



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

July 7, 2013

"Where Is Your Brother" - Genesis 4:1-16

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As we continue our study on 12 of the questions God asks people in the Bible, turn with me to Genesis chapter 4. We're going to take a look at the story of two brothers named Cain and Abel and the question God asks one of them.

This is an incredibly rich part of the Bible. It's thick with insights into realities that stand at the center of all of our lives. Sometimes when I preach I just want to tell you up front what I want to tell you...and then go ahead and tell you what I want you to understand. Today, I want you to see how God is calling us to not just live at peace with people in our lives. He wants us to look deeply into the lives of the people He has entrusted to us and see in them His good work. We're called to see and encourage and affirm and bless others. We called to do so much more than to have a neutral attitude towards others. We're called to cheer one another on, blessing and affirming what we see God doing in one another.

This morning I want to focus on just three things this passage teaches us. It is super important for us to understand these three things if we hope to people whose lives are shaped by the gospel and can speak words of blessing into the lives of others.

First, the kind of relationship we have with God shapes our relationships with one another.

Second, it is super important that we realize we're not living our lives in a benign environment and that means we need to be vigilant.

And thirdly, and most importantly, this text is a remarkable window into the goodness of the God we meet on the pages of the Bible.

One of the first things that strike me about this story is how excited Eve is about the birth of her first child. She's amazed at what has happened to her. The birth of any child is an incredible event in any person's life, but the birth of a first child is extraordinary. When Eve gives birth to Cain, I love her reaction. "I've produced a MAN with the help of the Lord." She's filled with joy. She's got herself a mini version of her main man, Adam!

But what's also surprising in this story is what Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, calls her lackadaisical attitude toward the birth of Cain's little brother. Cain! My firstborn! He's here! And, oh, yeah, here's Abel. Let's look at Genesis chapter 4 verse 1. "*Now Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.'*"

I agree with Keller. I think the next sentence is a big let down.

Verse 2, "*And again, she bore his brother Abel*".

Maybe what you're going to hear from me today is tinged, just a little, with the skewed perspective of someone who is also a second-born child. Like Abel, I'm number two in my family.

My mom gave birth to five kids. My youngest sister Debbie, who is the youngest child in our family, for the longest time did not have a baby book and she did not like that at all. If there's anyone in our family who deserved to have a baby book it was my little sister. In fact, she should have a bronze statue of herself somewhere with an inscription extolling her goodness. She is by far the best child in our family. She's a way better person than I am. She is the most loving, the most considerate, the most compassionate, and maybe the smartest child in our family.

But, for the longest time, no baby book for Debbie. For those of you who might not know what a baby book is let me tell you what it is. First, it's a BOOK, something people used to have in the olden days, made out of PAPER. People would use Scotch tape and something called GLUE, and they would actually PASTE the pictures, which were also printed on paper, on to the pages of the book. And they would do it all by hand!

All the rest of us in my family had one of these books and occasionally we used to pull them out. And every time we did, my little sister would sit there and try and stuff her little emotions into her tiny little heart because she did not have one of these books.

I think my mom was so burnt out by the time she gave birth to her fifth child that she just didn't have it in her to put that scrapbook together. I can remember Debbie asking, "Hey, where's my baby book? All I've got is this shoe box full of random pictures."

When Debbie was in high school my mom did make her a baby book. I don't fault my mom for taking 14 years to make my sister's baby book. My mom was just too tired managing the rest of us. I get it.

I wonder whether Abel had a baby book. I have my doubts. In my somewhat bizarre imagination, here's what I think might have happened in this first family. In Adam and Eve's little cave just East of the Garden of Eden, I can imagine stick drawings on the wall that showed Adam tossing a coconut to little Cain. I can imagine a picture of Adam and Cain building a canoe together. Up there on the cave wall was a picture of the three of them, Adam, Eve and Cain. Like my little sister I can imagine Abel, staring at the wall, scratching his little head and wondering, "Hey, where's my Paleolithic wall painting?"

Now here's why I think all that. I haven't just lost my mind. In the Bible people used to name their kids as a way of describing the character of their child, or because they wanted to remember an experience in THEIR lives before having the child or they wanted to express what they hoped their child's life would be like. Adam and Eve named their first son,

Cain, which means "successful and prosperous".

Now get ready. Adam and Eve named their second son Abel. And Abel means "worthless, a nobody". Can you believe that? They named him Mr. Nobody. Right before our eyes we are not just watching the creation of the world, you and I are watching the birth of psychotherapy.

Watch what happens. Genesis chapter 4 verses 2-7.

