“Once Upon a Time:
The Gospel and Cinderella”

Text: Genesis 37:1-28

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

June 16, 2013

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The story of Cinderella holds an enduring place in the hearts of children of every age. The story, as we know it, is based on Charles Perrault’s late seventeenth century version, complete with stepmother, fairy godmother, mice, pumpkin, glass slipper, and rescuing prince. There are other tellings of the story that reach back a thousand years and appear as indigenous stories in Africa, China, and among Native Americans.

It was Perrault’s story that received the Disney treatment in 1950. It was the twelfth of Disney’s full-length cartoon movies and came as the last of the classic movies of the 1930s and 40s. The creativity of the Disney studio was on full display, and the film earned three Academy Awards, including “Best Song” for “Bippity-Boppity-Boo.”

There is much in the story that is familiar to us. Even if we have never heard the story, or watched the movie, we sort of know the basic outline of this story. Oppressed girl finds a new life and is lifted from her condition by a handsome prince. It’s archetypal. We’ve heard this one before. As Ann and Barry Ulanov write in their book, Cinderella and Her Sisters:

Why should this story attract so many tellers, capture so many readers and listeners? What is there about it that cuts through the major differences of time, place, and culture? There are other attractive heroines. There are other cruel stepmothers and ugly sisters to bring alive the perils of family life. Rescuing princes abound and if other godmothers or ingenious animals, or talking fish, or enchanted forests are not necessarily so resourceful as Cinderella’s, enough magic exists in the world of fairy tales to provide contentment to an audience hungry for happy endings magically contrived.
What is there about the story of Cinderella that so attracts us?

It is Cinderella herself. Seated in her ashes – her “cinders” – she reminds us of all those who suffer – perhaps even reminding us of a “Suffering Servant” that Isaiah wrote about. She is a victim – a victim of injustice, cruelty, maltreatment, and serves harsh and pitiless superiors. She is a victim of envy – that most dangerous of human emotions and behaviors. She is squashed by the envy of her step-mother and step-sisters.

And that’s where our sermon takes us this morning. Let’s spend a few moments talking about envy and its destructive power in our lives and in our world.

The story of Cinderella begins with the background we need in order to put it all together. Cinderella is the only child of a very wealthy father and a deceased mother. (That’s about the only Father’s Day connection we’ve got here. Sorry.) The father dotes on Cinderella, giving her everything she needed or wanted. Still, the father feels that what Cinderella really needs is a mother, so, in time, the father remarries a woman with two daughters. As fate would have it, the father dies, leaving Cinderella with her new family, who, it turns out, are far worse than anyone could have known. Cinderella is treated as a slave and forced to live in rags and sit in the ashes – cinders.

What was the cause of Cinderella’s mistreatment? Envy. What was there to be envious of? Cinderella’s beauty, her poise, her sense of self, and her inheritance. Cinderella had it all and the step-sisters could not compare.

And what is envy? The Ulanovs put it this way:

Envy presents itself as feeling demeaned by another’s good fortune and wanting to belittle the other’s good to protect oneself. Envy wants to make something alive into something dead. Envy looks hard for evil in another person and takes great satisfaction in finding it.

Envy wears many masks, among them jealousy, greed, resentment, covetousness, and spite.

Because the Bible is a very human book, telling the stories of very human people, we shouldn’t be surprised to find envy in its pages. Rachel was jealous of Leah for being able to provide children to Jacob. (Genesis 30:1) The Psalmist advises us to steer clear of envy: “Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb.” (Psalm 37:1) The editor of the Proverbs reminds us: “A tranquil mind gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.” (Proverbs 14:30) Even poor old Job tells us, “Surely vexation kills the fool, and jealousy (or envy) slays the simple.” (Job 5:2) And when you make the jump to the New Testament, it is envy and jealousy that are given as reasons for the crucifixion of Jesus by those opposed to him. (Matthew 27:18 and Mark 15:10)

And when it comes to stories of envy and jealousy in the Bible, there is no greater example than the story of Joseph and his brothers. We heard the opening of the story again this morning. Joseph, the dreamer, is the favorite son of Jacob. Jacob dotes on him and gives him more attention than he gives his other sons.
Now, here’s where it gets interesting. Jacob had twelve sons and one daughter. Leah, his first wife, bore him six sons and a daughter. Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife, was unable to bear children, and gave her servant Bilhah to be a surrogate for her. Bilhah bore two more sons. Leah gave her servant Zilpah to Jacob as a surrogate and she bore two sons. And, finally, Rachel bears Jacob two sons – Joseph and Benjamin – the favorite sons of his favorite wife. Lots of intrigue. Lots of scheming. Lots of maneuvering. And you thought Downton Abbey was something!

