

This is a story of jealousy and envy. Envy is the desire to have something someone else has, or I imagine they have. And jealousy is being afraid of losing what I already have. To our spirits, these can be deadly.

Listen:

Luke 4:21-30

<sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." <sup>22</sup>All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" <sup>23</sup>He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" <sup>24</sup>And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. <sup>25</sup>But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; <sup>26</sup>yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. <sup>27</sup>There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup>When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. <sup>29</sup>They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. <sup>30</sup>But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The passage begins where last week's passage left off. Jesus reads the Scriptures declaring:

<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He then audaciously declares these Scriptures are fulfilled in your hearing. He is indicating that in him, the Scriptures come alive. The response of those gathered at the synagogue is, "Wow! Great message!" The treasurer thought of the increased budget; the CE person dreamed of an increased Sabbath School. Then, attendance would boom, and we would really be on the map of being what we hoped to be.

Then they started the soul-killing act of comparison.

What's wrong with these people? They are jealous and envious. They begin to measure themselves against other locales where Jesus had been. Then it dawned on them, "Wait just a

minute! He did miracles everywhere else, but not here. All he did was talk here.” So they compared themselves to others with dreadful results for them. Then the assembled began murmuring, “We know this guy. He came from here; we know his parents, and we knew him way back when. Why hasn't he done anything spectacular here if he is so special? His message was good, but he doesn't seem to live up to all the hype. We thought there would be more to him.”

And the shoulders of the treasurer slumped, those who hoped for a booming church school frowned, and others who knew the future no longer looked so bright, just sighed. Just words, no miracles, no signs. He is just like those annoying prophets or itinerant preachers building us up just to let us down. And they began to get jealous and angry. Envy and rage appeared.

So they said to him, “If you are all that, why don't you do here what you've done elsewhere? We want what they've got. They had miracles; we want miracles. Show us your stuff. You're no big deal. You are just the kid we knew when you were little.”

Jesus had spoken as an advocate for the poor, the needy, the traumatized, and the depressed, many of whom lived in Nazareth and were present at the synagogue. He was saying to them, “You are not forgotten by God. You are of great importance to God.” He was giving them what he thought they needed most, the assurance of God's compassion. He reminded the folks at Nazareth that they mattered to God, That's all good, but then he had to go and tell them, “The ones you don't think matter are valued and treasured by God. Just like you.” They missed his message of hope because of jealousy and envy.

They were jealous and filled with envy, for they wanted what Capernaum had gotten. They wanted more than words. They wanted a miracle. After all, Jesus performed miracles elsewhere. But Jesus didn't just produce miracles on demand. He met the needs of people, not always their wants. So, obviously, it was not a miracle he thought they needed. They needed to be reminded they mattered to God, but so did those they might look down upon. The foreigner, the helpless, and the stranger all matter.

But they didn't want to hear that. The people at the synagogue wanted miracles to prove who Jesus was. The hometown people set up an “us vs. them” the situation. “We want what they had. Miracles!” Later we will see Jesus flatly refuse a miracle when the Pharisees and Sadducees demand one. He refused and told them to repent.

Nevertheless, the people of Nazereth persisted, “It's not fair to include them and not us.” They did not understand that the inclusion of some did not mean the exclusion of others; a lesson we still need to learn. They sounded like little children. “You love him more than you love me.”

I can remember when my daughter, Amanda, used to say that about her brother. “You love him more than me!” And I would reply, “You're right, we do.” And she would come right back with, “No, you don't!” But, unlike the people in Nazareth, she got it.

They didn't get it. There is enough love to go around to meet our needs. Enough God for everyone, a profound truth we need to remember. Jesus has enough love for everyone. Fear says we can't include those people. But Jesus lets us know, including some does not mean it is necessary to exclude others.

Jesus discovered what we know, sometimes it is hard to be who you are amongst people who think they know you. They think they know everything about you.

Now Jesus gets in their face a bit to remind them what they already know.

He tells two challenging stories about when foreigners were the recipients of God's blessings provided by Elijah and Elisha.

I think he told them the stories of the two great prophets to remind them that sometimes, as hard as it is to accept, God's blessings go to other people in ways that don't seem fair to us. It's just not fair. But God is not fair. That's a hard truth. But folks want God to be fair when they want something someone else has. Rather than fair, God is generous, forgiving, and merciful. Psalm 103 puts the lack of fairness from God this way:

<sup>8</sup>The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

<sup>9</sup>He will not always accuse,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.

