

AM I MY BROTHER'S (OR SISTER'S) KEEPER

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, March 6, 2016

Based on Genesis 4:1-15; Matthew 5:43-47

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Ten Truths that Change Life, during which we are considering central Biblical truths that are life-changing when we truly receive them. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The first few chapters of the Bible lay out the human condition. Genesis chapters one and two speak of how God created all things, and created human beings “in the image of God,” meaning that we have the capacity to know God and be in a relationship with God and share in the creativity and the love of God. But Genesis chapter three (the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden) speaks of the problem of sin—that we turn from God and go our own way and so alienate ourselves from God and get ourselves into all sorts of trouble. Genesis chapter four, which we heard a few moments ago, proceeds to describe what then happens among human beings as we continue in that condition of sin.

There are two brothers, Cain and Abel. They each bring an offering to God. Even in the condition of sin, human beings are aware of God and sense a need to come to God. Abel, we are told, “brought the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions” (which were considered the best part of the meat). (Genesis 4:4) In other words, in the ancient view of things, Abel brought to God the best out of what he had. Cain, we are told, “brought an offering of the fruit of the ground.” (Genesis 4:3) In other words, he brought something. “The Lord,” the story continues, “had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering the Lord had no regard.” (Genesis 4:4-5) God affirms the way that Abel has given his very best. At that, the Scripture says, “Cain was very angry.” (Genesis 4:5)

Last week we talked about the perpetual human tendency to want to make ourselves great, and we noted that as human beings seek to exalt themselves, they inevitably compare themselves to one another and fall into envy. We observed that the story of Cain and Abel is an example of exactly that—Cain could not stand to be a peg lower than his brother Abel. God then seeks to counsel Cain, saying, “Why are you angry? If you do well, you will be accepted. But when you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door, seeking to control you, but you must master it.” Genesis 4:6-7) God encourages Cain to not let anger control him, but to focus on doing well, and all will be fine. But Cain gives in to sin; and the story continues, “Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.” (Genesis 4:8)

God immediately confronts Cain, saying, “Where is your brother Abel?” And Cain replies, “I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9)

Am I my brother’s (or sister’s) keeper? It is a question that looms large throughout the whole Bible and all of history. In the story, Cain of course was trying to escape responsibility for his act, but the larger attitude reflected in that statement is, “I

am not responsible for anyone else; my job is to look out for me.” It is an attitude that has been widespread throughout the human story.

But to the question, “Am I my brother’s (or sister’s) keeper,” Jesus gives a revolutionary answer, as he not only teaches us to love our neighbor, but says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Love your enemies . . . so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for God makes the sun rise on the good and bad, and sends rain (that’s a good thing in Israel) on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:44-45) Quite in contrast to Cain, who despises and attacks his brother, we are to be concerned about and show care not only to our family but to all people—whether they are close to us or not, whether we like them or not, whether they are worthy or not, because God has compassion and shows care to all. We can see this message in dramatic fashion in the conclusion of the story of Cain and Abel.

In response to the murder of Abel, God banishes Cain from the outskirts of the Garden of Eden. Cain laments his punishment, saying, “Today You have driven me away from the soil . . . I shall be a fugitive on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.” (Genesis 4:15) At this point, you likely think to yourself, “Now wait a minute, who else is there?” We’ve got Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel; there’s nobody else out there. What is he talking about?”

This question was never raised by the ancient Hebrew people who recounted this story for generations. They knew that the question, “Who else was out there?” was a meaningless question; because they understood that you are not supposed to read this as a literal, historical account about two guys named Cain and Abel. If you try to read this story as a literal historical account, you cannot make any sense out of the ending. But in fact Cain and Abel are not two silly brothers who lived eons ago, who we can dismiss as ancient primitives. Cain and Abel represent everyone. This is the story of the whole human race, a story of people who fall into envy and hatred and violence and fear. It is a story that keeps repeating itself in every generation. And when the story speaks of God’s actions, it is portraying how God deals in every age with people who act like Cain.

