

## “Poor Mental Hygiene”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister  
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009

The Reading:

*I [recently] made my semi-annual visit to the dentist. Settling into the hygienist's chair, I cringed guiltily as he asked in a manner which was both light-hearted and quite serious, "Well, we have been flossing daily, right?"*

*Uh-oh, I thought. "Well...", I replied, "not exactly daily."*

*"Hum," he said, reaching for his shiny little kit of scraping and digging tools. When we were finished, he once again, very calmly, went through his speech about proper dental hygiene. "You're not getting rid of the bacteria and plaque when you floss," he said at one point. "You're merely disturbing the process which, left undisturbed, enables all that stuff to settle in and create problems for you."*

*My eyes lit up in sudden comprehension. "Disturbing the process?" I asked. "Yes," he said. "Flossing disturbs the process in which all that stuff creates problems for you."*

*"Disturbing the process," I mused, and proceeded to expound extemporaneously upon the possibilities which seemed to exist for an interdisciplinary approach to theology and dentistry.*

*"You know," I said, "one could look at Religion as disturbing the process in which I, and others, allow our thoughts and feelings to become hard, like plaque, and then settle onto our souls and create problems."*

*I was on a roll. He listened politely as I went on.*

*"Flossing, then, could be looked at as a kind of spiritual discipline, a daily activity in which one can not only disturb the process of the settling of bacteria comfortably between our teeth, becoming plaque and gum disease, but also paying some equal attention to the assumption and biases which have settled quietly into our thoughts, disturb[ing] the process of their becoming rigid and even injurious to our lives."*

*He smiled, "Here lies the interface of theology and dentistry!" I declared. He continued to smile.*

~Rev. Daniel Budd

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The Sermon:

The book of Exodus (20:17) states:

*Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house;  
neither shalt thou desire his wife,  
nor his servant, nor his handmaid, nor his ox,  
nor his ass, nor any thing that is his.*

What if his house is bigger? His wife is prettier? His help works more for less? His ox is healthier and stronger? And what if he has a better ass?

Envy is not just in Exodus. It can be found all over the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, from humanity's envy of the knowledge of God in Genesis, to Cain and Abel, and David and Saul. What we see consistently throughout all of these stories, is that envy harms the person who is envying. Envy causes pain, because in envy, a person's own subjective sense of well-being, self-worth or self-respect is diminished. In a sense, envy is much like bitterness in that its effect is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to die.

I have just completed Joseph Epstein's little book on envy. Epstein suggests that envy is like *poor mental hygiene*. He writes:

*It blocks out clarity, both about oneself and the people one envies, and it ends by giving one a poor opinion of oneself. Envy clouds [judgment], clobbers generosity, precludes any hope of serenity, and ends in shriveling the heart - [all] reasons enough to fight free of it with all one's mental strength.*

So how do we do that? How do we "fight free of it?" First we must determine how envy shows up in our lives. Envy is not the same as jealousy. We can be jealous without wishing harm or devaluing the person who has the object of our desire.

Envy is often hidden from us within our own judgment. But judgment, in and of itself, is not wrong; it is actually quite necessary and sometimes helpful. Judgment shapes our personalities by distinguishing our preferences. I have often explained the workings of my own head as a mental boardroom. And holding a position of authority on that board is *The Judge*. He is robed, and oddly looks like a Baptist preacher from my past, if I were to imagine his character. He serves me well, most of the time. He always has an opinion (usually based on my past experience.) He is quick to make a decision in emergencies, especially when he feels threatened, imagined or otherwise. He is not, however, very open to change or to anything too radically unfamiliar. But he is a part of my mental boardroom and I value his opinion, even though I don't always take his advice. I usually acknowledge him, file his opinion away, and wait for more clarity, gathering more information before I make a decision. Envy is another member of my board room, and often makes an appearance at my board meetings to get the attention of the Judge. Envy succeeds in co-opting the Judge's attention most often when a false drama pits someone else's worthiness against my own.

Eighteenth Century German Philosopher, Immanuel Kant defined envy as "a reluctance to see our own well-being overshadowed by another's (because the standard we use to see how well off we are is not the intrinsic worth of our own well-being but how it compares with that of others.)" The fundamental question of the envious is a question about the injustice of the way the world has things arranged. Or about (what some would call) the fickleness of God's favor. Even

though I don't believe in a God who plays favorites, I know envy has entered the building when, instead of celebrating someone else's successes, I am hooked into believing they do not deserve their grace, or good fortune. Envy comes to my board meetings with a calculator, adding up all the injustices on a list entitled "Why not me?" For our Judge to do his or her job well, we must ensure that he is not clouded by envy's insatiable comparative yearnings.

When envy turns most ugly is when it is focused upon harming the one with the perceived advantage. Epstein tells a joke to make this point. [Please note these could be any three nationalities, and I hold nothing against any of them.]

*An Englishwoman, a Frenchman, and a Russian are each given a single wish by one of those genies whose almost relentless habit is to pop out of bottles.*

*The Englishwoman says that a friend of hers has a charming cottage in [the country] and that she would like a similar cottage, with an addition of two extra bedrooms and a second bath and a brook running in front of it.*

*The Frenchman says that his best friend has a beautiful blonde mistress, and he would like such a mistress himself, but a redhead instead of a blonde with longer legs and a bit more in the way of culture and chic.*

*The Russian, when asked what he would like, tells of a neighbor who has a cow that gives a vast quantity of the richest milk, which yields the heaviest cream and the purest butter.*

*'I vant dat cow,' the Russian tells the genie...  
"Dead."*

Whether or not we personally gain from envy or not, envy is most coldly served when it travels between ourselves and someone we have never met – and in fact are likely never to meet.

