

"Cain and Abel"

Genesis 4:1-8; 1 John 3:7-24

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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A little over a year ago, commemorations were held all over the world to mark the centennial or 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War 1. This was to mark the conclusion to what was up till then the worst military conflict the world had ever seen- one that eventually involved the mobilization of seventy million persons (sixty of whom were European). When it ended after four years of intense warfare, over seventeen million men lay dead, another twenty million were wounded, and the terrain of Europe had been transformed into one gigantic grave. However, there was one amazing irony concerning the major architects of that war- it was that they were all related to one another, that the conflict was in fact a "family affair" played out on the world scene. Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, King George V of England, and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia were all grandsons of Queen Victoria and thus they were all first cousins. But though they were related to each other by blood, the three heads of state mutually despised each other and as the years progressed, their relationship--governed by feelings of jealousy, greed, suspicion, and wounded pride--only intensified. Thus, as you begin to understand their personal interconnections, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Great War was so much MORE than a "family affair"- it was at heart a "FAMILY FEUD!"

Our scripture lesson this morning ALSO involves a "family feud"; it is a relationship that ends in fratricide- the killing of one brother by another. The story of Cain and Abel is a well-worn one- a tale familiar to us all. It concerns two brothers who were the sons of Adam and Eve. At birth, Cain was given a name meaning "I have gotten a man." Eve was obviously proud to have received a son for her first-born child- one who appeared so strong and intelligent. Abel's name, on the other hand, suggested something like "nothingness, frailty." Apparently Abel was a weaker child who possessed neither the brawn nor the brains of his older brother. Perhaps he was a bit slower, more backwards, someone needing to be helped all the time. Where success came naturally for Cain, Abel had to struggle through life and thus live in the shadow of his stronger, smarter, more resourceful brother. Like most mothers, Eve loved both her children, but owing to human nature she had to be PARTICULARLY proud of Cain, her first-born.

No doubt there are those of you who can identify with Cain while some of you may feel more like Abel. I have a twin brother named Howard who is thirteen minutes older, and while things seemed to come easy to me, Howard always had to struggle. It was that way from the day we were born- I came home from the hospital after only a few days while Howard had to remain an extra month, fighting for his life with double pneumonia. The doctors advised my parents to buy a cemetery plot for they didn't think he'd pull through- but thankfully, with God's help, he did. Howard never forgot that and from his earliest years, he determined he was going to be a minister although life seemed to have had other plans for him.

As we got older, I learned to walk first, to ride a bike first, to drive a car first. In school, I received excellent marks while Howard got by on lesser grades. I loved to play sports while Howard usually took long walks by himself. I hung out with the "in" crowd while he attracted

more of the loners for friends. Because we were twins, the inevitable comparisons were made. They couldn't help but observe how different as night and day we were. Some couldn't help from saying, "Why can't he be more like his brother?" Though our parents always treated us equally, for many years Howard always moved and lived in my larger shadow.

This was never more evident than when during one of our family get-togethers, we all sat down to watch some of the old home movies that my father had taken years before. One of the scenes involved our third Christmas, one in which my brother and I had each received--oddly enough--a pair of boxing gloves. With the Christmas tree serving as a backdrop, there we were duking it out- our arms whirling away like little windmills. After a few sharp blows by me to the head and midsection, my brother went down. However, not content to just knock him down, I had to knock him OUT. So there I am flailing away at him while he's down, and when I was satisfied that I had THOROUGHLY beaten him, I stood astride him with one foot on top of him, triumphantly beating my breast, looking like the mighty hunter and Howard, the vanquished lion. Everybody, including my brother, laughed because it seemed like such a cute, funny scene, but I didn't because I could see how even at the tender age of three there was an unconscious rivalry for dominance and power between us, and I was determined to win at all costs. And so when people ask me why Howard and I aren't closer than we are- after all, twins are SUPPOSED to be close, RIGHT, I only have to think back to that Christmas home movie made so many years ago to know the answer.

Our text, however, not only sets up a contrast between two brothers but provides us with a disturbing piece of drama- it becomes "history's first murder." We're told that Abel kept flocks and Cain worked the soil. Now some commentators believe that God rejected Cain's sacrifice because it was inferior, that livestock was superior to the first-fruits of wheat and various produce, but that's not so. A tiller of the soil was JUST AS NECESSARY as shepherding and the first-fruits of each were EQUALLY acceptable. In truth, God wasn't looking to the offering each man had in his hand but he was looking at the offering each one had in his HEART. And in Cain God saw a self-loving, self-serving individual who never showed much concern towards his younger, weaker brother. He saw one who was looking for every opportunity to assert himself, to prove his superiority over his younger sibling, while in Abel, God saw a humble young man, one who knew he wasn't much but who had to struggle hard just to keep pace. Yet, in spite of his brother's constant striving and superior accomplishments, Abel refused to harden his heart towards Cain.

