

Some years ago we read “The Book of Joy” in our Adult Formation class. It’s a conversation between two men who survived more than 50 years of exile and suffered violent oppression. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, despite their hardships – and each may say because of them – are two of the most joyful people in the world. Of course, you may know that we lost Desmond Tutu last year almost 2 years ago. In the book, and in their recorded conversation which you can watch on Youtube, their discussions center around the theme of “How do we find joy in the face of life’s inevitable suffering?” and “What wisdom does each of our respective religions have to offer – Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism?”

One of the chapters is entitled “Envy: That Guy Goes Past Yet Again in His Mercedes Benz.” The conversation the two men have is about how it is part of our human nature that we make comparisons. The example the archbishop gives is of the guy he sees driving past him in a very nice car, and the more he sees the nice car, the more jealous he is, even though he is trying not to feel jealous.

I’m sure this never happened in your house with your own children, or when you were growing up, but inevitably when the cake is cut, someone gets a slightly smaller piece of cake and cries, “No Fair!” It’s human nature, this comparison of what I have to what the other has. As we’re younger it may be a comparison of size of house, professional status, or ability of our children. As we age, it may be health status, retirement income, and a host of other things.

The Dalai Lama talks about a Tibetan Buddhist teaching which says that what causes suffering in life is a general pattern of how we relate to other people. He says, “Envy toward the above, competitiveness toward the equal, and contempt toward the lower.” Research about happiness shows that these kinds of comparisons are particularly destructive - primarily because they don’t leave room for joy in our every day lives.

In the parable today, the landowner pays everyone the same amount, regardless of how long they worked during the day. Some labored for a very long day, while others joined the job for the last hour of the day. The laborers who worked all day raise a cry of “Not fair!” when everyone is paid. Fairness here is defined as everyone getting the same. The same amount of cake, the same number of presents at Christmas, the same. Fairness though in God’s kingdom has more to do with getting what we need, not what we imagine is owed to us in comparison to what others have received.

The early monastics, who lived in the 3rd and 4th centuries, saw envy as one of the most difficult passions. A passion to them was not an emotion, or something positive, but something that has as its chief characteristic the destruction of love. Wanting what we don’t have, or wanting another to have less than we have, really any competitive comparison to another person allows a rift to form between us is the passion of Envy. Love – wanting the best for another person – is not possible with Envy.

The Archbishop and the Dalai Lama disagree on a point. The Archbishop says that envy is a part of our human nature, and when we experience it we should be gentle with ourselves, acknowledge it, and forgive ourselves. The Dalai Lama, on the other hand,

says that we are to work to train our minds not to envy other people because it is disruptive to peace, in our lives and in the world.

The parable today is really hard to swallow. We live in the south, and we know what a sweltering day of working outside can be like. The person who began in the early morning and worked all day should be paid more, we might believe. The message from Jesus is that God will continue searching for us well into the late afternoon and bring us in to the field even if we didn't show up on time. It doesn't pass OUR fairness test, but the landowner makes it very clear that mercy, forgiveness, and love are his to give away. He says, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

In the Book of Joy, the Archbishop makes a powerful suggestion for a remedy to envy: gratitude. He says, "I think that one of the best ways you can begin to counter (envy) is that old one of counting your blessings. That may sound very old, old, old, old, old grandfather-style, but yes, it does help. You know you might not have as big a house as that person, but you know what? You're not living in a shack. So being thankful for the things that you do in fact have can help." He also describes the concept in African villages of Ubuntu – which is often translated as "I am, because you are." The word ubuntu is Zulu and literally means that a person is a person through other people. Ubuntu is the idea of community as one of the building blocks of society, and humanity is built of oneness, you and me both. The common greeting in villages is "How are we?" and is based on the understanding that someone else's achievements or happiness is in a very real way our own. Unfortunately, when envy arises, we cut one another down and that destroys Ubuntu. When we remember that we are interdependent, though, we are able to see that we are incredibly large and strong.

The parable today is difficult. It goes against so much we seem to value in our society. Working hard and achieving success and independence to begin with. Pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Everyone gets what's coming to them.

I have a confession to make. I am envious of my husband Kees. He is one of the most content people I have ever known. It's in his nature, but it may also be because he grew up in a culture that had no advertising, and unlike ours, wasn't told repetitively about all that we don't have, yet need, to be happy.

Social media also helps us compare our perfectly presented selves with other perfectly presented people. Research shows that it gets in the way of our happiness, our ability to live with joy in our every day lives.

I have to say that I like the Archbishop's grandfatherly advice in The Book of Joy – to count our blessings. It does, like the Dalai Lama says, take some effort to retrain our thinking. But we live our lives knowing that the grace and mercy of God carry us better than we can carry ourselves. And for that we give thanks, even on days when everyone else has what we think we need to be happy for we know that Joy can be ours.

Amen.