

The good kind of jealousy

Mark 9:14-25

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So, first of all, I need to apologize in advance here.

It is really boring to listen to someone talking over and over again about something that happened to them.

And I am about to talk about something that I talked about only a few sermons ago.

But I swear, I won't ever mention it again.

I swear.

So, two weekends ago, I was in a charity event over at the Patterson Club, and by in, I mean, as a lot of you know, I was dancing in this charity event.

It was Fairfield's version of 'Dancing with the Stars', and somehow someone thought that I qualified as a star, or -- more likely -- knew that I find it very difficult to say 'no'.

"Ask Alida -- she'll say yes!"

And I did. And in the end it was actually a ton of fun, and now I have a little trophy with a disco ball on top,

that decades from now some grandchild will pull from a box in my attic and wonder about, no doubt.

But in the two months of preparing for this --

that's right, two months of practice to prepare roughly two minutes of dancing -- in those two months, there was definitely some learning about myself.

Out in the Narthex is the book that we're talking about at our monthly Book Chat this Tuesday,

and it's a lovely little reflection -- by another woman minister, actually -- on the spiritual journey that she discovered she was on while training for a triathlon.

I will not be writing a book on my spiritual journey through dance lessons.
But I did discover a few things.

First, not surprisingly, was humility,
something I mentioned in my previous sermon about this.

I genuinely -- and it sounds kinda dumb to say this -- I genuinely didn't know
how hard it was to dance.

My first lesson literally reduced me to tears --

I sat in my car afterwards sniffing and wiping my eyes;
hadn't felt that bad about myself since the disastrous perm episode of 1990.
I was humbled.

I was also -- and this is a less noble-sounding word than humble --
I was also just intensely jealous.

Yeah, jealous.

My partner -- and now, I might add, good friend --

my partner Lauren is beautiful and tiny and could do things with her body that I
didn't even really understand.

And watching her in these rehearsals, what I felt most of all, in all honesty,
was just out and out envy.

I wanted to *be* her, and to make my hip go right while my shoulders went left
and my hands did twirly things in the air.

I was just -- jealous.

Which is why, obviously, I can't write a memoir about my spiritual journey to
the dance floor,

'cause really, what kind of spiritual journey starts with jealousy?

Or maybe, just maybe, jealousy is where a lot of spiritual journeys start.

Because what if what you're jealous of,
what you envy,

is someone's faith?

What if what you wish you had is the faith that you see someone else has.

What if what you covet is the faith of another?

On Friday, two days ago, I subbed for David.

He teaches a class each Fall down at the Senior Center

[which is actually now the Bigelow Center for Senior Activities].

And he couldn't be there for class on Friday 'cause of this wedding he's gone to -

-

so, I was the substitute.

It's a class on literature and faith,

and among the couple books we were discussing on Friday,

David had also thrown in a short essay for us to look at together.

The title: "Coveting Luke's Faith."

It's a little essay *about* being jealous of the faith of another ...

written by a mother who saw that her young son had faith that she longed to possess herself.

Listen while I read some of it to you

(the piece was written for the Times in 2004).

I am unable to believe in God, she writes.

Most of the other atheists I know seem to feel freed, or proud of their unbelief, as if they've cleverly refused to be sold snake oil.

But over the years, I've come to feel I'm missing out.

When my husband went to Iraq for several months,

I was numb with anxiety;

yet my son Luke was chatty and calm.

He missed his daddy, but he wasn't scared.

I thought he was just too young to understand.

Then one night Luke and I were watching television,

and a story flashed on about a soldier home on leave .

The soldier started talking about how afraid he was of going back, how dangerous it was in Iraq.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Luke [press his hands together] and bow his head for a split second.

Surprised, I said, "Sweetheart, what are you doing?"

*He wouldn't tell me, but a few minutes later, he did it again.
I said, "You don't have to tell me, but if you want to, I'm listening." Finally he
confessed, "I was saying a little prayer for Daddy."*

*It was as if that mustard seed of faith had found its way into our son
and now he was revealing that he could move mountains.
Not in a church or as we gazed at the stars, but while we channel-surfed.
I was envious of him.
Luke wasn't rattled, because he believed that God would bring his father home
safely.
I was the only one stranded.*

*My husband did return from Iraq safely,
but if something had happened to his father,
Luke would have known Dad was in heaven, waiting for us.
He doesn't suffer from a void like the anguished father in Mark chapter 9, who
cried out with tears, "Lord, I believe;
help thou mine unbelief."
For Luke, all things are possible.
Luke's prayers can stretch to infinity and beyond,
but I am limited to one:
Help thou mine unbelief.*

Kristin just read us that very scripture story,
the story of the anguished father in Mark chapter 9.

He's a father whose son is gravely ill,
a father who's not at all sure what he believes, if anything,
not at all sure who Jesus is, if anybody,
but desperate enough for his son's sake
to bring him to Jesus and to say,

“if you can do anything, please do it.”

And Jesus takes him as he finds him,
without judgment,
without a litmus test of faith,
without demanding that he believe better, or more,
or differently.

