The stage play and movie *Amadeus* presents us with a vivid picture of the life and time of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as told through the eyes of Antonio Salieri, the court composer of the emperor of Austria. Salieri had dedicated himself to serving God and believes his only goal is to bring glory to God through his music. Salieri’s music is pleasant and enjoyable but falls short of being masterpieces. Then Salieri meets Mozart and his own mediocrity becomes glaringly apparent.

Mozart is crude, childish, obscene, and lewd. Yet he also has extraordinary talent. His music is intricate, poignant, thrilling and Mozart dashes it off apparently without effort. As Mozart’s fame grows, so does Salieri’s envy. He covets Mozart’s gifts, becoming obsessed with him and then plotting ways to destroy him. Salieri is successful inasmuch as Mozart dies very young; yet Salieri pays a huge price. His obsessive envy eventually drives him insane. The story begins and ends with Salieri, broken and filthy, committed to an insane asylum. In the last moving monologue he curses God for denying him the kind of talent that he had given Mozart.

Envy was deadly to Salieri. It destroyed his faith and drove him mad. Extreme? Yes, but a powerful lesson on the seriousness of this particular sin.

The word “envy” is from the Latin “invidia,” meaning “to look maliciously upon.” The New Testament Greek word for envy is literally to have an “evil eye,” to look upon with evil. So envy has come to be called “the sin of the evil eye.” It has within itself its own destructive seed. Our term “green-eyed envy” comes from this definition.

The unique thing about envy, in relation to the other deadly sins, is that unlike them, there is no pleasure to be found in envy. Proverbs 14:30 says, “A sound heart is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones.” Envy hurts from start to finish. Christian writer Frederick Buechner says, “Envy is the consuming desire to have everybody as miserable as you are.”

The roots of envy are planted deep early in life. From childhood we are
compared to others. Our value as individuals is measured by how good looking we are, our intelligence, our athletic agility, or sex appeal, our height, our weight, our economic level. In our more rational moments we may reject these measurements of worth as unfair and irrational. However, they have been so deeply ingrained in us by family and society that we tend to automatically react with painful envy when we are around others that have more of these valued qualities than we do.

Is envy a problem for you? One of the symptoms of envy is the secret delight we experience when a person we envy is brought down a notch or two. Dave Gebblehausen was the star athlete in my high school class of ’72. He was a lanky, good-looking forward on the basketball team that advanced into the state finals for several consecutive years. He always had an entourage of girls following him around, got his name in the papers often and he came across as being full of himself. Some years after high school graduation, I was shopping around for a car. I dropped in at the Datsun dealership of my home town and was approached by a stereotypic car salesman – mismatched suit, bad hair, protruding beer belly, and smelling of tobacco. He came up to me and said, “Hi, I’m Dave Gebblehausen, what would it take to put you into a new Datsun?” Outwardly I kept my composure, but inwardly I was going, “Ha!” Not pretty is it; this evil eye of ours’?

Another symptom of envy is malice. Recall the story of Cain and Able. Cain was so envious of the fact the Lord accepted his brother Abel’s offering but rejected his own that he committed the first recorded murder. How many murders and wars since then have arisen out of envy?

What is the alternative to envy? The classic Christian response is gratitude. Let’s consider Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard. It is an unsettling story. It certainly does not make economic sense and it seems to violate fairness as Jesus tells how all the workers get the same wage, whether they started at the beginning of the day, midway through the day, or just prior to quitting time. And yet is this not a reflection of how life is? We really are not created equal. Some people are more gifted, better looking, and just plain luckier than others. Some people seem to have the knack for being in the right place at the right time. Envy carefully calculates the injustice of it all. But what injustice? Everyone in Jesus’ parable gets paid what they have been promised.
In other words, everyone has something to be grateful for. Everyone has been given something. Like the old hymn says, “Count YOUR blessings one by one and see what God has done.” Concentrate on what you have instead of what you don’t have. And stop this deadly and stupid game of comparing yourself to others. Envy has very poor vision. It never sees the whole picture.

Sometime after I had lost my first wife a fellow minister and I helped organize a Wesleyan Heritage tour of Great Britain. Burt Lancaster not only had a movie star’s name he had movie star looks and charisma to go along with it. He was in his mid-fifties but he could have passed for thirty five. His wife, Dedi, was only thirty years old and she was “attractive” in every sense of the word. I liked Burt, and he was a very nice guy, but I had to admit I was envious of him as well. But it wasn’t long after that trip that Burt suddenly died of a massive heart attack. He died while he and Dedi were on a motorcycle. He managed to lie the cycle down sparing Dedi serious injury, but he was gone. It turns out that he had been dealing with serious heart disease for many years and few people knew about it. Often what we envy doesn’t seem so enviable when we see the whole picture.

We live in a consumer society. Advertising is everywhere. No matter what we have, we are carefully taught that it is never enough. We are manipulated into envying others if they have more of the so called good things of life than we do.

But we can inoculate ourselves by practicing the art of gratitude. No matter how little or how much we have, let us learn to be thankful. For each new morning with its light, For rest and shelter of the night, For health and food, for love and friends, For everything Thy goodness sends.
~Ralph Waldo Emerson

In the rush of it all we can so easily lose sight of the truly good things of life; things this world can neither give or take away: such as a good name, a fine reputation, integrity and honor. Most of all we are to call to mind that we have been invited to live in the alternative world, the kingdom of God whose treasures are easily obtainable if we but only seek them out. As the psalmist sings: “What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord” (Psalm 116:13).
“If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough.”
— Meister Eckhart

It is gratitude that prompted an old man to visit an old broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, he would return, walking slowly and slightly stooped with a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, and he would feed them from his bucket. Many years before, in October, 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B-17 to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. But there was an unexpected detour which would hurl Captain Eddie into the most harrowing adventure of his life. Somewhere over the South Pacific the Flying Fortress became lost beyond the reach of radio. Fuel ran dangerously low, so the men ditched their plane in the ocean...For nearly a month Eddie and his companions would fight the water, and the weather, and the scorching sun. They spent many sleepless nights recoiling as giant sharks rammed their rafts. The largest raft was nine by five. The biggest shark...ten feet long.

But of all their enemies at sea, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone or destroyed by the salt water. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie's own words, "Cherry," who was the B-17 pilot, Captain William Cherry, "read the service that afternoon, and we finished with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off." Now this is still Captain Rickenbacker talking..."Something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. Everyone else knew too. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull.

The gull meant food...if I could catch it." And the rest, as they say, is history. Captain Eddie caught the gull. Its flesh was eaten. Its intestines were used for bait to catch fish. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed because a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically hundreds of miles from land, offered itself as a sacrifice.
And you must also know...that Eddie Rickenbacker never forgot. Because every Friday evening, about sunset...on a lonely stretch of beach along the eastern Florida seacoast...you could see an old man walking...white-haired, bushy-eyebrowed, slightly bent. His bucket filled with shrimp was to feed the gulls...to remember that one which, on a day long past, that gave itself without a struggle...like manna in the wilderness.

“To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything He has given us - and He has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of His love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from Him. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference.”
— Thomas Merton