Our own culture is an envy producing machine, with Hollywood stardom as well as the entire advertising industry generating false wants and needs. Our attention is consistently pulled out of the moment and toward the next object of desire. Envy also clouds our judgment by turning our attention to the past: to some choice-point in our history that we imagine could have made our present very different. Maybe it was a decision we personally did not make, but we are envious of someone else who did.

So, you may be wondering whom do I envy? Well, I have to admit, I very shallowly envy people with naturally high metabolisms who can eat whatever they want. I envy musicians who have made it in the music business with very little talent (I could name them but I won't... you can just imagine for yourself, some three guitar chord one hit wonders who made enough money that they paid off their student loan debt. (Hear that Judge all clouded with envy? As though those

musicians are not Children of God?) But whom I really envy, quite sadly, are those who can marry in this country who seem to take it for granted, who do not understand the privilege. Britney Spears might be an example, who was married some drunken night in Vegas, or a man on death row who marries some upstanding citizen he met through the mail. All because they are the correct gender.

What do I do with this envy? How can we move from this draining mental energy, from this comparative judgment and sense of scarcity, to a more consistent-with-our-beliefs thinking that focuses on possibility. How can we honor our core value that everyone has valuable gifts to be manifested in this world? May I suggest – *mental floss*? Floss pretty much every day or at least more often than not. Mental flossing will not completely rid us of envious thoughts. However it will "disturb the process which, when left undisturbed, enables all that stuff to settle in and create problems for you." So what does mental flossing look like? Where envy is concerned, we have to go against our own instincts, and we need to pray for those whom we envy. Praying for those we envy is the flossing. Praying for our brothers and sisters is the action that changes *us*, regardless of what God you believe in, or don't believe in.

You cannot both be envious of someone and bless them at the same time. To undo envious thinking you must pray in gratitude. Gratitude does not need a particular God either. Gratitude grounds us in the moment – tears us away from comparative thinking. Prayers of blessing and gratitude are actions. They are the way to act ourselves into right thinking (it takes practice to undo the envy) and then take other actions as appropriate if your now-clear judge sees that as fair and compassionate. So I pray for Britney, and I work for justice.

Envy does not serve us. Envy is irrational thinking because it is self sabotage. It consumes our mental energies and pulls us out of the moment. Envy would fall into the category of "stinkin thinkin" (for those of you who may have graced the door of a 12-step program.) *Stinkin thinkin* occurs when our thoughts seem to take on the role of working against our own best interests. (Some people also might call this being influenced by the devil, if you have graced the doors of a few Pentecostal churches around here.) With *stinkin thinkin*, or the influence of the devil, we are lured into believing any number of things that simply are not true, or are not consistent with how we show up in the rest of our lives.

*Stinkin thinkin* can also be all-or-nothing thinking. When we see things in extreme either/or categories. When something falls short of perfect, we see it as a total failure. Maybe you have done this: you are on a diet and have a spoonful of ice cream, and you tell yourself, "I've blown

my diet completely.” That thought then upsets you so much that you down the entire quart of ice cream.

*Stinkin thinkin* can be overgeneralization. When, for example, we think a single negative event all of a sudden becomes a never ending pattern of defeat. We can catch ourselves doing this when our thoughts or comments include words like *always* and *never*. We find it when we pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, so that our vision of reality becomes tainted. It works like a drop of food coloring that discolors an entire glass of water. You might be familiar with this one: you receive many positive comments about something you have done, but one person says something mildly critical and you obsess about that one reaction for days and ignore all the positive feedback.

Maybe you are quick to jump to conclusions when there is no data to support it. *Stinkin thinkin* can include exaggerating the importance of our problems or shortcomings or minimize the importance of our desirable qualities or gifts. It is all these thought processes that don't seem to support our own mental hygiene. Like *should* statements and labeling that makes us think “I am a loser” instead of “I have made a mistake” or that keeps us from taking responsibility for our part in something by focusing all of the error as blame on someone else.

How many of you have experienced any of this kind of thinking that I have been describing? Would you raise your hands? I want you all to look around. Because normalizing this kind of thinking can help us to stop beating ourselves up over it and empower us instead to do something about it! These kind of thoughts: envy, and *stinkin thinkin*, are the plaque that builds up to form cavities in the brain. They harden our thought processes, and like poor dental hygiene, can even affect the heart.

So what do we do about it? We brush everyday twice a day with a good helping of gratitude, and floss regularly and whenever we think about it with prayers of blessing for those with whom we struggle the most. Although we can deliberately think thoughts, I don't think we have any control over what random thoughts pop up in our heads. We do, however, have control over what we choose to dwell upon, and act upon.

There are two more things we can do to have better mental hygiene. And they both involve paying attention. First, catch thoughts as soon as they appear. This exercise requires a determined effort on our part. When we watch every thought that enters our mind, as soon as we see a negative thought enter, we can discard it and refuse to follow it. The more we identify solely with our own thoughts, the more difficult it becomes to stop them later. Therefore, it is best to witness them as they occur.

And the second thing we can pay attention to: *who* is listening to our thoughts? The good news is no one but you, unless you choose to make them known. Seriously though, whenever a thought appears, ask yourself, who is it who is thinking this? There is an “I”, a witness to these thoughts we are thinking, who can decide to accept or reject thoughts. There is a Judge in your board room helping you decide. If we are otherwise mentally healthy, we are not victims of our own thoughts; we decide to either reject or give life to them.

When we rehearse our gratitude, and our blessings, we leave less room for mental plaque to form. So say it with me: *This is indeed a day which God has made. Let us rejoice in it and be glad.*

Let us bless our neighbor, and his wife, and his servant, and his ox.

And even his ass.

Amen.