“All things are possible for one who believes,”
Jesus says, simply, as he heals the child.

“I believe,” says the father, through his tears,
“help my unbelief.”

*I am envious of my son Luke, the writer said.
Help thou mine unbelief.*

I think the truth is that a great many of us are envious of the faith of others,
others who seem to believe with a depth greater than our own.

I think that more than a few of us covet others' faith,
look with longing at the faith others seem to have --
prayers that stretch to infinity and beyond,
faith that will move mountains.

I imagine that a goodly number of us come into church feeling just a bit like
impostors,
wondering if we're the only ones in the pews
who aren't sure about this faith stuff all the time.

I imagine there are more than a few of us
who sneak a peek down the pew during prayers

and think “I wish I believed like that person seems to believe.”

My guess is that there are plenty of us here right now coveting the faith of others,
the faith we suspect is larger and deeper and surer than our own.

Which is why this gospel passage has always spoken to me.

Because in fact, I believe that that father’s prayer

is the prayer of everyone who’s ever walked through the doors of a church.

It is **our** prayer, too:

I believe ... help my unbelief.

We covet the faith of others

just as we envy those who can float across dance floors

or can sing beautifully

or can eat cheesecake daily with no apparent consequences.

We yearn for the faith that others seem to have.

Help my unbelief.

But here’s the thing:

Unlike lots of other things, faith is NOT something that you’re either born with
or you’re not.

Faith is not given in abundance to some

and withheld from others

as exquisite vocal chords are

or athletic bodies.

Faith, paradoxically, is something that grows stronger

as you yearn for it.

Longing for faith,
coveting the faith of others,
longing, hoping, wishing for faith,
is the first step toward possessing it.

It's why we're here.

Because we want what others have,
because we're jealous in the best possible way.

We're here, all of us, because we covet a greater faith.

We're here to learn from those whose faith we admire, yearn for.

And that yearning is what keeps us moving toward God,
moving toward God.

I believe -- help my unbelief.

You may well have wondered, as you came into church this morning,
why there is a tent out on the Green.

Maybe a wedding reception yesterday, you probably thought,
maybe someone had a big Saturday night party?

No -- the tent is there because three days ago

hundreds upon hundreds of people gathered here on this hill

for the funeral of John Steers, young father, cherished friend, child of this
church.

We'd known we'd need a tent for overflow seating, just like on Easter, and we
did, and then some.

John was at Fairfield Prep when I came to this church,
a phenomenal tennis player and a really good guy.

And a good guy he remained for all of his too-short life,
a person of unshakeable integrity and tenacious hope.

At the service, two friends of John's eulogized him, beautifully capturing his
spirit in their words.

And the second to speak, Tom Lenci,

talked about what he, though older, had learned from John:

and what he'd learned was integrity.

Tom told us about it by telling a story,
a story about -- fittingly for John -- tennis.

Tom told the story like this:

"We were playing in a doubles match one time," Tom said.

"and I floated a return to the other pair.

And John was at the net.

The other guy rifled the shot back, but John turned and just nailed it, behind the back, right between these two guys.

It was the best shot I'd ever seen on the court in my life.

And these two guys, their jaws dropped, and they started walking back to the baseline.

And then something happened.

John said, "Guys, it's your point. The ball hit my pants."

And he had to say it again, because these guys just didn't get it.

No one heard the ball hit his trousers.

I didn't hear it, they didn't hear it.

But John knew, even if it was just a nick.

And his DNA was to do the right thing, and he didn't hesitate, he just did the right thing."

And then Tom said,

"I think now about how that integrity translated to me.

I found myself a year later playing in a tournament,
and I ran up to the net and I spiked the ball, it was great.

And I looked down, and ... the tip of my toe was touching the net.

The net hadn't moved, but my toe was hitting it.

And I called out, "it's your point, my toe hit the net, it's your point."

And as I walked back to serve, I thought to myself,

"John would be proud of me."

"So who was teaching whom?" Tom said, his voice catching. "Who was mentoring who?"

And we all knew the answer.

Because that is how God how teaches us.
That is how God speaks to us.
God speaks to us through the people around us
whose integrity we admire,
whose hope and optimism we long for, whose faith we *covet*.
It's what we're here for, it's what church IS for --
to be strengthened by one another,
to give faith to one another.
Each one of us, each one of us, walks through the door of this church with our
hearts crying out "I believe, help my unbelief."
Each one of us, every one of us, comes into this place longing for more faith,
coveting more faith, jealous for more faith --
and you know what? that's good, that's right, that's as it should be.

My jealousy for Lauren's dance skills didn't turn me into a dancer.
There's a video that proves that point.
And my envy of the way the women behind me right now can sing
won't do a thing to fix my vocal capabilities.
But faith? That's where jealousy *works*.
That's where coveting something works.
Because wishing for it *will* make it so.

Help my unbelief, whispered the father, to Jesus.
I believe, but help my unbelief.
And in his longing, it was not just his son who was healed,
but he himself.
So will it be for us. Amen.