

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

May 1, 2016

“Cain: Not My Brother’s Keeper”

Bad Dudes of the Bible, part 5

Genesis 4:1-16

Good morning. I am so glad that you are here today. Your presence means a lot to me, and it is a sacrifice of praise to God. On any given Sunday, we might have regular attenders, out of town guests, first timers and visitors, but we all gather in the same place at the same time to hear about God’s love. You and God form the most important relationship in your life, and all of us together form the church, the community of faith.

So let me assure you this morning, you are in the right place. You are not alone. God has something to reveal to us today, I am sure of it. So I invite you to pray with me as we prepare to receive that word.

Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, Creator of life, we bow before you this morning in awe that you would seek a relationship with us. We ask that you fill us with the Holy Spirit, our Counselor and Comforter, so that we may live the lives to which you have called us. Speak to us now. We are ready to listen and obey. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

The following notice was once printed in a church bulletin: “We are looking for players for our church-league soccer team. Now is a good time to ask, ‘Am I my brother’s goal keeper?’”

Even if you don’t play soccer, you might wonder, what does it mean to be “my brother’s keeper”? We are not talking about literal brothers today, although that could apply to you. We are talking about our relationships with all people whom God places in our lives.

I grew up with two brothers, and we had our share of fights. And by the grace of God, we succeeded in not killing each other. So I suppose you could make a claim that we did better than our subject today: Cain, the first son of Adam and Eve.

Today is the last message in a series called, “Bad Dudes in the Bible.” We’ve discussed King Nebuchadnezzar, King Saul, Queen Herodias, and the sons of Eli; some powerful people in leadership who didn’t behave very well. In each story, we have asked ourselves, “What did they do that we shouldn’t do?”

Well, I hope the lesson from today’s scripture is obvious. Don’t kill anyone, especially not your brother! In fact, I could just stop right now and let that be the sermon. Everyone is convinced, right?

Not so fast, my friends. We know this world still struggles with anger and murder, so a closer look at Genesis 4 is worthwhile, because we might be surprised at how much we have in common with Cain.

Crack open your Bibles, just inside the front cover, and you’ll find this short story of two brothers in a very violent sibling rivalry. Verse 1 tells us how the first family got started. “Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.” (Gen 4:1 NIV) I love how frank the Bible is about sex. The translation in the NIV really doesn’t do justice to the original language. A better translation is, “Adam knew Eve intimately, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain.” It’s interesting, despite all the shame and loss from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve knew no shame in their marriage. But just like the story in the garden, things went wrong quickly in their family.

Cain was the first born son. His name actually means “brought forth.” Eve knew that God was still the author of life, and with God’s help, she brought forth

a son. But Abel's name means "breath" or "temporary". His name foreshadows the approaching conflict.

The rivalry started quickly. In the second verse, Abel is mentioned first, then Cain. Abel was a shepherd, and Cain was a vegetable farmer. It is not that either job was preferred over the other; it was simply what they each chose to do. But it's odd that Abel, the second born, is listed first.

Further confirmation of the rivalry comes in the next verse. This is where the real problem started. Cain and Abel brought sacrifices to God. Great idea. Part of our worship today still reflects that. We bring the fruits of our labor – our gifts – and give them freely to God through our offering. But there was a subtle difference in the attitudes of these two givers. Cain brought "some fruits". Abel brought the best parts of his firstborn lambs: the tenderloins, the fatty, tasty parts. It appears that Abel held nothing back from God. Abel gave God his absolute best. Cain, on the other hand, gave God some thoughtless leftovers.

Predictably, God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's. And this ticked Cain off.

Have you ever gotten mad when someone caught you doing less than your best work? If so, you can imagine Cain's attitude when God rebuked him. God pointed out that Cain's anger wasn't healthy. God said, "If you do what is right, you will be accepted, too." It seems Cain's first mistake was being lazy, or at least not honoring God with his best.

But instead of listening to God, Cain became more bitter. His face was "downcast". Parents, do you know "The Look?" We get this in our house a lot. "Put the tablet down and go put your laundry away." Right? Every parent has said this at least once. And we hope to see the sweet smile of obedience as the

child happily skips off to his or her room, so eager to please Mom and Dad by doing the chore. That never happens. Instead, we get “The Look.” A scowl. A “Why me?” face. The face to which you say, “If you keep frowning like that, one day your face is going to freeze that way.” That was Cain’s look.

God saw “The Look” on Cain’s face, and God gave Cain a dire warning. “Sin is crouching at your door.” (Gen 4:7). This expression is like a lion waiting to pounce. My NIV Bible tells me in the notes that this same word in Babylonian pictures a demon crouching at the door of a building to threaten and attack the people inside. Verse 7 concludes, “Sin desires to have you, but you must master it.”

There’s a battle between good and evil, and it raged in Cain’s heart. Unfortunately, evil won. Cain couldn’t control his anger, and he killed his brother Abel.

Cain committed so many sins in a row. Laziness, disrespect of God, anger, jealousy, selfishness, lying, murder, and more lying. When God confronted Cain, he gave Cain an opportunity to confess. “Where is your brother, Abel?” God asked. “I don’t know,” Cain replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” He mouthed off to God! Side note: don’t ever be sarcastic with the Lord. It’s a really bad idea.

