

Lingering Envy

[John 21:20-23](#)

Lingering in the Shadows of Easter

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Sunday, May 8, 2005

Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

Teach us now, loving God, the measure of our days. Teach us now, forgiving Christ, the release of our sin. Teach us now, empowering spirit, the freedom to do the things, the good that you called us to do as we hear your word to us through Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

We have been looking at the John gospel text that followed the resurrection of Jesus, for John has a number of lingering human attributes that continue to haunt even the disciples and apostles after Jesus has been raised from the dead. It is a form of good news for us, because we can see our own vulnerable humanity in their mistakes as they live out the post-resurrection life of Jesus. We can say, "There we go as well." Today we look at the relationship that Peter has with the disciple whom Jesus loved, and that continuing competitiveness and rivalry that existed between the two of them. Sibling rivalry is something that children identify and practice at a young age. Hearing some prayers from young children, little Joyce said, "Dear God, thank you for the baby brother that you sent me, but what I asked for was a puppy. I never asked for anything before. You can look that up." Little Larry said, "Dear God, maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. It works better for us. It works okay with my brother and I, that we do."

Children, as you know, imitate parents, and the development of practices and patterns of life for better or for worse. A Mom was going to a local preschool where she wanted to pick up her four-year-old son. She decided to ask the teacher that day about how he was doing in the classroom. Smiling, the teacher commented on how bright and attentive the boy was, that they were very delighted to have him in the classroom. He was a source of energy for the entire group of children. The mother decided to stay and watch her son and his behavior in the class for a little while. She watched as Tony, with the other boys and girls, played in a miniature kitchen. And suddenly Tony stepped up to the toy refrigerator and flung open the door and exclaimed at the top of his lungs, "Hey, anybody want a beer?" Children will imitate us; they will imitate our patterns, our loyalties, our envy.

A single parent of a teenage son, who was in financial difficulty and lived in overt poverty, was in an old mobile home with all sorts of problems. Her son's friend, who lived in a beautiful home not too far away, ran away from home for a few days and she could not understand it. "Why did he do that? He has everything he could possibly want." So she went to her son and said, "Why is it that Jimmy went away?" And the son said thoughtfully, "Well, Mom, it's like this. Jimmy has a lot of environment, but not much love. I have a lot of love, but not much environment."

It is easy to envy other people for the wrong things. Envy, coveting, and jealousy are human patterns that we are tempted to get into when we believe that the other person has something that we need or want. There is something of who they are, of what they do, and what they desire to accomplish that may catch us in our own imagination and move us to envy. Envy is, at the same time, a rejection of one's own giftedness. It is a belief that the other person has the best that God has to give, and somehow God left me out. It is a rejection of the fact that God has made every one of us different, with different possibilities, different gifts, different senses of destiny, and different patterns of life.

There are many kinds of envy that we enter into. There's envy of personal attributes of how we look. I have a brother who was a state champion gymnast in high school and, needless to say, I do not look like him. There were moments I envied him because, not only was he a great physical being, he was also good-looking and tended to attract all of the women, and was also the most brilliant in the family as a physicist. I often asked God why it was that he got all of the good stuff in the family. But over the years I've come to realize that there are many other good attributes for myself and for the rest of us. Part of growing up is to

realize that we no longer have to envy what the other person has, because we're coming to grips with what God has given to us.

Other things that we envy are status, success, the many kinds of relationships and connections. This is a city of connections, and who knows whom. We may envy the fact that some have better connections than we do. We may envy the ancestry and heritage that some people enjoy, even their inheritance. "Oh, Lord, I wish I had that kind of money." We may envy the talent of others. When I played basketball, I envied people who could jump. There were some who could jump four feet directly up into the air. I envied those people. Hard work, motivation, and ambition are traits we may envy in others, because we just don't have the energy and drive to do what they do.

