

This past Monday I had a very strong feeling I want to tell you about. You'll remember that it was sunny outside, and the fall colors were peaking, so I went by the assisted-living center where my parents live and picked up my mom to take her for a drive in the country to see the leaves. We drove into Putnam County, to a covered bridge over Big Walnut Creek, then wound our way back toward Danville. Mom wanted to see our granddaughter, Madeline, so we went by Spencer and Jessica's house. Jessica and Madeline were sitting on their front porch with Jessica's mother, Debbie, who watches Madeline while Jessica is at work. Debbie is a very kind-hearted, generous woman.

Since Mom can't walk very well, Jessica brought Madeline to us and placed her on Mom's lap. Mom and I were passing her back and forth, hugging and kissing her, when Debbie came down from the porch to say hello. When Madeline saw Debbie, her face lit up and she reached out to Debbie to be held by her. I felt very jealous, and pulled Madeline back to me. I was envious of Madeline's obvious affection toward Debbie, even though Madeline had shown me the same affection not a minute before. I realized, as I pulled Madeline back to me, what was happening, and was embarrassed, so let loose of Madeline so she could go to whomever she wanted. She went to Debbie, which obviously meant she didn't love me, so I went home, curled up in the fetal position, and sucked my thumb the rest of the day, a failure at grandparenting.

I've always struggled with jealousy. Not the nasty kind of jealousy where I fly into a rage and kill other people. I used to do that, but not anymore, not for weeks now. More the snarky kind of jealousy that is secretly pleased when something bad happens to someone I envy. Not something horrible bad, like dying or getting sick, but something like the sewer backing up in the basement of their million dollar vacation home. I'm certainly not proud of my feelings of envy, but they're there and I know they're there, and I'm working on them because I don't want to be a jerk.

So I felt envious this past Monday and lie in bed that night and thought about it, and remembered the story about Cain and Abel, the first siblings, the metaphorical archetype for families everywhere. We're all familiar with the term "sibling rivalry." Cain and Abel had it in spades. They grew up to be farmers. Cain raised crops and Abel raised livestock. They belonged to a little Quaker meeting just outside of Eden, and someone in the meeting had the bright idea that everyone in the meeting ought to give God, who already had everything, a present. Cain swept the grain from the floor of his granary, put it in a bushel basket, slapped a bow on it, and gave it to God. There were weeds and dirt mixed in, and God wasn't all that thrilled. God felt like you felt when you were a kid and your grandma gave you socks for Christmas. That's how God felt. He thanked Cain, because God is polite, but Cain could tell God didn't think much of his present. God is polite, but he's bad at faking things.

Abel fattened up the firstborn of his flock, the finest animals he owned, and gave them to God. God was deeply touched by this gift because it was such a generous act, and he thanked Abel and promised to cherish the animals. This made Cain mad with envy, so he lured his brother Abel out behind the barn and killed him. This was the start of people going back behind the barn to sin. Smoking, spin the bottle, saying cuss words, it all began here, with the first siblings behind the first barn.

So Cain took Abel's life. And remember, this isn't historically true, but it is metaphorically true. It's not fact, but it is true. There wasn't a real Cain and Abel, but the lesson in Cain and Abel's story is spot on.

What is that lesson? When we are jealous of someone, when we look at their lives with envy, what we're really doing is wishing their lives didn't belong to them, but to us. When I am jealous of someone's wealth or relationships or looks or hair, what I'm really doing is wishing their wealth, their relationships, their looks, their hair, weren't theirs. I want it taken from them and given to me. But we not only want the gifts that make up the essence of someone else's life taken from them and given to us, we are also saying, "The gifts that comprise my life are insufficient. The people in my life are insufficient. My appearance is insufficient. My life isn't good enough, so I want someone else's life." As for Cain, he wanted Abel's life so bad, he took it.

You know, someone else's life might look really good from the outside, but inside it might be horrible. We would never know, because it's impossible to know what someone else's life is really like, unless the curtain is pulled back. I remember several years ago I had a book-signing with this famous man. People were lining up to buy his book and get his autograph, and have their picture taken with him, and I was so envious of Jared Fogle. We know so little about the lives we envy.

To envy is to want the life of another, to want that life so badly we would take it from them, which is the great metaphorical truth of Cain and Abel. But to envy is more than that. To envy another is the repudiation, the rejection, of our own lives. It is to say, "What I am and who I am are not good enough. I want what you have. I want your life." Thus, Cain wanted Abel's life, and took it.

God was gracious to Cain. God is like that. God merely acknowledged the inevitable consequence of Cain's brutality. In murdering Abel, Cain rejected home and rejected brotherhood, so God permitted Cain to experience the natural consequences of his brutality. Cain became untethered. Untied from home. Untied from love. Cain *went* away, the Bible says. Did you get that? He *went* away. He wasn't sent away as a punishment. He went away as a consequence. He became untethered. This is what envy, when unrestrained, always does. It untethers us from others. Cain went away.

Friends, don't let envy take you away. Covet *your* life. It is the only one in the world like it. Don't covet the life of another. They have difficulties and sorrows you do not know. Cherish *your* life.