

“The Lady in the Window” / 2 Samuel 6:14-19 / 13 July 2012

Oh, she hates them! That lady in the window, scowling at the crowds. She stands in her lonely window, on the inside looking out at all those happy souls, dancing in the streets with their trumpets and their raisin cakes. She hates her husband, King David, most of all. She’s the bitter queen who’s been showing up in folktales and stories ever since. As a father to two small girls, I travel a lot in the world of princesses, and fairies, and ruthless queens—like the lady in the window. In fact, I’ve discovered a strange phenomenon about fairytale villains: many of them are jealous. They’re jealous that someone else is the fairest of them all. Jealous that their own two daughters are graceless buffoons compared to Cinderella. Jealous that they weren’t invited to the party. Jealousy. It makes me think of the old Pantene shampoo commercial that says, “Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful.” Some of us have surely been there: hating someone else for being beautiful, or wealthy, or successful...and not deserving it. Most of us know what it’s like to be the one on the outside looking in, and maybe even feeling a little bit of envy for all the seemingly happy folks in there. Jealousy! It’s the ugliest, most corrosive, most debilitating feeling. Jealousy has taken down many a good soul.

The only sporting event that I ever watch with any kind of regularity is the World Cup soccer match, which is like the Super Bowl of worldwide soccer. Now, it’s easy to be a fan of a sporting event that only takes place every four years. And admittedly, like all diehard fans, I do occasionally end up missing a game. I missed the last World Cup in 2010, and I have a previous commitment on that date in 2014. But like a Christmas and Easter churchgoer, I still consider myself a regular viewer of the World Cup. The last time I watched that great soccer match was in 2006, when Italy beat France. Actually, the French probably would have won except that they committed so many “fowls” that the Italians were given several penalty shots. And the French fowls against the Italians were truly fowl. At one point Zidane, the eccentric star of the French team, approached an Italian player, pretended that he wanted to speak to the man, and when the fellow leaned in to hear him, Zidane head-butted him in the chest. It knocked the guy flat on the ground. And of course, that meant another penalty point for Italy. All sports carry an emotional impact for the winners and the losers, but it seems to me that soccer fans take it all a little bit more personally than other sports fans.

After Italy’s win, the TV continued to broadcast the Italians’ victory celebration: dancing, and hugging, and marching around on each others’ shoulders. They’re Italians, so they’re a little freer with their emotions than a lot of Germanic types. They sang songs and stood around in a circle and did a funny sort of jig. They kissed each other, in a way that American athletes never do, and took running leaps into each others’ arms. It was quite a celebration...for the Italians. Occasionally the camera would pan over to the other side of the soccer field, where a band of dejected Frenchmen sat around glowering. They sat motionless, glaring at the camera and frowning at those happy Italians. The French coach is a merciless-looking little man with rectangular glasses. They say he believes so strongly in the Horoscope that he won’t allow a Scorpio or a Leo on his team. And he has a frown that could make lettuce wilt. If only you could score points for glowering like that! It was quite a spectacle, almost as good as the game itself: jubilant Italians frolicking and playing like a band of overgrown kittens, while the moody French brooded and glared at them from a distance. That dark, Gaulish frown full of jealousy. “This game should have been ours!” It reminds me of the unhappy lady at the window.

Oh, that lady in the window! Have you ever stared on in annoyance as some happy soul lived it up? Have you ever been the one on the outside looking in? Her name is Michal. That's M-I-C-H-A-L; it doesn't have an 'e' like the male name Michael, but it's pronounced the same. Michal is the queen of Israel. She's the princess daughter of the former King Saul, and the wife of the great King David. And Michal's not happy. It doesn't make sense; everybody else is happy. Her husband, David, is so happy that he's dancing like a fool in front of his whole kingdom. He's so happy that he's dancing around in a priest's robe, called an ephod, even though he's not a priest. David and all Israel are rejoicing because they've retaken the Ark of the Covenant, which had been stolen by Israel's enemies. All Israel is happy today because they're tired of war; they're happy in a crazy, holy way. And to make the celebration all the finer, King David hands out raisin cakes to everyone in the city. Everyone is having a grand time...everyone that is, except Queen Michal. Watching from a window of the royal palace, Michal sees the procession entering the gates of the city. She sees the people dancing and playing their wild music. She hears the cymbals and the lyres, the castanets and the tambourines. The rhythm has the crowd worked up into a frenzy. The music has gotten to all of them, the booming drums and the strumming harps. Noblemen and priests are dancing. Judges and wealthy citizens, soldiers and peasants. The wild Mediterranean music has gotten into their souls, and it's making them move. But not Michal. Oh no! Maybe "the rhythm is gonna get you," but not her. Michal stands at her window looking down on her husband the king. And she despises him in her heart. She hates him for all she's worth, this man she once loved, this man whose life she once saved. She hates him for his joy. She hates him for his silly dance, his ridiculous, unkingly behavior. She hates him for reasons she doesn't even understand. She just hates him.