Peter and John (John, who was called the disciple whom Jesus loved) seemed to have an ongoing competitive quality with each other. My sense is that Peter was more in competition with John than John was with Peter. We see this played out even at the end of the gospel where Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me." And Peter as he immediately followed Jesus, turned around to look at John and say, "Well, what about him? What should he do?" One gets the distinct viewpoint that Peter was preoccupied with John's qualities of life; that he wanted, in many ways, to be like John. Nowhere else in the gospel do we find that Peter is called the disciple whom Jesus loved. In the text before this we see that Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" But not once do we hear the words that Jesus overtly loved Peter. Now we know to the depths of our being, instinctually, that Jesus must have loved Peter. But the writer of the gospel repeats five times that this special disciple was the disciple that Jesus loved; and his name was John.

Peter seemed to have a desire to be like John in some ways. John was probably Jesus' favorite. How do we handle that? Should Jesus have favorites? Should family members have favorites? Peter perceived that John was a favorite. It never says that for sure, but his perception was his reality. Peter was probably more like the Alpha Male. He would take charge, he would take initiative, he would move out and speak out as quickly as he thought or felt. He would talk, he would act, he would lead—a man's kind of man.

John, however, was seen as the man who leaned up against Jesus. He was quieter, he was more reflective, he tended to spend a lot of time with Jesus very personally. There is not very much said about John's initiative. In fact, John is the one who hangs out with the women, even to the point of the cross, probably the only man left of the disciples at the cross when Jesus says to John, "Behold your mother," and reconnects the son and the mother at that moment in time. John was the kind of man who would hang back, he would build close relationships, he would think, reflect, and write. He would not be the one who would lay down his life in an upside down crucifixion like Peter. But he would be the one who would write, and write, and write some of the most magnificent theology in history. We often attribute the book of Revelation as the most poignant and intense poetry regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter, evidently, was quite preoccupied with John's gifts.

There are moments in my life when I have envied others. There was a time when I was really interested in a young woman in high school whose name was Maxine. Maxine and I were friends, but she did not like me as a boyfriend. That was a concern to me, particularly when I found out that Richard Vance was her romantic interest. I remember his whole name very well. For a couple of weeks, I thought of ways in which I could either undermine or help him. Finally, in the battle over what I should do, I decided to help him, and told him that it might be good if he would consider inviting Maxine to the senior prom. He did so, and they went together. I had to overcome my moment of envy, because I would rather have been with her myself.

Envy is a temptation to control the other person's life. "Lord, you've told me about me and how I'm going to die," and Peter turned and asked, "What about John? What kind of life or death is he going to have?" And Jesus said, "What is that to you, Peter? What difference does that make? Look out for where you are going and what you are about; don't worry about John." The temptation for Peter was wanting to know more than he should, to want to be more than he was. We linger in envy when we turn away from our primary relationship with God, turn away from what God has gifted us to do, and who he has made us to be. We turn toward another and say, "What about him, Lord? What about her and her giftedness? Why haven't you given me that?" We want to have what we don't have. It goes all the way back to the story of Cain and Abel, where Cain realizes that Abel has a blessing from God that Cain will never get. And rather

than face himself, and face his own limitations and possibilities, Cain kills his brother, Abel.

Sometimes, in my past, I have envied other Presbyterian pastors. I admit that I have had points of envy for Earl Palmer, who has preached in this pulpit, because he is a wonderful teacher and has a tremendous ability to connect history with biblical text. I have envied my mentor, Gary Demarest, who preached in this pulpit awhile back for my installation, because of his tremendous scholarship and historical ability to interweave the gospel and to make theological points in clear ways. I have envied Tom Tewell, who has preached in this pulpit, because Tom seems to have this wonderful attribute of appealing to almost everybody at every level and having a connection to them that brightens the spirit. I've envied Craig Barnes for his poetry, his literary ability, and his ability to literally memorize sermons verbatim and repeat them exactly the same way at each service. I'll probably never be able to do that. If I do that, you'll know it's a miracle day. But what God says to me is, "Look out for yourself, Gareth. Pay attention to your own gifts. There are gifts that you have that you can place out there in front of people that are also important. Don't worry about the others."

We linger in envy when we ask about others, and we are interested in conversations about them. We focus on them, and we almost play out the National Enquirer in which "inquiring people want to know." We become a society preoccupied with the lives of other people and their beauty, their mistakes, their flaws -- rather than paying attention to ourselves. We have become a society interested in celebrity status through television. That's a form of envy: believing that we can't possibly look as good or practice a kind of life that reaches that place of esteem.

