



ALWAYS AND EVERYWHERE

It is right and a good and joyful thing always and everywhere to give thanks.

To be free from the prison of envy



BY BISHOP PAUL V. MARSHALL

Dragging a broken leg on crutches, 12-year-old Brenda was delicately making her way through the classroom. Sarah's foot shot out. Brenda crashed to the floor. "It was an accident," lied Sarah, automatically and without conscious thought.

The truth was, she did not know why she had hurt Brenda. She simply felt very bad and strangely triumphant. Her parents were shocked. Sarah knew only that it "just came out of me."

As we talked in the weeks following, Sarah was able to describe the impulse to hurt her classmate. "She is so good at everything and everybody likes her ... it makes me hate her."

Eventually, Sarah used the word *jealous*, but what was going on for her was a particularly vicious form of *envy*, a capability we are apparently born with. Envy is called the coldest of the deadly sins because it destroys the heart of the one caught up in it while also causing harm to others. It was devouring Sarah. She felt

it but did not understand what was happening to her.

I do not use envy here in the sense of my seeing my neighbor's car and wishing I had one like that. I think of a kind of malevolent envy that experiences the happiness or talents of others as somehow a personal deprivation. It is as though one has been robbed because somebody else has something good.

Sarah saw Brenda's goodness, talent, and popularity as taking away something she felt she should have but did not. She wanted to be good, gifted, and well loved; but she felt quite the opposite, so she struck out at her classmate.

"It is not enough to succeed," Gore Vidal once said. "Others must fail." When other people's success or happiness makes us mad, we discover why this sin is deadly. It leaves us with no peace. We need to lash out at the one we envy—or become them. The cult classic *The King of Comedy*, starring Robert DeNiro, depicts the extreme attempt to become the envied other.

People driven by, or suffering from, envy are never happy. They usually have nothing good to say about anybody. They live in a world of self-imposed misery, which they do not understand. They are stuck, like an infant, in a

place of powerless rage when it senses that all good and all nurture come from a mother. Infants are said to sense that they are powerless to produce anything except what infants can produce, and even that is taken away from them at regular intervals. They usually outgrow this. The envious do not.

I think there are several options to consider if one is being consumed by envy. The first is to admit one's envy, own it, inhabit it. After all the only way to get rid of an unwelcome feeling is to let oneself have it.

But having admitted envy, we can reconsider the person we envy and practice admiration. Acknowledge the gifts and talents of the other without begrudging it. After all, admiration says something good about the person who does the admiring: he or she has a discerning eye and good taste.

In the film, *Amadeus*, Salieri tortured himself over Mozart's gifts. He complains bitterly that God has gifted Mozart more, and is enraged with God for making him able to understand just how gifted Mozart is. He had the option or realizing that his keen ear was a compliment to him.

Instead of displaying himself as a gifted music critic, he increasingly diminished himself as a person.

Admiration is not idealization — it is quite dangerous

to assume that anyone is perfect. It is spiritually healthy to acknowledge that God has gifted the entire human race in many ways, but that each of us is a shade of gray.

Admiration allows us to value what is good in another and turn it into a model for our own behaviors or ambitions. I cannot emulate what I hate. I can, however, work towards becoming some of the things I like in others.

Admiration allows us to see other vessels, resources, and models. But it is not the only way to escape from the trap of envy. There is gratitude.

We can have gratitude that God has given such gifts at all, and that this or that person lets that goodness show. We can have gratitude that we do not have the burden of being the person who has to bear the burden of being absolutely the best.

Gratitude allows us to suspend our disbelief in the personhood of those we envy. At the same time, it comes as a great relief. All goodness does not have to be centered in us. We do not have to bear the burden of being actually the master of the universe.

To rise above envy is a liberation. Admiration and gratitude warm our hearts and allow us to join the human race and be content. I hope that is what happened for Sarah, but the truth is that I do not know.

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The Diocese of Bethlehem edition of *Episcopal Life*, the monthly newspaper of the Episcopal Church, USA. Copy deadline is the second Monday of the month. Opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Bishop or the Diocese of Bethlehem. Send articles and letters to the Editor.

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Episcopal Life ISSN 1050-0057 USPS#177-940 is published monthly by The Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church, Inc., 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Periodical postage paid in NYC and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send changes of address to *Episcopal Life*, PO Box 2050, Voorhees NJ 08043-8000. Send change of subscription address to *Episcopal Life* Circulation Department, PO Box 2050, Voorhees NJ 08043-8000, elife@afwprinting.com, 800/374-9510.