

Green Dragon

“Kill the beast.”

Matthew 20:10-16

Third in the Series, *Ups and Downs on the Emotional Roller Coaster*

Rev. John H. Hice

June 6, 2010

First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Labor Dispute

We have a problem here. Something in Jesus' story appears fundamentally unfair.

There was urgency in the vineyard. The grapes were plump and juicy and it seemed that this was the day they had to be reaped. So, according to custom, the owner of the vineyard goes to the market square where day laborers are waiting to be hired.

The scene reminds me of the caddy yard at the golf course where I worked in my youth. We each had been given a category according to experience and skill (I was a “C” caddy). We would arrive at six in the morning. Someone would usually bring a transistor radio, and on through the day it would play.

From the cool of the morning until the hot sun began to lower in the afternoon sky, we would sit, penned-up, waiting for a call. The “A” caddies would usually be selected early; they might work 36 or even as many as 72 holes of golf in a day (at least that's what a few of them said). The rest of us would sit and wait: 8:00 A.M., 10:00, 1:00 P.M. ...waiting for someone interested in paying the lower rate of an inexperienced caddy, or just stuck with one of us because the good ones were already taken.

So the crowd gathered early, then the caddy master would come, obviously with a job, look us over, younger hearts heart would race with a little bit of fear, anticipation, hope; only to see a finger pointing to one of the older, bolder boys. Then we'd all sink, relax, and idle our time listening to *What a Day for a Daydream* in the hot sun.

Dragon

Day laborers did that six days a week. No let up. Year-after-year; and if they managed to put in a day's work at all, the wages they'd pull would amount to a denarius, enough to put barely enough food on the table for the family to get by.¹

Before you feel sorry for the left-behind, think of those who got hired. You could argue a case for them. The owner chose them, entered the usual contract, and sent them out in the field to work hard all day in the burning sun. Then every couple of hours more laborers came to join them in the labor. Around 4:00 in the afternoon, after they'd been at it a good ten hours already, in came the last batch. At quitting time the owner came to pay the workers. First, he paid the late hires who'd sat around most of the day, listening to tunes and reading comic books: the "C" group. They probably weren't worth their weight and certainly hadn't picked their grapes – not like the first ones. Yet, it was the last ones who were called up first and into each of the outstretched hands went a *denarius*.

Wouldn't it be reasonable to expect that if those people got a day's wage, there'd be a sizeable bonus for those who had picked their bushels? But those who were hired on at noon got the same wage. Then finally the first came for payment and into their hands went the same wage: a mere denarius. Now, how is that fair?

It seems envy can sometimes be more justifiable than you'd think. Name a time when something wasn't fair for you: someone else got something you knew should have been yours. Envy: it seems to be justifiably everywhere. A favorite uncle visits and brings a toy for one child and not the other. A colleague gets the promotion you expected. You're all proud of your new house and the furnishings you broke the bank to purchase, and then see the house a cousin in Milwaukee got. There are occasions in life that aren't fair. The short end of the stick is a hard place to be.

So beware. It's just at the point you feel justified in jealousy that it will run you into trouble. Once I was leading a worship service in a county jail and noticed an inmate who seemed more refined than the rest. The chaplain told me about her after they'd left. She had been a book keeper in a going company, a good mom and wife, respected in her neighborhood, her kid's school, and around town. But she had noticed friends and neighbors who were able to afford some luxuries that seemed a little beyond

her means. Designer clothes, luxury cars, the best of window treatments and furnishings: you get the picture.

She wanted these things too. In fact, she thought she deserved to have them. So she started using her credit card and sunk deeper and deeper in high interest debt. Finally, she was well-over her head in it.

So she started to borrow money from the business – without asking. She'd just take a little here and a little there, cooking the books so it wouldn't be discovered.

Always intending to pay it back.

She was tens, maybe hundreds of dollars into it when she was discovered. Embezzlement: an open and shut case. Now she was doing time. That's where her envy got her. No wonder envy is considered one of the deadly sins.

