



Envy: The Monster Within

Renay Burger for November 28, 2010

If we're honest, I think we could all admit that we have pet peeves. For instance, in my case, when I'm driving and the person in front of me doesn't use a turn signal, or, when Aaron, who I dearly love, leaves pairs of dirty socks lying around the house in odd places, or, one of the ones I personally find most annoying, when people at the grocery store that I'm waiting behind in line do not put the divider down after their groceries when the conveyor belt is half empty and I have a huge pregnant belly that makes it impossible to reach the divider myself and I have a grocery cart towering with food as well as five other people waiting behind me in line. When it comes to pet peeves and Aaron's Uncle Marc, because he is such a vigilante for grammatical correctness, he hates the phrase, "gift idea".

We've all heard this phrase before--it might sound something like this--

(Read like a commercial from off-stage)

Looking for the perfect gift idea? Come to Jared and buy her the new, princess-teardrop earrings that she's always dreamed of. This gift idea is sure to have her crying tears of joy when she tells her friends, "He went to Jared".

You know, *gift idea*. It's during this particular season, The Christmas Season, in which Aaron's Uncle Marc can be seen viewing the television through clenched teeth. He also makes frequent use of the mute button. When Aaron and I lived in Chicago, every year, Thanksgiving began Uncle Marc's annual rant regarding the misleading nature of his least favorite phrase--the dreaded *gift idea*. And, while we all watched network movies during our collective carbohydrate stupor, at some point,

during a commercial, those two little words would be spoken and Uncle Marc, as expected, would leap from the couch, begin insistently waving his arms, and scream, “See! See! That’s not an *idea*! That’s a *diamond bracelet*! Person, place, thing or *idea*--and *that* is clearly a *thing*! That you give as a *gift*! It is a *gift thing*!”

I love Aaron’s Uncle Marc--and clearly, I respect his grammatical logic, being an English teacher and all. And, though it doesn’t sound nearly as polished as “gift idea”, it certainly makes more sense. It’s been three Thanksgivings since last we last witnessed Uncle Marc’s antics, three days since many of us chowed our first bites of this year’s turkey, and with The Macy’s Day Parade and its Grand Finale--Santa Claus--behind us, we’re still only three days into the “most wonderful time of the year”, the Christmas Season.

When I look out my window, in my neighborhood, Armory Park, the inflatable snowmen and Christmas lights are already up. When I listen to Pandora, even if my station doesn’t request for it at all, the holiday music is already beginning to play. But, perhaps most unsettling so far has been this: when I watch television programs on my laptop, the Christmas commercials--at a volume level significantly louder than the program I was watching--have already begun. Whether by laptop or sizably larger plasma screen, if you’ve watched any television at all, you’ve already been inundated with this year’s “gift ideas”; that said, if you’re anything like me, after the first few commercials, you’ve already begun making a checklist of all the “gift ideas” that you’ve already wanted that are on sale--or better yet--upgraded.

And, if you’re anything like 135 million other Americans, you already began taking advantage of those tantalizing sales and went shopping on Black Friday. Last year, after successfully avoiding it for 27 years, I went shopping on Black Friday. Aaron and I, after waiting in line outside of the store with about 300 other people, scored free breakfast from IKEA. It was *awesome*--the free breakfast, that is.

What was not so awesome, however, was having to walk through the store itself. You see, I have this terrible weakness for cheap, Swedish furniture. It’s not that I don’t like IKEA. After living in small apartments for the last seven years, with each new idea I see their designers come up with, I have a renewed respect for their clever and economical use of living space. However, it’s the sheer quantity of clean design and cozy, well-coordinated decor--and seeing *other* people buy it--that makes me miserable. Each time I walk through IKEA, it reminds me of how cool and space- efficient my apartment will never be.

Now, even though I consider myself a fairly optimistic, friendly person, when I get in IKEA, something happens. When I see those people waiting in the checkout line who are dragging double carts stacked with hip European furniture, there is part of me that, depending on how I feel about my own apartment at the time, secretly hopes that, soon after loading their purchases onto their roof racks,

the tie devices on top of their vehicles will destruct and send their precious trendy shelving units to splinter across I-10.

This just proves that I am clearly an awful human being. Don't get me wrong--the better part of me knows I shouldn't feel this way, but, for most of my life, I have been and continue to be painfully envious of people who have stuff that I don't. Sadly, this jealousy doesn't just stop at home furnishings. It flares its ugly head all the time.

