

"OVERCOMING ENVY"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Henry Adams was born into one of America's few patrician families. The Adams family, I suppose, formed the closest thing to a dynasty that we have in this country.

You'll remember from your history lessons that John Adams was the 2nd president of the nation, that his cousin, Samuel Adams, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the "brewer" of the Boston Tea Party. John Quincy Adams was the 6th president of the United States. Charles Francis Adams was a congressman and statesman, ambassador to the Court of St. James...perhaps the best ambassador ever to represent this country in a foreign capital. He's credited with keeping England out of the Civil War and from joining the side of the Confederacy.

Quite a family. John Adams begat John Quincy Adams, who begat Charles Francis Adams, who begat Charles Francis Adams, who begat Henry Adams.

DEVELOPMENT

Henry Adams himself once said, "No child held better cards than I". An anecdote out of his childhood tells of the time Henry was reprimanded by the family gardener for doing some misdeed. The gardener said, "You probably think that you are going to be president someday, too." Later Henry Adams wrote, "The thought that I would be anything else but president was new to me". It never occurred to him that he would walk down any path in this life except the path leading to the White House.

But he didn't make it. In fact, he never held any political office, a fact that made him assess his own personal life as a failure. And yet his accomplishments in this life were enormous. He was an advisor to presidents, if not president himself. He was a professor at Harvard. He was Editor of a literary journal, the most important one of his generation. He lived a comfortable life, a notable life. With the exception of the suicide of his wife in 1885, he led a life without sorrow or pain.

Remember, too, he was one of America's great writers. He is generally recognized as having written two classics, The Education of Henry Adams, his autobiography, and Mont-Saint Michel and Chartres, an analysis of the 13th Century. Two classics. You and I would be content if we have one book published under our authorship. Yet Henry Adams had two, both classics, and he felt his life was a failure.

For the last thirty years of his life he lived in a house across from the White House, and day after day for thirty years, he would look out the window of his study and see the White House and be overcome with envy! Envy dampened his friendships. John Hay, his best friend, was asked by two presidents, Roosevelt and McKinley, to be Secretary of State. Adams wondered privately why he had never been asked. He wrote, "A friend in power is ever a friend lost."

Few men were as privileged as Henry Adams was. Few people given as much talent and yet - envy convinced him that he had been a failure.

KING SAUL AND ENVY

It is not without reason that envy is named one of the seven deadly sins. It's a tyrant. It will take over your life. Hurt it. Harm it. It will color everything that you do.

And that's what happened to Saul. Saul - strong, powerful, resourceful

and intelligent - a great leader, King Saul - the prototype of all the Kings of Israel.

Then came David, young and handsome, brighter, more talented. Saul took him under his wing as men of power often are attracted to brilliant young men on the way up. Eventually David became Saul's adjutant. And Saul's son Jonathan's best friend. Then David married Saul's daughter, Michal, and became his son-in-law. He was like a son and Saul groomed David for greatness.

And then it happened. People started talking more about David than about Saul. David's star was rising and the higher it ascended the cooler Saul became towards David. Finally the friendship was ruptured, and then when David was elected in the minds of the people to the rank of a hero and the women were singing, "Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands", Saul became insane with envy, literally. He went mad and ruined the rest of his life.

Saul was obsessed with David. That's all he could think about night and day. Twice he tried to murder him. And finally, you'll recall, David had to flee the country and become an exile to get away from the wrathful envy of Saul.

ENVY: A DEADLY SIN Envy - it's one of the deadly sins.

I've known intelligent and privileged people who have had their lives colored over with envy. A brilliant young associate comes into their business and at first - like Saul - they're attracted to this young person. Then the friendship cools and pretty soon the rupture comes in their relationship. After that they cannot do their work because all they think about day and night is that other person, and they look upon him as if he were some enemy sneaking up to take their place.

I've known - and perhaps you have, too - people who envy what other people have - their salary, their position, the better mate they have, the softer life. By dwelling upon that comparison between themselves and the person they envy, they lose the life that has been given to them. It's tragic, but true.

Oh, what a deadly sin envy is. It will destroy the career of a great king, as it did King Saul. It will take away the joy of the life of uncommon accomplishment, as it did in the life of Henry Adams. Or, it will blind us to the goodness of life that God has given to each one of us, as it does to many of us.

YOU ARE IMPORTANT! Now I believe that our Christian faith has something to say to us in all of this, that it can help to free us from this deadly sin of envy. To envy is to compare your life with that of somebody else. That's called, "invidious comparison". To set your life over against somebody else's and measure your worth according to that standard.

But if you get the point of the Christian Gospel, it won't let you do that. The great liberating message of Christianity is that you are important in yourself. You gain your importance in relationship to God and not in relationship to other people. Only that one relationship with God in which you are declared to be precious and ultimately important matters.

The first Christian preaching went out into the Greek and Roman world expressing that message in this form, saying, "Christ has died for you". They preached that to all people, to the lower classes as well as to the nobility.

Soon the lower classes were acting as if they were nobility. Those who were labeled outcasts in the society were acting as if they had been chosen. And those who were common folk all of a sudden began walking with dignity in this life. Wherever Christianity has gone into this world and preached that "Christ has died for you" the result has been the same. It happened in 18th Century England when Wesley preached to the people. "Christ has died for you". Those words form one of the powerful and liberating forces in the world and whenever it has gotten out to people, it has made a difference.