What God accepted was not Abel's sheep, but Abel's HEART- it remained pure, honest, and generous. What God rejected was not Cain's produce but his SELFISH PRIDE- his glowing sense of superiority over his brother. The sacrifice that God looked for from Cain is the same offering God demands from each of US- the SACRIFICE OF THE HEART. There is only one way to come before God and that is with HUMILITY, not pride; with LOVE for those weaker than ourselves, not jealousy and contempt. That is the ONLY way we can ever approach God and know that he accepts us and our offering. The result is that Cain feels CHEATED by God. Cain, after all, had been the older, the more successful, the more admired brother and yet God rejects HIM and accepts ABEL. As his hatred of God grows, so does his hatred for Abel so that he lures him out into the open country and there, he cold-bloodedly murders him.

It's hard to deny that the seeds of hatred and jealousy that incited Cain to raise his hand against his younger, weaker sibling are all-too apparent TODAY. Police statistics show that the highest percentage of murders take place among family members. That same dynamic is often seen played out on the international level. Back in the 1980's, the now defunct nation of Yugoslavia was comprised of three inter-ethnic groups- the Bosnians, the Serbs, and the Croats, all brothers who despised each other and in a bond only HELD together by the strong hand of Josef Tito. Once Tito passed from the scene, civil war broke out and Yugoslavia became a killing ground among the three republics. And who REALLY believes that in Iraq, the power struggle between Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds has been halted and that chants of "kum bay ya" has broken out among them. The fact is that you have three groups--all Arab, all Muslim, all brothers bound by blood--who are still all-too willing to kill one another over their inter-political differences. In Israel, the closest they have come to peace in over seventy years is the result of a 450-mile, thirty-foot high concrete wall that extends around the West Bank and cuts right through the heart of Jerusalem to physically separate a pair of brothers from themselves- one an Israeli and the other a Palestinian. Meanwhile, in the Far East, not only do North and South Korea continue to point nuclear weapons at each other but in spite of their attempts at détente, their conventional forces still remain on highest alert. Again and again, history has demonstrated how violence is never really a solution AT ALL as violence just breeds retaliation and MORE violence- perpetuating a cycle of death and devastation that doesn't end until one of the participants is finally beaten or destroyed.

But even MORE disturbing than the murder of a younger sibling by his older brother is that Cain's heart is hardened during an act of WORSHIP. One minute he is in church, seated next to his brother- singing the same hymns, praying the same prayers, presenting their offerings together. But the moment the service ends, with a heart consumed with jealousy and hatred, Cain lures his younger brother Abel out into an open field and then slays him there.

Some years ago, I went out West on a fly fishing trip with my roommate from seminary who is a Presbyterian pastor in Idaho. While driving back to Boise, I began telling him about a certain minister who served a Presbyterian church only a few miles from my own. As I described him, my voice grew louder and my body language became more demonstrative- it was clear to him that the very thought of this person had made me agitated in a way he had never seen before. I talked about this minister's pomposity and his arrogance, sharing with him some of the unethical things I felt he had done during the six years we had served that area together. Then, in a moment of candor, I confessed that I had never detested another human being as much as this man, that he represented everything that I had come to despise about this profession I loved- MINISTRY.

Well after I got all this off my chest, Phil looked over to me and said, "Dave, you know what? I think YOU'RE the one with the problem"- and IMMEDIATELY I knew he was right. You see, the strange thing was that I was not describing some serial killer or mass-murderer; it was no child abuser or wife beater that I had gotten all worked up about. Rather, it was another MINISTER, a PRESBYTERIAN COLLEAGUE of mine who on MANY occasions I had worked with and dined with and had even WORSHIPED with. Yet I had come to see incarnated in this man and his ministry all the problems and frustrations I had come to abhor about ministry in general- his slickness, his insincerity, his condescending attitude.

As I thought about this man driving back from our camping trip, I realized how much like Cain I was, how the anger I had stored up for years against him was being vented not just towards a colleague in ministry- one who had served as my partner in both the local ministerium and presbytery level. Even MORE, this man was my BROTHER IN CHRIST! And surely as it was such sin in Cain's heart that led him to eventually murder his brother, it was no less that same sin in my OWN heart that led me to intensely dislike this clergy brother of mine, to experience such feelings of rancor and bitterness that I had to begin asking God to heal me of. I MYSELF was Cain and I had, in fact, become BLIND to it.