So, when you stop to think about it, Joseph’s step-brothers are the ones who are envious of him and sell him into slavery and then create a fantastic tale about Joseph being killed by wild animals. And why? Because they are jealous, envious, and resentful of him.

The Bible pulls no punches when it comes to envy. The Bible puts envy on display for all to see its destructive and vicious power. The Bible offers us these images as warning and counsel.

The power of envy is that envy does not lead us to focus on the goodness in another human being. Nor do we allow the desire created in us to spark the development of a matching goodness in ourselves. Envy leads us to see something in another, find it missing in ourselves, and then act out against the one who has what we want. Envy leads us to strike out at another because of what we ourselves lack.

Envy blinds us to the blessings that surround us and indwell us. Envy tells us that we are lacking and not that we have so much. Envy tells us that if we just have what someone else has we will be happy and contented. Envy tries to convince us that the reason we don’t have something we want is because that something is owned by someone who doesn’t deserve it and is a lesser person than we are. Envy argues that if we just have what someone else has – something that they really don’t deserve – then we will find the fulfillment that has eluded us.

Envy gets into our thoughts and feelings. It erodes our love for neighbor and eventually our love for God. “Why would God bless them so when they are such despicable people?” “It would serve them right if God would just smash them.” These words roam around our brains and sometimes come from our mouths.

And, sometimes, envy gets into our actions. We strike out at those who are the objects of our envy. We speak ill of them, gossip about them, pass judgments on them. We deface the image of God in which they were created with labels and brand them as beyond forgiveness. And, sometimes, we go so far as to take actions against them that are designed only to cause them pain and harm. Progeny

And all because we see something in them that we find absent in ourselves. Rather than try to change ourselves, we will try to tear down another. Envy is the beginning of theft, war, and murder. Envy spawns hatred, division, and injustice. Envy’s progeny is suspicion, mistrust, and ultimately destruction. This is envy’s truest and most damning nature.

So, where are we to go for help and hope? To whom can we turn?

She is there in the cinders. She sits in the ashes. She offers a feminine face to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah’s prophecy.
Instead of envy and jealousy, she offers us a glimpse of humility and meekness. She is unassuming and modest. She is true to herself and grateful for what is hers and not anothers. In her humility and lowliness, there is greatness and distinction. She accepts the maltreatment she receives and does not return it to those from whom it came.

Cinderella offers us a glimpse of the Christ and a glimpse of how those who would be known as Christians are to live. She is the antithesis of envy and jealousy. She is grateful and thankful for what she has. She seeks not for things but for love. She strives, not for more, but for what is real, and lasting, and true.

And it is for that, that Cinderella is rewarded. For living a humble and authentic life, Cinderella receives the gift for which she longs – love. For finding a different – and albeit narrower path – Cinderella finds new life.

Envy, jealousy, and covetousness will destroy us. Job was right – they will rot our bones. These are paths that lead to death.

Humility, modesty, an unassuming nature – these will lead us to life. These are reflections of the Creator. These are part of that image in which we were created and life is more of what it was meant to be when these principle elements are present.

And lest you think that’s just too much “pie in the sky,” remember these words:

The Lord takes up the weak out of the dust
and lifts up the poor from the cinders.
The Lord sets them with the nobles,
with the nobles of the chosen people.

And if we can make that change – if we can put away the ways of jealousy and envy and take up the ways of humility and generosity – we too can live “happily ever after,” which is, of course, just another way of saying, for now and evermore. Amen.

Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Cinderella and Her Sisters*, p. 13

Ibid., p. 91