We linger in envy when we talk about others. You notice that one of the things that happens about John here is a rumor that spreads that John is going to live forever. John is going to live until Jesus comes back again. Now, who spread that rumor? The only person who knew that that conversation had taken place was probably Peter. Peter, the one who liked to talk before he thought, was probably the source of the rumor. The gospel doesn't say that, but you can read between the lines, and you can think that Peter may have been so preoccupied with John that he just couldn't be quiet about it. He had to keep talking, saying perhaps, "Well, John is not going to die. Jesus said he's going to live." We are tempted to spread rumors, to fixate, to obsess on other people, to treat them with celebrity status. At the same time, we denigrate ourselves as if we don't count. And what God is saying to us as clearly as God can in the gospel is: "You count. Others don't count any more than you do. The pastor doesn't count any more than you do." We each have different gifts, different calls, and different abilities. We each count before the presence of God.

Jesus gives sharp critique to this. The last word toward Peter in the gospel is a word of criticism. That's how it ends. Peter doesn't look very good in the end. And the reason why is that Jesus does not want to leave Peter with the sense that he can keep practicing that kind of lifestyle and be a good leader of people toward the living God. "Peter, look out for yourself." And so there are some patterns here that Jesus raises that are patterns that will redeem us in spite of our envy. One that is clear, is to focus on Jesus and look ahead; don't turn around and look behind or to the side to see who else is going and what their attributes are. Stay focused on God and look out for yourself.

Take responsibility for your own life. Jesus loves you. Yes, Jesus may love the other, and give some others better or different kinds of gifts, but God has given you unique gifts as well. Look out for yourself. Listen and watch and reflect. Don't do all the talking, don't be so brash and out in front of people before you know what you're doing. Take some time to step back and ask the questions and reflect, as John does. Lean in close to Jesus.

I think one of the things that bothered Peter was that John would be able to lean in so close to Jesus and have Jesus' ear, to the point that even at the Last Supper when Jesus was saying he would be betrayed, Peter looks to John, the one that Jesus loved, and says, "John, why don't you ask Jesus who he is talking about? You're close to Jesus. Find out."

Be yourself, and use your giftedness. Each of us is different. Peter is not John. Peter becomes the spokesperson for the gospel in the Day of Pentecost. John disappears into the quiet woodwork in history. John becomes the writer and theologian; Peter becomes the one who literally leads the church. Be yourself and use your gifts. Put your future in God's hands, whatever the future may hold. Some here may live the

next two weeks, and some here may live the next fifty years. Look out for your own life. God has measured your days and given you an opportunity to live. Do the best that God has given you to do. Don't try to live the other person's life. Discern the difference between admiration and envy, for as we grow and mature, we can admire how God has gifted other people differently from us.

Envy still holds onto the hope that God will undermine that person and build me up in place of them. That's one of the reasons I believe that coveting is the tenth commandment. Don't covet. It will kill you in the long run. It will kill the people in your life in the long run. I never heard the words, as far as I can remember, from either my mother or my father, that we should envy other people and their lives. Other people had better homes, more money, perceived that they were of more elegance and sophistication, but I never once heard my parents denigrate our family in hopes of being their family. Parents, you give your children one of the greatest gifts if you send a message that they count, and you count, and they do not have to be another child—even their brother or their sister—they can be themselves.

The conclusion is simply this: God gives Peter and John different gifts, different destinies, different ways of behaving and styles of personality, and they're both good. But Peter gives in to the temptation to envy John. And what Jesus is clearly saying to us at the end of the gospel is this: "You don't have to live that way. You don't have to live on the goodness or benefits of another human being, or the hopes that you'll become like them. You can live in the integrity of the person God has created you to be." And you can live into the future and maturity of becoming more like the kind of person that Jesus is by following Jesus into the future. The gospel is clear. You are loved by God, you are gifted by God, you are unique. Be yourself, and let Jesus make the most of your life as you follow him. Amen.