Gen 4:2b - Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground (he was a farmer), 4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions (he was a shepherd). And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, (he was VERY angry) and his face fell. 6 The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is CROUCHING at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

Let's look at what happens in this story. Both brothers come to God with an offering. It's very important for us to understand the Hebrew word that's used here for offering. It's the word, "Minhah". It refers to a certain kind of offering, specifically a dedication offering. It was a way of paying tribute to God. The brothers are not coming to God seeking forgiveness for their sins. In a dedication offering you just brought the best of what you had. I don't think that Cain brought the wrong offering. The reason God does not receive Cain's offering has nothing to do with the fact that he did not bring an animal sacrifice.

What's going on here is something deeper than that.

When God accepts Abel's offering and does not accept Cain's, Cain blows a gasket. Could it be that Cain gets angry because his nobody little brother was being blessed and he wasn't? God accepts Abel's offering and blesses him. God, for reasons that are not explained in this passage, does not accept Cain's offering. God sees something going on in Cain that we can't see at least not clearly.

Because of the way Cain reacts to his brother's blessing, could it be that Cain had grown up defining himself as not being his unsuccessful little nobody of a brother? If Abel is now successful how can Cain continue to be who he is? He's the successful one. He's the golden boy, the firstborn, the one who knew the love of his parents before his little brother came along and ruined his happy little "it's-all-about-me" life. Cain is a "somebody". Abel is a "nobody". But all of a sudden grace breaks in and God blesses Abel. And that explodes Cain's world.

This explosion in Cain's life could be a really good thing for Cain. Cain now has a choice. Will he see this both as an opportunity for self-examination and an opportunity to join God in blessing his little brother? Will he accept this new reality, that grace breaks in and blesses other people? Or will he succumb to his angry feelings and do whatever he needs to do to restore things back to the way they were when he was the center of attention?

But there is still something deeper going on here. Charles Spurgeon tells a story, of a king, a farmer and a nobleman. I love this little story. Listen to the great English pastor and preacher.

“Once upon a time there was a king who ruled over everything in a land. One day there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. He took it to his king and said, “My lord, this is the greatest carrot I’ve ever grown or ever will grow; therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” The king was touched and discerned the man’s heart, so as he turned to go, the king said, “Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I want to give a plot of land to you freely as a gift, so you can garden it all.” The gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing.

But there was a nobleman at the king’s court who overheard all this, and he said, “My! If that is what you get for a carrot, what if you gave the king something better?” The next day the nobleman came before the king, and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, “My lord, I breed horses, and this is the greatest horse I’ve ever bred or ever will; therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.”

But the king discerned his heart and said, “Thank you,” and took the horse and simply dismissed him. The nobleman was perplexed. The king asked him what was the matter. He said, “I’m confused. Yesterday you gave a farmer a huge piece of land just because he brought you a big carrot. I brought you a beautiful horse and you didn’t give me anything.” So the king said, “Let me explain. That gardener was giving ME the carrot, but you were giving YOURSELF the horse.”

That, I think, is what might be going on with Cain and Abel. In the New Testament book of Hebrews chapter 11, verse 4 there is a very big clue into what is going on here in Genesis 4. “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received

approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks”.

By faith. Faith in the Bible is always about our response to what God has already done for us. Abel simply gave his gift to God, recognizing how God had already given him everything.

Cain did not see the world this way. He gave his gift to God, not out of gratitude, but in an effort to get something more from God. The gardener gave ME the carrot. You gave YOURSELF the horse. I think that might be the reason why God rejected Cain’s offering. Cain thinks he’s held up his side of the bargain. “Hey God, I’ve done my part, I’ve brought you this gift. Look at what I’ve done for you. Now it’s your turn. You need to do something for me.” Cain does his good deed in order to get something from God. Abel gives God a gift because he’s simply grateful for what God has already given him. Those are two completely different ways of living our lives. Cain’s way is the way of legalism and the law and Abel’s way is the way of grace and that is the way of the gospel.

Here’s a core truth that takes us right to the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. When we live like Cain, when we have a legalistic relationship with God, we are not able to live with grace towards others and ourselves. Cain’s angry response is the telltale sign that he’s a legalist.

Because of his legalistic, transactional relationship with God, Cain misses the opportunity we all have at moments like this. When someone else is being honored and we are not, when someone else gets the job and we don’t, when someone else has a great success and we’re still struggling, when

something good happens to someone else and not to us...we have a decision to make.

Cain had the opportunity at that moment to be big, to celebrate with his little brother. Cain could have looked Abel in the eye, he could have wrapped his arms around his little brother in a big bear hug and said, “That’s so awesome Abel! Look at how God is blessing you!”

