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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/11/2009, The Second Week of Lent, Midweek
Envy

APOSTOLIC GREETING

PRAYER OF THE DAY

P Eternal God, it is your glory always to have mercy. Bring back all who have erred and strayed from your ways; lead them again to embrace in faith the truth of your Word and to hold it fast; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

FIRST LESSON From Genesis 37, KJV

³Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours. ⁴And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.... ¹¹And his brethren envied him... And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan. ¹⁸And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him. ¹⁹And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh. ²⁰Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams... ³¹And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood; ³²And they sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no. ³³And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. ³⁴And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him.

SECOND LESSON..... Philippians 4:8-11, KJV

⁸Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. ⁹Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you. ¹⁰But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity.

¹¹Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.

HOLY GOSPELMatthew 6:25-34, KJV

²⁵Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? ²⁶Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? ²⁷Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? ²⁸And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: ²⁹And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? ³¹Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? ³²(For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. ³³But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. ³⁴Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

HYMN LBW 271 *O Splendor of the Father's Light* SPLENDOR PATERNAE

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat *of many colours*.
(Genesis 37:5, KJV)

Something there is about colours. The eye of many a person is drawn to colors, and to become color-blind, perhaps because of some neurological trauma, would be true suffering for many of us. The colors in these church windows, for example, lift and cheer up many a soul.

Speaking of our church windows, did I tell you that I have an elliptical machine these days, up near the church windows? It is an exercise machine. I like it. Chris and I set it up in the balcony, in the landing at the head of the Lexington Avenue staircase. So, in the evenings, I am sometimes working out on my elliptical machine, listening to my iPod, and wondering why Gwen and Dongsok are not have fun all by themselves, playing the long organ passage in

In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, for example, up there in the organ loft. That's the nighttime. But when it's daylight and I'm working out, I like to gaze at our church windows. You cannot see those windows from here. They are on the other side of that door up there in the balcony. They are the old, simple, windows from the earliest days of this building. They are pastel in colors and almost translucent, but with some stretches of intense colors in them, especially the deep purple borders around the windows. It does good for the soul, I say, just to be able to gaze at some colors in this world.

Some lands are drab in color. They might have their own subtle beauties -- surely they do -- and yet from the point of view of color, they are forty shades of brown and grey. And for some ancient people, the production of colors in cloth was a rare and expensive accomplishment. Lydia, for example, in the New Testament, seems to have become prosperous enough to be a benefactor of the apostles by being a seller of purple dye.(Acts 16). By God's mercy, even poor people are able to enjoy the colours of the sunrise and the sunset and the ephemeral rainbow, but oh! to have colours *fixed* right into your own coat! Then you could enjoy those colours anytime, not just when the sun was on the horizon, and you could catch the eye of the onlookers, because *you* are the one with the many-colored coat.

The problem is that the many-colored coat attracts envy, and envy is but a step short away from doing some wickedness. To use the words of Psalm 37,

⁷Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.

⁸Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil.(Psalm 37:7-8, KJV)

Abandon envy, lest it break forth into sin against your neighbor, and lest it ruin your own peace.

The thing about envy is that it is nigh inexhaustible. Once you get the lust of the eye embedded in your character, it leaves you restless. You are familiar with this phenomenon, I bet. So, let us imagine each of Jacob's many sons. They envy Joseph for many reasons, including that doggone coat of his. But suppose they each had the same coat. Then, I bet that they would be happy, *for a while*. They would be proud as a peacock, *for a while*. They would think that life is sweet and that all their problems are solved, *for a while*. But then they would notice that their neighbor has some new Nikes, or yon fashionable woman has some beautiful leather boots, and off goes envy again. It leaves us restless. It leaves us discontent with the good things we do have.

I continue to be fascinated by the Dominican Sisters who are retiring up at The Wartburg, where Carol is Chaplain. They are starting to move in, two at time. Though there are only a few of them so far, they are transforming the place in way. One of the Social Workers was struck by the change in the dining room, for example. It has become a happier, more lively place, because the Sisters spread out among the people and talk with them. Otherwise, meal time tends to be fairly quiet there. But the Sisters talk with folks. And the Sisters seem somehow happier, maybe even healthier, than many folks their age.

But the Sisters are precisely the ones who have foresworn envy. That is the meaning of the habit, now isn't it? The habit means that you are bowing out of the race to look fashionable and up-to-date. That is also why I love to wear my clergy clothes. I simply want to withdraw from the competition. I do not want to look with an envious eye at the lovely clothes gentlemen wear. God bless them. I can admire them. But I do not want to envy them.

This evening's hymn includes that wonderful prayer, "Drive out envy from the envious." (LBW 271, *O Splendor of the Father's Light*.) We should take this prayer in full earnestness. Envy is a disturbance in our character to be wrestled against. And it can be overcome, gradually perhaps, but definitely.

St. Paul, for example, at one time occupied a station in life that others could envy. But taking up his cross and following Jesus had lowered his standing. Indeed, sometimes he was mocked, sometimes beaten, sometimes imprisoned, often opposed. But Paul had trained himself not to regret his own place in life, nor to envy others. And so we have that great line of his:

...I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. (Philippians 4:11, KJV)

In the end, whether or not envy gets or loosens its grip on our soul depends upon the audience we care about. If we want to look good in the eyes of popular culture, then that can be fun, but also exhausting and wasting of our time and money. But if the audience we would really love to shine before is the Communion of Saints and He who is Lord of all, then we would do well to heed his sweet words about the lilies of the field, how they neither toil nor spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these. That is, let us strive to look lovely in the eyes of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.