Obviously, the consequence of Cain’s murder was punishment and banishment. The ground was cursed because Abel’s blood fell on it. Cain would no longer be a farmer, but a wandering nomad. His punishment was twofold: he would leave God’s presence and the presence of the community. Cain would be truly isolated.

How terrible is it when sin cuts us off from those who care about us? This callous indifference that Cain showed – “What do I care? I’m not my brother’s

keeper!” – this attitude, sadly, has repeated itself throughout human history. And it causes death. Not necessarily murder, but starvation, the imbalance of resources, and oppression are all consequences of selfishness, greed, and indifference to others.

Not only that, but sin also hides us from God. (Gen 4:14) And that distance is painful. Cain saw what was happening, yet he never apologized. In his banishment, he still only thought of himself. “What if someone sees me and kills me?” he asked. And yet God gave him grace: God marked Cain to protect him, before banishing him to Nod.

It is interesting to me that this passage starts with one person, Eve, acknowledging that God is the author of life and death, and concludes with another person acting like God by ending someone’s life. Acts 17:25 reads, “God himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.” When someone sins by taking their own life or someone else’s, we still feel the effects of that sin: separation. Our community is reeling from a terrible loss this week, of a 13-year old girl who died on Saturday. We want to lash out, we want to blame, we even feel guilt because this child came to our church, attended our VBS program. Through her death, we have become restless, and our thoughts wander. We are threatened with isolation.

But God gave grace to Cain, and he gives us even more grace. You see, Cain was marked by God to protect him. Although Cain wouldn’t protect his own brother, God protected Cain. And God offers us grace, too, and protection from things like depression and guilt.

We don’t have to isolate ourselves. We can find healing within the community of faith. We don’t have to leave God’s presence in our grief. We can

run towards God. Whether we are facing death, divorce, illness, anxiety, loss of jobs and homes and relationships, we can choose to run towards the One who loves us and died for us: Jesus Christ.

It's easy for us to look at Cain and judge or blame him. He was a bad dude, after all. But we have the same tendencies inside. None of us is pure, no one is blameless. Romans 6:23 tells us the ugly truth: Not one of us is righteous. Not one. Not me. Not you.

So what is the difference between us and Cain? Whether or not we confess. Confession is a lot like puking. Sin is a poison inside of us that wants to kill us. By admitting it to God and each other, we can be healed.

In Matthew 5:22, Jesus tells us that hatred is the same as murder. When we hate someone, we are guilty of the same sin as Cain. In Matthew 25:45 he says that ignoring, failing to care for one of the least of these is the same as ignoring him. It's time to confess those sins. It's time to be a brother's keeper, to choose love over hate, to obey God and serve others.

We must learn to live in community. We can't be a brother's keeper if there is no one around us. We can't be like Cain and live alienated from society and from God. Yeah, living in the broken world can be painful, because people are messy. None of us is perfect. But it is God's will for us to live together, support each other, pray for each other, confess to each other and forgive each other. I know it's hard, but we have to learn to say, "I'm sorry." And we need to give each other permission to intercede for us and intervene in our lives when we get "The Look."

And most importantly, unlike Cain, we need to heed the warnings God gives us. When God's Word confronts us in our sin, we need to admit it, quickly and honestly.

So when a friend asks you, "How's it going?" will you respond briskly, "Just fine," or will you risk a moment of honesty and share from your soul?

When someone asks you about a destructive or abusive behavior, confronts you over your words and actions, will you shrug it off and say, "You don't understand!" or will you listen in humility?

When Jesus pulls at your heart strings, speaks in a still small voice, whispering, "I love you. I want to show you how to live for me," will you ignore it, or will you listen and respond?

As we enter into our time of celebrating Holy Communion, I ask that you give these thoughts real consideration. This is our chance, right here and now, to confess to God and ask him, with a sincere heart, to make us our brother's keeper.

Would you please join me in this prayer of confession?

From the United Methodist Book of Worship, #480

We confess to you, all-knowing God, what we are. We are not the people we like others to think we are. We are afraid to admit, even to ourselves, what lies in the depths of our souls. But we cannot hide our true selves from you. You know us as we are, and yet you love us. Help us not to shrink from self-knowledge. Teach us to respect ourselves for your sake. Give us the courage to put our trust in your guiding power. Raise us out of the paralysis of guilt into the freedom and energy of forgiven people. And for those who through long habit find forgiveness hard to accept, we ask you to break their bondage and set them free; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen. *(Service continues with the Pardon, Peace and Great Thanksgiving.)*

Memory Verse:

Hebrews 11:4 - "By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead."

Questions for Reflection:

1. Who was your protector when you were young? A brother, sister, or friend? Did you protect someone else your age?
2. How easy is it for you to take advice when you are doing something wrong? Explain.
3. How does our sin alienate us from God and from people?
4. What are the consequences of letting sin master us?
5. What confession do you need to make so that you can be a better keeper of those God has placed in your life?