Beyond Envy, Rivalry and Violence: Let’s Start with Desire

I’m a 17 y/o server in a cafeteria-style restaurant called Sign of the Beefeater on 8 mile in Detroit. New girlfriend, Nancy Rozell, who has just broken up with her old boyfriend, also named Ken. I do not like Ken Zwirnikowski, though I barely know him. For a few weeks after the breakup, he comes through the line at Sign of Beefeater and says to me, “Hi Ken! I’m on my way to see Rozell!” I want to stab him with the carving knife.

About once a year after we got married (and we were married 40 years) I’d make some snarky comment (cloaked in a costume of lighthearted jest) about, “That squirrely old boyfriend of yours, Ken Swirnikowski.” At one point my kids said, “Give it up Dad!”

There’s a German word schadenfreude: pleasure in misfortune of others? Ever felt a little secret shadenfreude when your co-worker, the one who consistently outshines your performance, blows a project? It’s an embarrassing thing about us isn’t it?

If your month old newborn sleeps the night, don’t tell your friends who are tearing their hair out with a 6 mo old getting up every two hours. The envy provoked will not be good for anyone.

In our reading today about the two paths—way of the Spirit contrasted with the way opposed to the Spirit, did you notice this string of human traits, “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy”? Right after he said, “The whole law is summed up in a single command: ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ If however you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

As we observe the intense polarization of our culture & politics, isn’t there something prescient and chilling about this warning? The Bible assigns envy-rivalry and the violence they engender, a central role in the human condition...it situates the Jesus path as alternative to envy-rivalry & violence.

What say we explore this together for the next 4-5 Sundays?

Today, consider the triangular nature of desire as the cause of envy, rivalry, and ultimately, violence. Right in our origin story, Genesis 3. (Alter translation) READ

Often focus on role of temptation/disobedience as the trip-line of “the fall.” But the text is inviting us to look deeper: how desire works for humans.
“And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was **lust** to the eyes and the tree was **lovely** to look at, and she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave to her man, and he ate.”

The Hebrew translated “**lust**” is *ta’awag* and means “that which is intensely **desired**.” And the Hebrew translated “**lovely**,” *nehmad* means literally, “that which is **desired**.”

So this is human desire’s first explicit appearance in the Bible.

This piece of writing is what a scholar would call **mythic**. Myths have fantastic features, like talking creatures. They were earliest human stories and the ancient peoples knew not to take them literally. Because that would rob them of their power.

The Bible, especially Genesis, includes **mythic stories** but they are often **myth-busting myths**. They are designed to unmask some of the self-serving myths that we tell ourselves.

This story **unmasks the myth** of the independent autonomous self, so precious to modern people...

We like to think that each of us is a self-contained unit generating its own desires. We want what we want because we want it.

But this story had a different take. Often we want what we want because we are **imitating the desire** of someone else.

The garden dwellers didn’t generate their own desire for forbidden fruit. They didn’t want it because it was forbidden. They **borrowed their desire**—and it was an intense desire that felt to them like it originated with them—from someone else, **the woman from the snake, the man, from the woman**.

The snake opens with a little deceit, saying God had forbidden them to eat from all the trees in garden. But the woman catches this, and interrupts right away to say, “Oh no, he told us we may eat from any tree in the garden, just stay away from the one tree.”

The woman wasn’t fooled.

Instead, she **absorbed the snake’s desire**. This desire didn’t originate with her. She had no sign of it until the talking snake revealed its desire: “Don’t you realize this tree can make you like God?” His desire became her desire.
This is a deep insight into the nature of human desire: it is **triangular**. We desire according to the desires of others....as Rene Girard says, because we have this advanced capacity for imitation. We don’t just imitate behaviors, fashion, etc. We imitate desire.

**Rene Girard** the scholar who developed what he calls “**mimetic theory**” (mimetic = imitative) calls this “**mimetic desire.**”

I had no interest in coffee until I had a Teamsters union job that included coffee breaks. My co-workers wanted coffee so I wanted it too, even though I didn’t like the taste. (So I sugared it up....)

Girard says we **unconsciously imitate** the desire of another person called a **model** or **mediator** (not just any person but a significant person in our lives, usually.)

You can see how mimetic desire fuels **rivalry.** We want what someone else wants. They notice us wanting it, and they want it even more, and we notice them wanting it even more and we want it even more. It can spiral out of control.

Rivalry, rooted in mimetic desire, breeds **violence.** We want our rival to fail in his quest for what we want. Our rival starts imitating that same desire in us, and they want to see us fail in our quest. And it spirals. (China & Japan’s rivalry over a few useless islands)

**Rivalrous desire** spread like a **contagion** in Genesis. The **woman,** seeing the snake’s interest in the forbidden fruit—he obviously wants to be like God--suddenly wants it herself. Her **man,** seeing her want it, wants it too.

This contagion triggers another, **violence.** The first death in the Bible is a murder, fueled by envy. Mimetic desire leads to envy leads to rivalry leads to violence.

And violence, not disease, is the contagion most feared by early humanity. By chapter six of Genesis, we read, “**And the earth was filled with violence.**” The violence of humans, that is.

Later in her story, Israel was given ten words, ten commands. Of the ten, the tenth is the most mysterious because it seems to us to be the most **impossible:** “**You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbors.**”
(BTW, if we think slavery is not supported by “a plain reading of the Bible” all we need to consider is 10th commandment, in which it is assumed that human beings will own other human beings. Today of course, we would say this particular “plain reading of the Bible” doesn’t reveal God’s will. This book can only be read as part of an ongoing conversation with God. But I digress.)

The **deep wisdom** of the tenth command is precisely in the way it cuts through all the layers of external behavior, and addresses us at innermost heart level: **“Do not desire your neighbor’s house...or anything that is your neighbors.”** This addresses violence at its root. To end rivalry and violence, we must consider desire.

We might ask, how is such a thing possible? How can we control what we *desire*? Perhaps “control” is too strong a word. How about “influence.” How might we influence what we desire?

Maybe that’s why we have this story about desire, how we can unconsciously imitate the desire of others.

Maybe it helps to know that desire is mimetic. We unconsciously imitate the desire of others.

Knowing this, Jesus models another use for mimetic desire. Jesus comes to us as a child of God who is near and dear to God, like a child with its mother is near and dear. He says, come close to me and together we’ll get close to God. (A God who is LOVE, MERCY, FORGIVENESS.)

**THEN LET OUR MIMETIC DESIRE RUN WILD. WE DO IT UN-CONSCIOUSLY WITH OTHER PEOPLE. TRY IT WITH GOD.**

**AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE START DESIRING WHAT GOD DESIRES AS IF IT WERE OUR VERY OWN DESIRE, WHICH IT WILL BE.**

Jesus invites human beings into the life of love he knows within the Trinity—Father/Son/Spirit. Here there is **imitation & desire** without envy, without rivalry, without violence.

**SILENT REFLECTION**

Make an intention to yourself and God: not to change your desires, but to notice them. Ask the Spirit to make you aware of your desires, including where those desires come from.