

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 21, 2014

"Keeping Up With the Joneses."

Matthew 20:1-16

A company chartered a cruise ship for its top sales people. These sales people swarmed aboard and headed for their cabins. Minutes later one of them was on deck demanding to see the Captain. One of the officers asked if he could help. "My friend has a much better cabin!" he said. "I did as good a job as he did and I want a cabin just like his." "Sir," the officer replied, "The cabins are identical." "Yeah," said the man, "But his cabin looks out on the ocean and my cabin looks out on this old dock." Hello? Is anybody home? Soon they will be on the ocean and all the views will be the same.

Have you ever noticed that we are perfectly content with what we have--until we compare what we have with what someone else has.

A sparrow complained to Mother Nature, "You gave beautiful colors to the peacock and a lovely song to the nightingale, but I am plain and unnoticed. Why was I made to suffer?" "You were not made to suffer," stated Mother Nature. "You suffer because you make the same foolish mistake as human beings. You compare yourself with others. Be yourself, for in that there is no comparison and no pain." That's easy to say, isn't it, but hard to implement.

It's hard not to compare what we have with what our neighbor has. There is a book that is called *Ambition* and in it is demonstrated how defeating this game of comparison is. It tells about a man who sold his business for \$10 million and moved to Florida to start a new life style, only to run into a group of even wealthier neighbors with private plane safaris to Kenya, homes in Nassau, and much more. He said he would have been happier if he had never moved to the Gold Coast. You and I think we would be deliriously happy with \$10 million--many of us would be deliriously happy until we ran into the person who has \$50 million.

High school and College reunions can be especially dangerous for people who try to find their own self-worth in comparison to others. It is those who were happy and successful in high school and college, who go to the reunions: the class presidents, the team captains, the cheer leaders, the prom queens. The unpopular misfit who later becomes successful rarely goes back. It's too painful to be reminded of earlier failure.

Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went back to the marketplace and saw other men standing there. He said to them, "You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you." And so they went. The landowner went back to the marketplace again about the sixth hour and again about the ninth hour and did the same thing. And when there was only one hour left in the work day, he returned to the marketplace and found some other men and said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard."

Scholars tell us that in Palestine, the grapes ripen toward the end of September, and after that, the rains begin to fall. If the harvest is not gathered in quickly, it is ruined. Any worker is welcome, even if he can only do an hour's work.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first." The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came first and each received a denarius. When those hired earliest in the day came, they thought that they would receive more; but they also received each one a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner, saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day." But he answered one of them, "Friend, I am not being unfair to

you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Are you envious because I am generous?"

You and I know the answer to that one: The workers would be perfectly happy if they had not played the comparison game. They compared what they were paid with what the others were paid, and they were dissatisfied. And that is true of many of us. We have a phrase for it, don't we? Keeping up with the Joneses. There are many faulty misconceptions that people who play this game are under. I want to mention just a couple.

The first misconception is that happiness on a scale is something you can acquire. If I just have a nicer car, or a nicer house, or a European vacation like the Joneses have, then I would be happy. That's an illusion.

If you doubt that, you need only consider the story of Maya Angelou's Aunt Tee, a woman who worked for 30 years as a maid and 30 years as a live-in housekeeper. On Saturdays, when she lived with a rich white couple in Bel-Air, she would cook pigs' feet, greens and fried chicken, then invite some of her friends over for the evening. The chauffeur and the other housekeeper and her husband would come to eat, drink, dance, laugh and play cards. One night, the rich white couple knocked on their housekeeper's door. They apologized for disturbing her, then they got right to the point. Every Saturday night, they heard the joy and laughter coming from the housekeeper's quarters, and they wanted to be part of it. Would she please leave her door ajar, they asked, so they could not only hear the joy, but see it, experience it, feel it? The warmth and happiness that their 14-room house, three cars, swimming pool and who knows how much money could never buy them. Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he concluded his parable by saying, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Am I getting through? This is powerful information.

The second misconception is that a person's worth can be measured by the size of his or her accomplishment. I hope that you accomplish every worthwhile dream in your heart, but that will not increase your essential worth. There are people who, because of limitations of many kinds, cannot ever hope to accomplish nearly as much as you and me, but that doesn't diminish their essential worth one bit. Both they and we are already worth more than we can ever imagine.

You and I don't have to prove our worth to our neighbors, to our family, to anybody in this world. Christ bought our worth when he traded his life for ours. That is an idea too deep for us to ever comprehend, but if it says nothing to us, it should say this: We are of infinite worth just as we are.

So, don't worry about the Joneses. They've got worries of their own. Quit playing the comparison game. There is nothing in it but heartaches and failure. There will always be someone who has more, who can do more, than you or I. Let's rejoice in this: The God of all the universe loves us more than any of us can imagine.