THE CHURCH IS WHERE IT HAPPENS

Now the Church is where that idea is put into practice. Paul said, we're all one body here. He calls us the "body of Christ" and that means that nobody here is better than anybody else. There is no invidious comparison here. Here everybody has something to contribute. Here everybody brings a gift and is encouraged to make it a part of the whole, recognizing that unless even the smallest part is healthy and makes its gift, the whole is going to be diseased and hurt.

What a marvelous image that is - the body of Christ. Paul says that the Church as the body of Christ is the image of the way the world will some day be, where everybody is considered to be important because everybody has a gift to give and can bring it to the common treasury of mankind. The gift you bring is good, simply because it is yours. God gave it to you. That's how you got it. So offer it. Don't envy what other people have. Use what you have and what you have been given.

David Halberstam once said of Lyndon Johnson, "The president didn't suffer from a bad education, but from the belief that he had a bad education."

And that's what envy so often does. Invidious comparison...the assumption that what I have is not as good as what somebody else has. And the most powerful antidote to that is the Christian Gospel, that in relationship to God, you are important, and nobody is more important than anybody else. To me, that's a powerful contribution our faith gives to us in overcoming envy. Remember it.

USE YOUR TALENT

And the second contribution is the teaching that we are to use our talent. Your life is like everything that God has created; that is to say, it's not finished yet. God created you as an unfinished product, and you, along with everything else in His creation, are on the move toward a goal, everything progressing.

The thing we most often fail to see is that God wants you to be co-creator with Him in making your life become what it should be. And He won't do it without you. He has created you with talent and He expects you to use it and develop it. And then He will bring you to the fulfillment of your life. And if you're going to use it and develop it, it will mean that you're going to have to take risks along the way and move out - with faith.

And that's the point of the Parable of the Talents that Jesus told. The difference between the three stewards in that Parable of the Talents is not in what they had been given, not in the gifts they had. The difference was in the risks they were willing to take. The servant who was condemned was condemned because He wouldn't take risks. He buried his talent - and so do we, most of us, for fear that if we offer ourselves, it's not going to be worth very much. That's the sin, Jesus said...refusing to take the risks that would enable God to move you toward the fulfillment of your life.

THEORY ABOUT FAILURE

There is an interesting theory about failure. People often fail at something because they don't exert enough effort or they don't have enough discipline or they don't make enough sacrifices. Some people look at that person and conclude that obviously he or she just a lazy "so and so".

But the real reason for their not investing in the sacrifice to be a success may not be that they are lazy, but that they are afraid. They are afraid that what they have to offer isn't going to be acceptable. The surest way to discourage children from doing the hard work that is necessary to accomplish something in this life is to compare them with somebody else, especially with their older brother or sister. "Why can't you be like So and So?" Well, they know they will never be like So and So...nobody will ever be like So and So, except So and So!

So why try? We're all different. We'll never be like anybody else. And then very often their reasoning goes like this, and maybe you've tried it, too. Why try if everything I do is measured over against somebody else? And then they employ that maxim used by the perennial failures, "It's better not to try at all than to try when you know that you're going to fall short anyway."

And any teacher should know and any good and wise parent should know, too, that the greatest motivator is simply the acceptance that whatever a person does, it's going to be important as it is - not in comparison with anything else - just that it is!

That's the liberating message of the Parable of the Talents. If you haven't heard... that elsewhere, if you were raised in the kind of environment where that was not the rule, or if you have become the victim of that kind of suppression of talent in your life, the one place that you will always hear it is here in Church - because here in Church you are judged not by what other people do, but only by what you do. We need to do the best we can and leave the rest to God. I believe if we do our best, God is able to use what we do to accomplish His will. And sometimes even in spite of our stumbling efforts, sometimes even though we make mistakes, if we do it "pro Deo" - God is able to use it.

And doing it that way means that you're free from invidious comparisons with others, and it means you're free from the burden of always having to be a success. You don't always have to be a success. All you have to be is faithful to do your best, and your confidence is that God is able to do the rest.

GOSPEL OF MARK

Remember Jesus said that if you want to enter the Kingdom of God, you must become like a child. I suppose that it has many meanings, but it is significant that He uses it in the context of the disciples scrambling around for some power and status.

The Scene is from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has just announced that He is going up to Jerusalem and the disciples know that means the Kingdom is about to come. They know that when Jesus finally goes to Jerusalem there will be an encounter with the Roman Provincial government, and there will be fireworks and then the coming of the Kingdom in all of its glory. So they begin quarreling among themselves. Which one of them is going to have the seat of prominence, the seat on the right hand of Jesus when He comes in glory in His Kingdom?

Jesus puts an end to all of their status seeking by putting a child in the midst of them. It was a reminder that unless you become as children, you're not even going to get into the Kingdom of God. In this context of scrambling for the best seats, that quality of child-likeness being held up as our example, I feel, is the trust that whatever they do is acceptable.

Has a child ever held up his drawing to you? All you need to do is to look at it and know that he's not comparing that with anything else. He's proud of it simply because he did it.

A first grader proudly showed the gold star he had received in school to his mother. His mother asked him, "Why did you get that?" And he said, "We get gold stars for doing what we do best?" The mother said, "What did you do best?" Her son replied, "I am the best restester."

So it is in the Kingdom of God. There are no invidious comparisons there. There is no room for envy there. There everybody is accepted for who they are.

You've been given a tremendous gift, and the only question that one day is going to be asked of you, "Did you use it?" And if so, you will be ushered to a special place of honor! So be it. Let us pray.

PRAYER Deliver us, dear Lord, from smallness when we worship Thee.
Swallow up our pettiness, our smallness, yes even our envy, in the grandeur of your spirit, your truth and your love.

In Him who is both power and love may we find the strength to live our lives in fullness and in joy. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.