The lady in the window; she's on the outside looking in. She's cut off from the festivities. She's alone with her hatred and her exasperation. That lady in the window still haunts our world today. Wherever there's rejoicing, wherever there's success, wherever there's affluence and satisfaction, Queen Michal is there, looking on from her high window, nurturing hatred in her heart. But don't hate her back, because if you do, then ours becomes a world of hate. And what then?

Think about it; you already know a little something about being hated. We all know a little something about the Michals of the world, glaring at us from a distance, plotting out a course for their anger. But it's not just terrorists; most of the world stands on the outside looking in at all that you and I take for granted, our great dance of life with its cars and houses, and rights and privileges. Impoverished ranks of Latin Americans stand on our southern border willing to risk their lives just to come over here to Arkansas and process our frozen chicken fingers. They're eager not to destroy us but rather just to come and get their share of the pie. They stand on the margins of our country, the margins of our society, excluded from the dance, looking in with hungry eyes. Then there's our own homegrown breed of outsider, the desperate poor who grow up knowing nothing but the dehumanizing cycles of generational poverty: some are drug users and dealers, criminals or potential criminals, the underprivileged, the fatherless, the ones we pass in the streets without making eye contact. We have our own dispossessed folks, our own outcasts. Many native-born Americans are desperate people, too, looking for their share, angry that they've been left out. Walking around irritated, bitter, mad all the time, finding insults in every word or gesture from a stranger.

All the many Michals glaring at us from their lonely windows! And we dance unawares, living our lives of relative ease! It may not seem like it to you and me, but to most of the world, your lifestyle and mine looks like one great big party of affluence with trumpets and raisin cakes. And anytime there's a party, there are a whole lot of folks who didn't get invited. And wherever there are folks who didn't get invited, there's a Michal, looking in from the outside, despising all the revelers in her heart.

You have your personal Michals, too. There are people in your life who resent you, people who are jealous of you, people who've felt slighted by you at some point and never quite got over it. Someone despises you, too, perhaps for some long-forgotten reason. I know I've got at least two of them. Who are your personal Michals, glaring at you from afar? And yet, whoever Michal is, she's mad for a reason. It might not be a good reason, but hers is the pain of one who's on the outside looking in. And to meet her hatred with hatred is the very worst thing you can do.

The great Outsider himself once said, "Love your enemies." Take a long, hard look at the Michals of this world. There are no good guys and bad guys, just...guys, with issues and problems. People who hate are just regular people who get caught in a whirlwind of personal problems, and history, and politics, and economics, and religion. They're just people who want to matter, people who want friends and options, people who get trapped in unbearable conditions. People who get used. And nobody will do crazier things than the person who feels like he or she doesn't matter. Look at the Michals in your own life. Are they really evil? Or is it more complicated than that? Are they evil, or do they just believe that they've been wronged, left out? Are you somebody's Michal yourself?

In Cameroon, I used to travel by motorcycle between remote villages. Most Cameroonians are gentle and hospitable. But in a few far-flung areas, the folks aren't used to foreigners. In such villages, I would arrive to find the people glaring at me silently from the windows of their huts. They might hiss, or spit, or mutter, "natangan," which means "white man." Their hostility often rattled me. But I found one way to disarm it, and it never failed. Whenever I arrived in an unfriendly village and the folks glowered at me from their windows, all I had to do was smile, wave, and say, "Ambollo." It's not a magic word; all it means is "hello." But it's their tribal word for hello. As soon as they heard a white foreigner speaking to them in their language, without exception, their faces broke out into the most beautiful smiles. "Ah, ambollo!" they would answer. "You're speaking our language! You must respect us. Ambollo!" And suddenly a whole village of formerly hostile people would become my eager language instructors.

Two weeks ago we talked about loving our neighbor; today we talk about loving our enemies. Human nature responds to hatred with hatred. But look beneath the hatred at the fear and despair that cause it. Respond to hatred with love. It's called grace. It makes the world go round. At this point in the life of a divided world, it is the only way forward. Michal stares from her lonely window, hating you for reasons you and she cannot comprehend. But the answer is not to get her before she gets you. The only solution to the problem of Michal is to treat her with the grace. Surprise her with just a bit of respect. The love of family, the love of country, the love of neighbor; these are the easiest of loves. Jesus' teaching is hard love: love your enemies. It's the thing they least expect. When you love the one who hates you, he'll recognize a strange holiness in your behavior. And that surprise can change the world. Amen.