But that is not what Cain does, is it? What Cain does is so far from being that kind of encouraging, affirming cheerleader in his little brother’s life that we’re shocked to watch what Cain ends up doing.

Sadly, what Cain does to his little brother is played out in all sorts of ways, every day, all around the world. It may not end in the kind of violence we see here in this story, though it does sometimes. But what happens here gets played out in offices, classrooms, homes, communities, and between nations every single hour of every day. We need to be super vigilant because we have the same inclinations Cain had when we find ourselves at a crossroads like this—when we find ourselves in the number two position. And that is particularly true if we have a transactional, legalistic relationship with God and not one built on grace.

That’s big point number one. The kind of relationship we have with God shapes the kind of relationship we have with one another.

Here’s the second big idea in this text: We’re not living our lives in a benign environment and that means we need to be super vigilant.

It’s in chapter 4 of Genesis that we hear the word “sin” for the first time in the Bible (it’s in verse 7).

Genesis chapter 4 verse 6,7: *After Cain's offering is not accepted, "6 The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."*

God says, "Sin is crouching at your door, Cain". The word translated "crouching" is most frequently used to refer to what a leopard or tiger does to stalk its prey. It's what you see your pet cat doing when he spots a bird, or a bug or another cat. He crouches down. When a cat spots a bird, the first thing he does is to try and hide himself. He makes himself look smaller than he actually is in order to catch what he's hunting off guard.

Sin is like that. Sin crouches down. It makes itself look smaller than it actually is. It hides itself from our view, as it gets ready to pounce. Do you know how sin is crouching in your life today? Trust me, sin is not just sitting there in that hidden corner of our lives. It's crouching. It's getting ready. It looks pretty small right now but it about the pounce. It looks like no big deal but it is a big deal and we need to deal with it.

There's a monster hiding inside Cain but Cain doesn't see it or he won't look at it. But look at how God treats Cain. He's tender. He comes to talk with him as a counselor. God tries to intervene with Cain before he does something crazy. God steps in. Before Cain murders his brother, God comes to Cain with questions. God wants Cain to get at what underneath his anger. God says to him, "Cain, sin is crouching at your door and it wants to take you down. Don't let it. You can master this." As soon as Cain starts to spiral down God pursues him before he goes completely out of control. God graciously affirms Cain. He comes

with questions. Those questions communicate respect and God's confidence in Cain. "You can master this. Do you understand what's going on in your heart?"

God is appealing to Cain. Why are you angry? Cain, don't you see that your real enemy is not Abel. God says to him, "Don't you see that I'm not your enemy. Something you're overlooking in your life is what poses the greatest threat to you." But Cain will not listen. He lures Abel out into the field and murders his brother. He will return his world back to the way it was when it was all about him, when he was the center of attention, when there was no one and nothing else that he need to make room for. The violence of this moment is shocking. The sin that was crouching at the door has erupted in Cain's life.

With Abel's blood crying out to him from the ground, God comes with another question. "Where is your brother?" That's a gracious invitation to turn around. But Cain will not turn from the path he's on. He says, "Am I Abel's keeper?"

"Well, Cain, actually you are your brother's keeper. In fact, you're called to be so much more than your brother's keeper. You're called to be his greatest encourager and supporter. Even if that means you might need to take second place sometimes while you're brother experiences great blessings. You're called to be so much more than your brother's keeper."

Point # 1: The kind of relationship we have with God shapes the kind of relationship we have with one another.

Point #2: We're not living our lives in a benign environment and that means we need to be vigilant.

Finally and quickly, point #3: This is the main point of this passage and it is what the Lord's Table is all about. We have a good, compassionate, forgiving God whose love is greater than our broken human stories and deeper than our greatest mistakes.

Even after Cain kills his brother, even when Cain does not own up to what he has done but only complains about how hard his punishment is...God still pursues him. God will seek justice for what has happened to Abel. Abel was somebody to God. He wasn't a nobody. But even after a horrible act of violence is perpetrated against Able, God will not choose between showing justice and showing mercy.

Look at the love God shows Cain. When he's angry, God comes to him in an effort to guide him in the right way to go. And even after he has killed his brother, God reaches out to him. Cain shows no repentance at all. He demonstrates no willingness to take responsibility for what he has done. And still God is merciful to him. Still God is reaching for him. He's reaching for each of us today as well.

Because he loves us, God is seeking us. God is asking each one of us, "Where are you? Why are you so angry? Where is your brother? Where is your sister?" Those questions are all invitations to come out of hiding and know the depth of God's love for you and me.

Note: The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw is an associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also found at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version: fpchkoolau@gmail.com