

TEXT: Matthew 20:1-16
THEME: God is generous
SUBJECT: Envy
TITLE: The Evil Eye

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
20 September 2020
Messiah Moravian
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It seems the “Evil Eye” has been around as long as human beings. It can be traced to the Sumerians of the Euphrates Valley, though historians have found cave drawings up to 10,000 years old in Spain and amulets from 3,300 BCE Syria that they believe were used to ward off the evil eye.

A belief in the evil eye is found in almost every country in the world and in every religion, including Judaism, Islam, Hindu, Buddhism and Christianity. Evil eye charms can be found everywhere from street vendors in Greece to department stores like Bloomingdales, which has an entire evil eye jewelry collection.

Why are we talking about the evil eye? Because it appears in Matthew 20:15. The NRSV translation “cleans up” the Greek text: “Are you envious because I am generous?” The Greek reads, “Is your eye evil because I am generous?” The landowner wants to know, “Are you giving me the evil eye because I am generous?”

The standard metaphor of the evil eye became in the biblical-Jewish tradition a standing metaphor for greed or envy. Human nature, according to the Greeks, is naturally envious. Socrates called envy the ulcer of the soul. The Greeks did not think envy could be suppressed. Whatever human nature might be, they concluded, envy was surely part of it.

In the parable Jesus tells, the laborers who worked twelve hours received the same pay as the laborers who worked only one hour. The laborers who worked twelve hours received exactly what they agreed to: a daily wage, enough money to support one’s family for the day. When the landowner pays each subsequent group of laborers, including those who only worked one hour, the same wage, he ensures all worker’s families will have their daily bread.

Who cannot empathize with those who began work at 6:00 am? They are not happy! “It isn’t fair!” I still see and hear my friend’s five-year-old daughter yell at her dad, “It isn’t fair.” His immediate response was, “Fair is for fairy tales.” I was envious of his spontaneity and even more envious of how quickly he quieted his daughter’s complaint. I was never that quick nor that successful.

“It isn’t fair!” The Bible, the book we hold so high and holy, has a very different understanding than we do of what is fair. What is fair is not getting what you “deserve” or what you have “earned.” Imagine how well we would fair in the eyes of God if this were true. The Bible’s view of what is fair is getting what is needed to sustain life.

What is the injustice suffered by those who labored all day? They tell us explicitly: “You *made them equal* to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

YOU MADE THEM EQUAL to US! I don’t imagine this was said in an even tone. They are not our equals, but you have **MADE THEM EQUAL**. Envy is more strongly felt between near equals than between those widely separated in fortune. It doesn’t really seem to make much sense to envy the Queen of England. Those who bore the burden of the day do not envy the landowner, they envy the other day laborers.

Envy is a feeling of discontent and ill will because of another person’s advantages or possessions. Envy forms when we believe the other person’s advantage or possession diminishes or brings disgrace on us. YOU have demeaned us and our hard work by giving them the same pay you gave us!

The first recorded case of envy is that of Cain killing his brother Abel. When God found Abel’s offering to him of the first of his flock of sheep acceptable and Cain’s offering of the fruit of the ground less acceptable (carnivore’s prejudice?), it was too much for Cain, the older brother, to bear. Cain “rose up against Abel and slew him.” Cain acted out his envy. Not, as he and so many of the envious that have followed him have long since learned, a very smart thing to do.

Why does he have it and I don’t? That is the chief, perhaps the only, question, for the envious, who have a deeper, if only because more self-centered, sense of injustice than others. They feel a fundamental unfairness, lashed up with an abiding sense of grudgingness, in the disposition of any good in which they are not the most favored recipients. Why should the next fellow have the more capacious house, beautiful wife, better job, sweeter life than I? The answer is clear: he, the S.O.B., should not.

Envy—setting aside for the moment that it is one of the seven deadly sins—is very poor mental hygiene. Envy is like cataracts: it dims one’s vision of oneself and of the people one envies. 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. (Joseph Epstein, *Envy*, 2003.)

Injustice or generosity? The laborers who worked 12 hours received exactly what they agreed to. Those who worked 9 hours were promised “whatever is right.” Those who worked 6 hours or 3 hours were promised the same: “whatever is right.” When the land owner found others standing around “idle all day” and asked “Why?” they responded, “Because no one has hired us.” The landowner said, “You also go into the vineyard.” He didn’t promise them anything and they didn’t negotiate any wage.

“Whatever is right” in Jesus view of the world is whatever it takes to sustain life, to create the conditions in which life can flourish. No matter the hour they began, the hours they worked, each received enough to feed his family for the day. Injustice or generosity?

“**YOU MADE *THEM EQUAL* to US!** Was Jesus a Marxists? A socialists? He certainly wasn’t a capitalist. Upon hearing this gospel lesson read in church, a businessman declared to me on his way out the door: “If the landowner acted like that, he would have no workers the next day!”

Jesus asks, “Is your eye evil because I am generous?” The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who made all laborers equal. The kingdom of heaven is not pie is the sky after you die religion. The *kingdom* of heaven is Jesus’ vision of the social order. In the social order Jesus lived and died for, everyone has what is needed to live fully, freely, without fear. No one gets to horde resources while others go hungry. The cross is the consequence of such a radical view of life together.

PRAYER: St Ephraim of Syria, d. 373. He served as a teacher of Christians and counselor to bishops in and around Nisibis (now in Turkey). Translated by Scott Cairns.

If you were to ask *How may I acquire
God’s benevolence?* try this: Bring Him
gold and silver through the needy.
If you’re short on cash, bring Him
faith and love and temperance,
bring Him calm, and kindness, most
of all a humble heart. Take great care
not to judge—not anyone, protect
your eyes from vanity, keep your hand
from doing wrong, and keep
your foot from unlikely paths.
And while you’re at it: Comfort the countless
frightened, console all who suffer.
At the very least, *get off their backs.*
Lift the cup to those who thirst, and break
a little bread to feed the hungry.
You know all this already; now do it.