

“In the Same Boat”
Matthew 14:22-33
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I remember seeing on the news a few years ago the story of Jack Whittaker, a 57 year old grandfather who won a \$315 million lottery. Two years later he was back on the news saying how bad his life was now and how he really regretted ever buying that lottery ticket. I remember thinking at the time that I would do much better with the money than Jack did and if God could only see fit to make me win the lottery, he would see how responsible I would be and how many good things would be done with the money. Of course for that to happen I suppose I'd actually have to buy a lottery ticket some day. But anyway, I'll admit I was envious. I wanted what he had. I wanted what happened to him to happen to me. *Envy*, that's what we are talking about today. Have you ever been green with envy? According to the ancient lists, envy is one of the seven deadly sins. If you have been here in the last month, you know that we have talked about sloth, anger, lust, and gluttony. And we have also talked about virtues that combat those sins: hope, justice, love and faith. That means we only have greed and pride after today. But today is envy. And this one is serious enough that it gets its own commandment: *You shall not covet what your neighbor has*. But we've all done that haven't we? All of us get envious at times. You see what someone else has, what someone else has accomplished and you say to yourself, "I wish I had that." But that's natural isn't it? I envy all kinds of people and things. I wish I could throw a ball like Bob Gibson and shoot like Larry Bird. I wish I was six foot nine like Magic Johnson and had money like Bill Gates. I envy Fred Astaire his dancing and Jimmy Hendrix his guitar playing. I envy good writers their

ability to write a book and get it published and have people like it. I envy the wisdom of Thomas Merton and the faith of St. Theresa. Is that wrong to envy like that? Of course not. In that way, envy can be a lot like anger. Remember that we said that anger is a natural human emotion and can *motivate* one to change so can envy. It is a natural human emotion and if we work through it, envy can be helpful. When I go to the gym and notice another guy who has worked hard to get his fifty-something body into shape, am I envious? Of course I am. But what do I do with that? Am I motivated to say, "If he can do it so can I?" Or does it depress me and I think that "I'll never get there," So I give in to gluttony and pick up a couple of Big Macs and a vanilla shake on my way home to make myself feel better? Or worse, do I think about how this guy must spend all his time at the gym, ignoring his family and friends, and how he must not have much of a life anyway to spend all his time working out, and really what a vain jerk he must be to everyone around him. You see, envy can motivate us to improve or it can eat away at our happiness, poisoning our view of others and worse poisoning our own hearts.

There were once two shopkeepers who were bitter rivals. Their stores were directly across the street from each other, and they would spend each day keeping track of the other man's business. If one got a customer, he would smile in triumph at his rival. At the end of the day they would measure their success, not by their net profits, but by whether-or-not they had made more money than the competitor across the street. One night an angel appeared to one of the shopkeepers and said, "I will give you three wishes, but there is a catch, anything you ask for, you will receive, but your competitor will receive twice as much." The man thought about that for a moment but decided he like the

idea of being rich so he asked for a million dollars. The next morning there was a million dollars in his bank account, but his rival was quick to tell him that he now had two million in his account. Again that evening the angel appear and he asked for a new Rolls-Royce. Sure enough the next morning there was a Rolls-Royce limousine in front of his store, but there were two limos in front of his competitor. That day he brooded and thought and was just sick with envy, more angry at what his neighbor had than happy at the blessing he had received. So finally when the angel showed up that evening to grant his third wish for which his rival would receive double, he blurted out, "I wish that you would strike me blind in one eye!"

That's the evil part of envy, and that's what Pope Gregory meant when he made it part of the list of seven deadly sins back in the sixth century. Envy at its worst resents the good being experienced by another. If you look it up in the dictionary, a good dictionary, you may find an obsolete definition. Up until the seventeenth century envy meant "malignant or hostile feeling, ill-will or malice." Envy even has a color. We often say someone is "green with envy." That probably comes from green being the color of sickness and nausea. In medieval art, the sin of envy is often depicted as a sickly person. The sadness and tragedy of envy is that it may not hurt someone else, but it eats away at us. Envy sickens us. Ovid, the Roman poet, who was a contemporary of Jesus, depicted Envy as a sickly person wasting away at the mouth of a cave: green, festering, and sick to the stomach. Envy is the only one of the seven deadly sins that has no gratification at all. Lust, gluttony, anger, sloth, greed and pride all claim some immediate gratification or at least release. But not envy. Envy, when just for its own sake, is poison.