So how does God deal with the sinner, represented quite graphically by the figure of Cain? Cain has murdered his brother, and he suffers consequences of his actions, as he is forced into wandering—there are consequences to sin. Cain in the end really deserves no mercy. But at the conclusion of the story, God gives mercy. God places a mark on Cain to protect him, “so that no one who came upon him would kill him.” This piece of the story reflects the culture of vengeance that widely prevailed in the ancient world. If someone in the ancient world committed a murder, the relatives of the victim would go out to find the murderer in order to kill him. The story of Cain expresses this dynamic—that human beings will want to avenge the blood of a victim and kill the perceived perpetrator. We see this happening all the time in our world today—people are constantly taking bloody vengeance for perceived wrongs.

But the story of Cain and Abel shows God taking two decisive actions in response to human sinfulness. First, God shows Cain grace—undeserved mercy. We talked about grace previously in this sermon series—that it is the unmerited blessing of God—and it is well illustrated in the story of Cain. Cain deserves nothing, but receives God’s care and protection. As Jesus said, “God makes the sun shine and rains fall on the righteous and unrighteous.”

Secondly, God intervenes to stop the cycle of vengeance that human beings are inclined to perpetuate. The mark on Cain is the sign that God calls for the violence to stop. Thus the story dramatically illustrates how God responds to our whole human condition in which we are lost in sin and caught up in envy and hatred and violence—God acts with grace and acts to bring about peace.

These twin themes—laid out clearly at the start of the Bible in the story of Cain and Abel—are carried further and brought to supreme fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jesus comes to all of us who are sinners—with grace. Though like Cain we are not deserving, Jesus goes to the cross for us, to absorb the consequences of all our sin, so that we can be forgiven. Cain had feared that he would be cut off from the face of God; but in Jesus God shows us His face—a face of mercy. And just as Cain at the end of the story received God’s mark of protection, the New Testament in the book of Revelation says that as we trust in Christ we receive the mark of Christ—we are placed under the eternal protection of God.

The mark on Cain was also God’s declaration that human beings should stop the cycle of vengeance that has so plagued human history. When Jesus later said, “Love your enemies,” it was God’s ultimate declaration that we are to move away from vengeance—not only to stop vengeance but to engage in active care for others. Jesus leads us way past the usual human pattern of just loving our friends and our family (or at least the family members we like). He moves us to extend God’s compassion to people who are far removed from us and people we may really dislike. In contrast to Cain, who wanted to take no responsibility for others, Jesus calls us to take responsibility to exhibit grace and goodness toward all humanity.

This afternoon more than thirty of our youth will spend two hours at our church making phone calls to ask people to contribute to this summer’s Mountain T.O.P. mission. Do you enjoy calling people to ask them for money? You can be sure that our teenagers would rather be doing something else on a Sunday afternoon. But they are making phone calls this afternoon, and they are spending a week this summer in rough conditions on a mountain in Tennessee, because in answer to the question, “Am I my brother’s (or sister’s) keeper?” they are saying yes.

This summer they will reach out with grace and compassion to people they do not know, and they will do so, no matter whether the people that they meet are endearing or not. Last summer, my daughter Rachel, who is passionately against any form of racism, was on a Mountain T.O.P. team that went to work at the home of a man who flew a large Confederate flag in front of his house. There’s an interesting scenario.

Do you work hard to help someone who appears to have values that you find reprehensible? She worked to help him anyways.

“God makes the sun shine and the rains fall on the righteous and the unrighteous,” says Jesus. “If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? And if you greet only your own kind, what more are you doing than anyone else?” (Matthew 5:45-47) So Jesus moves us in precisely the opposite direction from the behavior portrayed in the story of Cain and Abel. It is a life-changing truth, when we realize not only how God is reaching to us, but how God is leading us to treat others. In a world so often full of hatred, callousness, and apathy, Jesus leads us to receive, and show, the infinite love of God to all.