<sup>10</sup>He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

They knew this, but still, it didn't feel right to the people of Nazareth. Finally, their emotions got the best of them. They got so angry they tried to do away with Jesus. His prophetic words that had brought them joy now exposed deep-seated jealousy and envy expressed as rage and anger.

There are times when we all need to hear the words of judgment that expose our souls. It may be painful, but sometimes it must be done for healing to occur, especially if we start acting like the people of Nazareth.

As I reflected on this passage, I wondered what prophetic words Jesus had given me. As he spoke to Nazareth, how might I have words that would be appropriate for our community? How could I declare with the same force and passion a timely prophetic message?

I'll admit I found this task daunting. What could I say to provoke the same response?

While pondering that, it dawned on me, "Wow! Just how arrogant can I get?" Then Jesus had a few choice things to say to me. First, "If you are without sin, throw the first stone (John 8:7.)" And then he said, "You may be the preacher/pastor, but don't try to take the splinter out of your neighbor's eye before removing the log from your own (Luke 6:42.)"

I may be called by you to stand in the pulpit and declare God's word. But I am not Jesus. On the contrary, I am one of his flock, and as such, I stand with you. Therefore, when I speak any words of judgment, I need to remember that they apply first and foremost to me.

One of the prophetic words I hear Jesus speaking to me is to stop being so jealous. Let go of envy.

Do you remember the story of Lyle the Crocodile and the birthday party? It's a great children's book. You see, the Primms had a crocodile living with them, Lyle the Crocodile. One day Joshua Primm was having a birthday party, and Lyle got jealous, mean green jealous. He was upset that he didn't have a birthday party, cake, or presents. It put him in a dreadful mood. He sulked, and people noticed but were not sure why. It was so unlike Lyle.

Later Lyle stepped through Joshua's toy drum, and he wasn't sure if he was on purpose or not. So he moped, and the Primms thought he was sick. But he was infected with mean green jealousy. The same kind that infects me too.

The Primms were sure he was very ill. Though unintentionally, Mrs. Primm contacted the wrong doctor. Instead of an animal hospital, he ended up spending the night in a regular hospital for his mysterious ailment.

Later, Lyle got up and proceeded to assist the other patients. Doing for others had made him feel good and forget his envy and jealousy. Lyle especially enjoyed being with the children. Then Lyle was sent home by the doctor, being declared healthy. He had brought such happiness they invited him to come again, but only for a visit.

Later Ms. Primm told him they had a surprise for him. It was three years ago they found him and surprise there was going to be a party. Lyle's party.

Like Lyle, it is so easy for me to be infected with mean green jealousy and envy. I can too quickly disparage the mega-churches that preach a prosperity gospel that basically declares wealth is a sign of God's blessing. Those churches are growing by leaps and bounds and people flock to them. And despite what pastors say, many of us were trained to believe that the size of our church matters. Our self-esteem is sometimes vested there. As Carey Nieuhof says, our obsession with numbers messes with our soul and turns people into objects. So

while my disparaging remarks about those churches may be prophetic, they are tinged with more than a little bit of jealousy and envy. I need to stop putting them down for my soul's sake.

Maybe after hearing God's prophetic word for me, brought by Jesus and Lyle the Crocodile, then, I can begin to let go of my jealousy and envy, celebrate my blessings and wish the best for others.

So there is a message here for me. If I can let go of my mean green jealousy by serving others, I can prepare myself for the party of God's kingdom right where I am.

*And my faith tells me I am right where I should be. For I do love you deeply and thank God, I am here. I sincerely believe that God has prepared me to be with you for all my ministry. But, sometimes, I can't help being just a tad jealous and envious of others. Ok, more than a tad.*

I can learn not to be jealous of what others have or might get and stop worrying that there won't be enough for me or a party for me. As Cheryl Crow sings "It's not having what you want; it's wanting what you got."

Instead of being jealous and envious, maybe I can begin to, in the words of the old hymn:

Count your blessings, name them one by one;  
Count your blessings, see what God hath done;  
Count your blessings, name them one by one;  
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.

And there is the prophetic message for me and maybe for all of us.