

“Envy Will Kill Ya”

For a moment let us flashback to the early 1980s. One of the heartthrobs of that era was an actor who played Dr. Noah Drake on the soap opera *General Hospital*. Does anyone know who I am talking about? Here is another hint, he was also a pop star who had a hit with the song “Jessie’s Girl.” His name was Rick Springfield.

I do not want to focus on him so much as that song “Jessie’s Girl.”¹ It is about a guy whose best friend is a fellow named Jessie. Jessie has a new girlfriend and the singer of the song says, “You know, I wish that I had, Jessie’s girl. I wish that I had Jessie’s girl. Where can I find a woman like that?” While he asks the question “where can I find a woman like that?” What he really wants to do is take her from him. He wants that particular girl for his own.

In the language of the Church this emotion is one of the Seven Deadly Sins—specifically envy. I think there are two kinds of envy. What the Dutch language calls “benign envy” and “malicious envy.” Benign envy can create the desire to emulate someone, or motivate us to improve our lot. It can also create positive thoughts or admiration for another person. We wish we had something similar but we do not need to have that specific thing. Therefore, we can admire it without needing to possess it.

Malicious envy, on the other hand, leads us to want to hurt another even if it means hurting ourselves. The singer wants his best friend’s girlfriend. Someone else wants your car, or house, or job even if it means you have to lose it. Malicious envy involves someone having to lose what they have in order for us to be happy. Think of the pain that is caused by the selling off of Joseph and the guilt the brothers will realize later in the story.

Speaking of which, in today’s passage from Genesis we continue to follow the patriarchal and matriarchal saga that began with Abraham and Sarah, continued with Isaac and Rebecca, then Jacob, Leah and Rachel. We did not get a chance to discuss how Jacob dealt with his predicament of being married to the wrong sister and how he was then able to marry the one he loved. Nor did we get to discuss how he then was able to trick his father-in-law Laban into giving him much of his livestock. Thus Jacob could take his wives and children and move back to the Promised Land where he would make a home for himself. Nor have we discussed Jacob’s wrestling match with an angel/God, and how his name was changed to Israel or how he and his brother Esau finally made peace with each other. That is a lot of ground that we have had to pass by.

But now Jacob and family are settled in Canaan. His sons are grown or growing. His youngest son is named Joseph. He is his father’s favorite much to the vexation of his other sons. What’s more this son has a special coat. The coat was special because it had long sleeves, but in older translations it was called a coat of many colors. Reaching back to the 70s some might remember the rock musical by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.” That musical was based on this portion of Genesis.

Besides having a special coat, Joseph also had a gift for interpreting dreams. He would dream dreams that he would interpret for the family. One that really irked his brothers he interpreted as being about everyone in his family bowing down to him. Something that was very unlikely to happen for the youngest son.

¹ “Jessie’s Girl” by Rick Springfield from the album *Working Class Dog* ©1981

As today's passage goes, Joseph was sent by Jacob/Israel to go and check on his brothers as they were tending flocks in a faraway place. When the brothers saw him coming they decided first to kill him and make it look as though a wild beast had done it. At the behest of Rueben, they tossed Joseph into a deep but dry cistern. The idea was to let him die there. However, some traders came along and Judah thought it would be even better to sell Joseph to them. The traders took Joseph to Egypt. The brothers returned home and told their father Jacob that his favorite son had been killed by wild beasts. They showed him the special coat on which they had smeared animal blood. This broke Jacob's heart.

The story does not end there by a long shot, but it does illustrate how craven the emotion of envy is. Little brothers tend to be tedious and annoying, but that is not a reason to kill them. Parents have favorite children but most siblings manage their envy well enough not to commit fratricide. Siblings get special presents from our parents and somehow we refrain from selling them off into bondage and servitude. Or maybe it is just the difficulty of doing these things that prevents siblings from doing it.

In this case envy is such a powerful emotion that the brothers cannot resist. The only thing that keeps them from killing him is Judah's realization that killing a blood relative is not good (perhaps he remembered the story of Cain and Abel from Genesis chapter 4). Regardless, they take extreme measures to rid themselves of their annoying and favored brother their envy was so strong.

Madison Avenue plays on our tendency to envy to sell everything from deodorant, to cars, to beer, to... well you name it. Envy of others causes us to want to "keep up with the Joneses" as the saying goes. It leads to the competition of getting our child into the "better" kindergarten or college. It leads us to look askance at our spouse compared to the kinder, more loving, more attractive spouse of another. It leads us into shady financial deals.

The Seven Deadly Sins cause death within us. They cause us to hurt ourselves and those we care about. They cause us to hurt family and friends. They cause us to go so far off of the right path that getting back to it may seem impossible. These brothers will get off lightly compared to Cain, or David who envies Uriah for his wife, to name two.

Failings like envy can go so far as to damage our souls beyond repair. Beware of it. Do not fall into its trap. Pray that these negative emotions will give way to something better. These Old Testament stories are there for our edification as well as to show how God can take something bad and turn it to good. They are there to help us avoid the negative feelings that lead to negative outcomes and leave us dead within.