"O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;" reads Shakespeare in *Othello*, "It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on."² A paradox: how envy, an emotion designed to protect, is bound to become a passion that will consume you.

Green-eyed monster – let's call it the green dragon. Every time you compare yourself to someone else, you invite the green dragon to your door. That is the beginning of envy; and if you want to manage envy, and keep it from devouring you, you'll have to stop whistling. Envy management is all in prevention: *stop comparing*.

That's what Jesus is trying to get across much of the time. Peter came complaining one day that a stranger who wasn't in the Disciple Club was healing people in Jesus' name and getting credit for it. "You've got to make him stop!" Peter says. But Jesus asks him, "Why? If he's not against us, he must be for us. (Just let it go.)"³ Stop comparing. He says not to be worried about the speck in another person's eye, but concentrate on the log in your own.⁴ Stop comparing. Envy: It springs from comparing yourself against others.

Back to the vineyard. Those who work all day compare themselves with those who hired on at 4:00, and they envy. "How come they got to play cards most of the day and

get the same pay as us?” Jesus’ answer is this: this is about the amazing grace of God, not about fairness. Don’t begrudge those who are blessed. By the grace of God, you are blessed. Others will be blessed, too. Don’t be concerned about how God’s grace is given to another: In fact, just thank God for what they’ve got.” You’ve each got your own set of blessings.

Take pleasure in the blessing of another: that is the only way I know that you can slay the Green Dragon. You starve it.

Slaying the Dragon

It was a perfect game. 26 Cleveland Indians came up to bat. 26 batters were out. No hits. No walks. No errors. So far, a perfect game. Then Armando Galarraga, Detroit’s starter pitcher who was about to go down in history threw a pitch that was hit to the second base hole. It was easily caught on the bounce. Like clockwork the routine play went like this: the pitcher ran to first base and caught the ball thrown to him, beating the runner clearly by a step. There’s nothing close about it. Perfect game; but the umpire called the runner, “Safe.”

Robbed. Robbed of a perfect game. Robbed of a rightful place in history. A tearful Jim Joyce, umpire at first, recognized and confessed his error; but the rules of baseball wouldn’t let it be reversed, even when batter number 28 was retired and the game was won. Joyce said, “I took a perfect game away from that kid.”⁵

Armando could have compared himself to Roy Halladay who just threw a perfect game for the Phillies. He could have blamed and fumed and heaped all kinds of coals on the umpire and on the rules. He could have envied that which should have been his.

Instead, he smiled. He never raised his voice. And when he was asked, he said, “Nobody’s perfect.” The next day he walked on the field and shook the umpire’s hand. And the rest of us would gladly have joined him – and it would have been understandably ugly.

No envy. Only grace.

His father called him from home in Venezuela to tell him how proud he was of him.⁶

New York Yankees manager Joe Girardi said that the way Galarraga handled it was almost like it was an Ernie Harwell moment. “It was like the Detroit organization, the fans, were reacting the way Ernie Harwell would have reacted.”⁷

His grace rubbed off on the rest of us. There was something catchy about it.

The dragon was slayed.

Maybe that’s what grace gets you. Instead of crying, “foul” and entrenching himself in the position of a loser,

grace made him a winner – him and all the rest of us.

Maybe that’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

¹ Eugene Boering, “Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, vol VIII*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 1995. p 393.

² William Shakespeare, *Othello*, III, iii.

³ Mark 9:38-39

⁴ Matthew 7:5

⁵ Michael Rosenberg, “Robbed!” *The Detroit Free Press*. © Thursday, June 3, 2010.

⁶ Shawn Windsor, “Galarraga cool on surreal night,” *The Detroit Free Press* © Friday, June 4, 2010.

⁷ “Girardi: Galarraga had an ‘Ernie Harwell moment’” (AP) June 5, 2010.