end up not only chasing, but gobbling up our own tails. This is why, year after year, on Ash Wednesday we confess as a community before God, "our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves."

Envy appears in a number of vice lists in the earliest Christian writings. And it is a mainstay in the old classical list of the seven deadly sins. It was obviously a problem for our spiritual ancestors as much as it can be for us. So Jesus follows Moses in making it clear to his followers then and now that there's little time and even less room for it in God's promised reign.

Gehenna, the early Christian word that we translate today in this reading as "hell" was derived from Hebrew "Ge Hinnom," literally the Valley of Hinnom. In Jesus' day, not only did it carry weighty images of a nasty afterlife, it was more literally the geographical location for the Jerusalem's garbage dump. So when Jesus follows his reprimand of John's jealousy with this teaching about causes to sin, he's warning us all about the dangers of envy and the need to cut it away as quickly as possible. The afterlife aside, envy – as so many of us know from experience – can land us quickly in the spiritual dumps. God in Christ knows that envy is as

paralyzing to our hearts and spirits as it is toxic to our communities and our relationships. So he utilizes the most vivid and shocking language possible to drive the point home.

But clearly we don't cut off limbs or pluck out eyes to overcome envy. If we did, we would have no hands to serve, no feet to walk, and we would only lend new meaning to the "blind leading the blind!" The good news is that to seek out a Christian remedy for envy, we need turn no further than today's reading from James – an oft-neglected letter of the early Christian writings. James got a bad wrap dating all the way back to Martin Luther in the sixteenth century, but our spending time with James over the past several weeks has reminded me of the letter's deep and often pithy truths for Christian souls. The one today is simply about the virtue of prayer. Envious of someone? James might suggest we pray for him. Does the envy point out a need we have? James suggests we might pray for the strength and guidance to address that need in ourselves. The path away from envy of another is to rebuild the relationship, to re-forged the bonds of love between us, to call out the deep truths of need and desire in our own hearts and name them and seek God's transformation and fulfillment of those needs. The great gift in praying in response to envy is that we might discover who we truly are becoming – who God ultimately wants us to be.

The remedy for envy amongst the clergy in the Diocese of California was to form colleague groups and trainings for new clergy that brought us together in conversation, prayer, and mutual support from the word "go." The more recent initiative to bring parishes and other diocesan and secular institutions into common mission for those most in need – what we're calling Area Ministry – marks the next step in the process of healing our communal envy. The only thing we clergy have to remember is that we might not be leading all of the common mission ahead of us. Some of you might be, instead! And some might be who are not even in the room of the institutional Church at this point, just like those unknowns in the gospel, healing in Jesus' name; like those outside the seventy prophesying in the camp of the Israelites.

Jana, by the way, went on to become a wonderful artist. She allowed God to turn her unique perspective on the world, her being different from so many of her peers, into a gift. Instead of envying those who fit in, she learned to live more fully into her unique way of being. This meant she could bring enrichment to the lives of countless others through her art. She could have sat in her room, consuming herself in her jealousy. Instead, she cast the demon out and onto the canvas as a reminder – now holy in my memory – of Jesus' teaching to avoid the spiritual trap of envy. Now God has painted Jana's life anew, as God promises to paint all of us anew with the humble gifts of bread broken and a shared cup – with the gift of grace that is devoid of envy and instead filled with love abundant, and overflowing to eternal life.