Let's see--what are all the things I've been envious of before... hmmm... Jobs... paychecks... GPA's... advanced degrees... houses... pets... cars...musical instruments... music collections... technology... vacations...the list goes on and on. When it comes to being envious, whether it's the Christmas season or not, I'm a lot more like The Grinch Who Stole Christmas than I am like Jesus. See for yourself.

(Play “You're a mean one, Mr. Grinch” video.) (2 minutes, 48 seconds)

In Proverbs 14, the author writes,
“A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones”.

When I read this, I think two things: first, I think that I'm not the only one on this tiny twirling planet that has a bit of Grinch in them; second, I think that envy, the little green monster, is more than just a children's story. It's not just a character that moves into the caves outside of Whoville, but it's a sin that flourishes in our own insecurities and discontent. Just like the author of Proverbs indicates, envy is corrosive, cancerous--and ultimately, if left to fester, it impedes our ability to love one another by disabling the everyday faculties we use to show one another love.

In John 13, Jesus *commands* us to love one another. Verses 34-35 read:
“A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Envy is corrosive. A corrosive, such as hydrochloric acid, damages and destroys those surfaces it comes into contact with. One would think that envy, being corrosive, would be used by the envious *against* others with the intent to cause pain--and it is--but, like the English proverb says, “Envy shoots at others and wounds itself”. In this case, *what envy wounds, more than anything else, is the heart of the envious person.* Just like the author of Proverbs suggested, it rots from the inside out.

The Grinch is a perfect illustration of this. Besides being called a “bad”, i.e., rotten, “banana”, he's described having an “empty hole” of a heart that resembles a “dead tomato splotted with moldy purple spots”. Even his soul is “full of gunk”, and is likewise compared to a “dump heap”.

Considering all the decomposing going on--the Grinch is called a "rotter", after all-- it's no surprise that the three words that best describe him are "stink", "stank" and "stunk".

Well, before any of us watched our first The Grinch Who Stole Christmas Special, Socrates himself called envy "*the ulcer of the soul*". He knew all about envy's corrosive nature. What are the consequences of our hearts becoming corroded by envy? We cannot share in one another's happiness.

In Corinthians 12:26, Paul writes,
"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one is honored, every part rejoices with it".

Sharing in the joy of the person envied is nearly impossible for those corroded by their jealousy. The Grinch, tapping his fingers and glaring at the community below, clearly stewing with annoyed jealousy over the happiness of the Whos, doesn't wish to *celebrate* the holidays with them--instead he plots a means to *destroy* their holiday and *steal* it from them. Rather than love his neighbors below, he becomes the ultimate party pooper.

Growing up, I had a similar sentiment toward my cousin, Amber. Since we were toddlers, our parents had compared us to one another, gauging the success of one of us against the failures of the other. It started out in 2nd grade with each of our mothers perming our hair and discussing who looked cuter. As we became older, if Amber got a 3.9 GPA on her report card, it was my responsibility not to congratulate her, but to beat her GPA with a 4.0--and then gloat. If Amber was asked to Homecoming first, rather than be excited for her, I hated her for it, and tried to outdo her in some other way--like with having a more elaborate dress. We both had our share in this awful competition, but what I know is this: even as adults, we still aren't close. Estranged, I think, by our competitive relationship growing up, we've still never been able to share in one another's successes--and there's a part of me that mourns that loss.

When corroded by envy, not only are we disabled from sharing in one another's joys, but we're hindered in our ability to show compassion toward one another.

1 Peter chapter 3 verse 8 tells us that,
"Finally, all of you, be like minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble".

With our envious hearts so corroded, we can't show care for one another when we're hurting. In fact, when those we are envious of experience failure, or pain, we do quite the opposite. We revel in their suffering. This phenomenon-- *schadenfreude* (pronounced shot-in-freud-uh), or *experiencing enjoyment obtained from the troubles of others* --has been scientifically studied and documented.

Neuroscientists in Japan conducted MRI studies and found that, when neurologically- monitored subjects were presented with scenarios that included both a character similar to them and another character, still similar to them but perhaps more accomplished, the subjects related to the less accomplished of the two. When, in the scenario, the more accomplished character would experience success, the pain region of the subjects brain, the dorsal ACC, would activate, showing envy. On the other hand, when the more accomplished character would experience a failure of any kind, time and time again, the subjects' pleasure center, the ventral striatum, would activate, showing *schadendenfreude*.