The gospel lesson we read today is one of my favorites, because it shows off the apostle Peter at his most audacious and impulsive. Here comes Jesus walking on the water toward them in the midst of rough weather. They are all scared until he identifies himself, but how could it be him, he's walking on water! So Peter says, if it really is you, let me walk on the water too. So Jesus tells him to come on in, the water's great. So Peter steps out and begins to walk on the water. When he looks around at the wind and the waves he begins to sink, but of course Jesus saves him and they get into the boat together and all is well. Most people point out that Peter's problem begins when he takes his eyes off Jesus and then he starts to sink, showing us that if we never take our eyes off Jesus then we can do amazing things as well. That's all well and good and that idea will preach, but what if Peter's problem began before that? What if the real problem was getting out of the boat in the first place? Peter sees Jesus walking on the water and thinks to himself, "I wish I could do that. Walking on water would really be cool. If I could do that then I'd be happy." And so he gets out of the boat, and probably Jesus is thinking to himself, "This is a really bad idea, but if you want to, then ok, but I'll be ready to grab you when you sink." But Jesus knows all along that the best thing for us is to stay together and to stay in the boat. Envy is the desire to have what someone else has, not necessarily because we need it, but to be set apart from others, to glorify ourselves. Envy will never be satisfied. If we stay in the boat, there is no need for envy. If we recognize our connectedness with each other and not worry about outdoing each other, there is no need for envy. Envy tells us that we are separate individuals, that what happens to you has no effect on me, and what happens to me doesn't affect you at all. But what if we are

connected? What if the joy you experience lightens my load as well? What if the sorrow that weighs me down hurts you as well?

According to St. Thomas, charity is the opposite of envy, because charity rejoices in our neighbor's good, while envy grieves over it. I hate to disagree with St. Thomas yet again, but I must. I don't think charity is the opposite of envy, but I think gratitude is. Envy is wishing I had something different; gratitude is giving thanks for what I have. Envy is wanting more than this circumstance; gratitude is being happy where I am. Envy is wishing I were someone else; gratitude is thanking God for who he has made me to be. As Joseph Campbell said, *The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.* And I'd follow that with a quote from Meister Eckhart who said that if the only prayer we say in our lifetime is "thank you," that would be sufficient.

Perhaps Peter could have seen Jesus coming to them across the water, and looked around at his friends and said to himself, "How lucky I am, safe here in the boat with my brother and my friends and here comes Jesus to join us. Thank God!" Looking around and seeing what God has done and being grateful; looking around and seeing the others that God has given to us, most of them with gifts and talents far different from ours but along with us making up a wonderful mosaic of God's glory and giving thanks; that's what slays envy: gratitude. Paul's letter to Timothy affirms that we are all in the same boat, "for God desires everyone to be saved" he says. God wants us all to be part of his family, God wants us all together. Envy sets us apart from each other, gratitude draws us closer.

We are about to celebrate together the sacrament of Communion. That's one of the names for it anyway, and it highlights the fact that in partaking of the elements we are united anew with God and with each other, we are communing, we are in community. But in some traditions it is also called the Eucharist. Eucharist is from the Greek word meaning to give thanks. Before he broke the bread and poured the wine at the Last Supper, Jesus paused to give thanks. So do we in the great prayer of thanksgiving. We give thanks to God for all he has done for us throughout the ages, but we also give thanks for one another. We are grateful to be part of the Christian community, of our own church. I am grateful for you, for each of you. Being grateful leaves no room for envy, because we are all in the same boat.