

Sermon – Am I My Brother's Keeper?

Scripture: Genesis 4:1-9, Psalm 133

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Our first scripture is Genesis 4:1-9. Today's narrative following Adam and Eve's departure from the Garden of Eden portrays the alienation between their sons Cain and Abel. This conflict foreshadows the epic struggle between brothers throughout scripture...from Jacob and Esau to Joseph and his brothers in Genesis to the prodigal son and his older brother in Luke. Although the word "brother" is faithful to the narrative, the term surely includes sisters in its theological implications. Each of us is accountable to the question of how we treat one another. Listen to the Word of God.

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord."² Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.³ In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground,⁴ and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering,⁵ but for Cain and his offering God had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

⁶ The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."⁸ Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.⁹ Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" Amen

Our second scripture, Psalm 133, uses imagery to affirm what delights God and what God blesses forever... when brothers and sisters live together in unity. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there God's blessing is ordained,
life forevermore. Amen.*

The sermon title: “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?”

Text: Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’” Genesis 4:9

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, on this independence day, we thank you for the rich history of our country and what we have learned about ourselves and you along the way. And now may the words of my mouth and meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Cain and Abel is the title of the sculpture Peter’s dad, Will Kieffer, Jr., created to honor his great grandfather Luther and Luther’s two son, William and Theodore, who died in the Cold Harbor Battle of the Civil War in 1864. The sculpture was dedicated in 2004 on the 140th anniversary of the Cold Harbor Battle and is located in the Richmond National Battlefield Civil War Visitor Center.

Will initially wanted to create a sculpture of his great grandfather Luther, a union soldier; however, sculptures of individual soldiers were not allowed. To create a memorial that honored both the North and the South, Will chose the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Two brothers, two ways of life, one a farmer and one a shepherd, who could not reconcile their differences and live together in unity. This well-known and tragic biblical story captures the innate conflict and competition between brother and brother since the beginning of time.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are not to be read as literal history, but rather as a poetic prologue to the story of the Hebrew people. These chapters include a series of rich, metaphorical stories that explain the predicament of the world in which the ancient Hebrews found themselves when their journey began in Genesis 12, with Abram and Sarai.

The fact that the first murder arises over a conflict about what is an acceptable sacrifice to God is poignant, telling, and exposes the strong prejudice against farmers in the ancient Hebrew world. It is Yahweh who accepts the offering of the shepherd Abel and rejects the offering of the farmer Cain for no apparent reason! There is nothing to disqualify Cain. No explanation is given and we need to resist the temptation to try to offer one. To attempt to do so is to assume we know more than the text and we inevitably impose our own biases.

As we read scripture, we must acknowledge the biases and prejudices written into the storyline. Over the centuries cultural and human biases have been projected onto God and used to justify oppression, elitism and hubris within religion. The rationale for the subjugation of women and the justification for slavery are both carved into these early Genesis stories. By naming this truth, there is an opportunity for redemption, healing, and change.

As we celebrate the independence of our country on this national holiday, we also acknowledge the cultural and human biases written into the Declaration of Independence two hundred fifty-five years ago in 1776. We rejoice in the gift of democracy on this Fourth of July and we simultaneously recognize the exclusivity within the original document. Neither women nor abject poor nor enslaved men were included in “all men are created equal.”

That is why Frederick Douglass, freed slave, social reformer, and esteemed orator delivered his infamous speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" on July 5, 1852 in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, New York, addressing the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society.

That is why Julia Ward Howe, abolitionist and woman suffragette, wrote the lyrics to the powerful song "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory" in 1862 during the height of the civil war.

That is why our forefathers and foremothers who worshipped in this Springfield abolitionist congregation from 1840-1867 so admired the Reverend Albert Hale and his wife Abiah who eloquently and consistently "talked the walk" of their faith by advocating for the poor, the sorrowing, and the enslaved.

That is why this tower bell above us rang with vigor, reverence, and joy on January 1, 1863 following the news of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

That is why brothers James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson collaborated in 1905 to compose "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which the NAACP, an organization founded in the wake of the 1908 Springfield race riots, named "the Negro national anthem" as a cry for the struggle and liberation of African-American people.

And that is why today we celebrate Independence Day in our country, which like our denomination, is reformed and always reforming in the struggle toward a more perfect union.

As we delight in our newfound independence thanks to the discovery and distribution of effective vaccines, we also give thanks for the silver lining of the pandemic pause which raised awareness of continued inequities within our society.

Rather than justify these inequities or debate whose offering is more acceptable to God, let us seek to live together in unity. Indeed, the Old Testament Prophet Micah reminds us of the most acceptable offering:

"With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before God with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
⁸God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God.

Am I my brother's keeper? ...Absolutely! Amen