When our hearts are corroded by envy, it is very difficult for us to feel compassion toward those we are envious of.

By nature, it is the exact opposite of what we want to do. When someone gets knocked down a peg, it levels the playing field a little, and gives us a little hope that we're not so bad after all. This, however, is not the compassionate and humble attitude that Peter was suggesting we use to love one another with. All this does is show how insecure we really are--which brings me to my next point.

When our hearts are corroded by envy, we typically don't feel confident or appreciate our lives as God has placed us and gifted us.

With our hearts "three sizes too small", we find it difficult to love ourselves. Rather than see the value in our own lives, we wish for the lives of others. For instance, I know that, after seven years of small apartment living, I often wish that my husband Aaron and I had a house--and a backyard for me to grow a garden in. But, circumstances and budgets being what they are, we're living in a 700-square foot apartment, instead.

Sometimes, I forget the verse in Romans 12: 4-8 that reads:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

In my bouts of envy I forget, sometimes, that our living in that tiny apartment among six other neighbors, all their kids, all sharing the same community yard, washing machine, clothes line, and driveway, might have a bigger purpose. While a house might be nice, our combined gifts in "the body" might be better used in the place we're in rather than the place we're wishing for. The truth is--a house in a residential area might not be the place that we're most needed at the moment--and I have to learn to be okay with that. At any given moment, no one person in "the body" is going to have the exact same role and placement as any other, and if we all we did was fight over who did

what, nothing would get accomplished. With little left to our weary, corroded hearts, loving one another, as we've been told to do, is significantly difficult.

Besides being corrosive, envy is cancerous as well. This is true in the sense that cancer occurs when abnormal cells multiply too quickly, creating masses called tumors. While the original structure remains, the abnormal, proliferating cells overwhelm an area, mutate the original structure, and inhibit the subject's ability to fully use that structure as the subject normally would.

In James 4, verse two, James writes,
"You want what you do not have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, and you can't possess it, so you fight and quarrel to take it away from them".

When I look at this verse about envy, I'm reminded most of brain cancer. The scheming that James talks about is very much like this, mutating a person's brain to obsess over how they might acquire--and possibly destroy--the possessions of others rather than focus on what we've been commanded to do--love one another. Just like brain cancer, as it mutates, it begins to shut function after function down, so does envy as it impairs our ability to focus and act loving toward one another. Within time, divisions within the community can begin to occur, and isolation from the community quickly follows.

So, now what? What can we do to stop envy from spreading in ourselves and our communities? How do we find contentment in what we already have?

Think about how your skills and resources fit into your community, or even here, at Damascus Road. Take a minute to stop and think about how God has already gifted you. What are your talents? Strengths? Thank God for these things.

Take another minute to think about how you've been provided for in the past and how your needs are being taken care of currently.

Thank God for these provisions.

Think about the people in your community whose talents and strengths of whom you're jealous--then think about how they set an example for you to learn from.

Thank God that He's put people in your life that you can look up to for inspiration.

Think again about the people in your community of whom you're envious, then brainstorm ways that you could humble yourself and connect with these individuals.

Consider asking these individuals for expert advice so you yourself can grow in those areas in which you find yourself lacking.

Thank the people you consider “talented” in your community for sharing their gifts.

Tell them how their talent ministered to you. The simple act of showing appreciation is a powerful form of loving one another.

Consider beginning a culture of sharing within your community.

The New Testament says that the early Jesus-followers in Acts both “shared everything they had” and were “one heart and mind”. As we begin acting like teammates instead of opponents, as it becomes less about “my stuff” and “your stuff” and more about “our stuff”, there’s more stuff--and love--to go around.

Pray. Have a conversation with God about how often you feel contentment, joy and love toward others in your community.

Ask God to help you grow in these areas.

As you take these actions, the corrosion from envy that disable our ability to love one another will go into remission, and soon enough, we begin to become *whole*, which in Hebrew is *tov*, which also means *good*--once again.

Right after the message, the band is going to come up and play a reflection song. As the band plays, I encourage you to consider the lyrics being sung; also, I encourage you look at--and even touch--the two sculptural pieces displayed on either side of the speaking area. As you spend time in reflection, think about the condition of your heart and your mind. How similar or dissimilar is your heart from the corroded one displayed here? How similar or dissimilar is your mind from the cancerous one displayed here? Answer honestly as you converse with God.

We’ll end with this verse from 1 John, chapter 4 verses 19-21:

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Let us pray.