My friends, let's be honest with ourselves. The painful truth is that there's a lot of Cain within EACH of us. Outwardly, we may show ourselves to be all faith and love and humility but on the INSIDE, we remain proud and self-serving, filled with all manner of jealousies and suspicions that lead us to DISDAIN our brothers and our sisters. The great wars played out on the world's stage are just a grander, more elaborate manifestation of what goes on in our OWN small lives. Though we claim to be a people of uncommon love, we can easily harbor old grudges and nurse old hurts FOR YEARS without dealing with them or letting them go. I once had a deacon who admitted to me her contempt for our church treasurer, and when I asked her why, I was amazed to learn that it was over some perceived slight that had occurred between them some THIRTY YEARS BEFORE.

Let me close by saying this. I can't remember a time when the American family has seemed more divided. Growing up in the 50's and 60's, it's not hard to remember how the headlines of the daily papers and nightly newscasts were dominated by such raging issues as the struggle for Civil Rights, our expanding involvement in Vietnam, Women's Liberation, and the fight for gay acceptance with mass marches and campus rallies held almost on a weekly basis. However, it can't begin to compare to what we CURRENTLY see dividing our nation, a conflict that is continuously inflamed by what we read on the internet and by those talking heads we watch regularly on cable television. It is a conflict, not just limited to the halls of Washington, D.C. but one that has filtered down to our local TOWN halls, to our neighborhoods, our churches, and even our own HOMES. Liberals are at war with conservatives and vice versa; the same with Republicans and Democrats, with pro-life Baptists and pro-choice Presbyterians, and the lists goes on and on.

The frightening thing is that there doesn't seem to be any way to resolve these differences. Just this past week, one of the local news stations interviewed a woman whose car was sideswiped by another causing her to total it. The driver of the other car—a male--then drove off without stopping. When asked by the reporter why she thought the man had purposely done that, her reply was, "Well, I guess he saw the political sticker on the back of my car and was offended by it." The person who drove her off the road didn't know her and obviously didn't care where she had any children in the car. All it took to set him off was a simple sticker on the back of a bumper to tell him everything he needed to know- that the driver of the vehicle in front of him—WHOEVER it might be—was an ENEMY, someone to be DESPISED!

We've all got to be horrified and disgusted by the mob run amok on the Capitol Building ten days ago which caused members of Congress to flee for their own safety, damaged portions of the building, and left five persons dead. It's been reported that among the crowd were those

who were specifically targeting the Vice-President and Speaker Pelosi, that they were lucky just to get out ALIVE. One of the policemen who was tased and beaten within an inch of his life said that as one individual struggled to grab his pistol, others began chanting, "Shoot him with his gun; shoot him with his gun." HOW HORRIBLE IS THAT! It's the story of Cain and Abel being repeated ALL OVER AGAIN, the story of one brother trying to kill another- but in THIS case, it was SOMEONE those people HAD NEVER MET BEFORE and for no other reason than that he wore a different uniform from themselves. My step-father was ALSO a Capitol Hill cop who worked in that same building for many years. He's been dead now for the past two decades but I had to wonder how HE would have felt had he been alive to witness that day!

Friends, in the midst of all this hostility and in-fighting, what is too-often forgotten is that that other person is our brother, our sister, part of our American family whom Christ asks us to love even as we love ourselves. We have GOT to stop hating and demonizing those who may think or speak or live differently than ourselves, otherwise all that hate and aggression we direct towards others is going to eat US up and leave US dead inside INSTEAD. Hasn't this been the difficult lesson that the Church has had to relearn again and again throughout the past two thousand years and in a thousand different ways? We are always tempted to draw the line tightly, to restrict and exclude from the fold persons who are different from ourselves, persons who perhaps live differently or share different values or who think differently than we do, and yet we have to continually contend with the biblical mandate to open our doors to such people and love them even as Christ loved US.

Jesus shocked the people of his day by being so LOVING, by being so TOLERANT, by being so INCLUSIVE. He reached out to the poor, the sick, the marginalized. He welcomed women, children, Gentiles, and Samaritans. He embraced prostitutes, tax-collectors, demon-possessed persons and even those afflicted by leprosy, the most heinous disease in the world at the time. He never asked ANYONE, "Are you a liberal or a conservative? Are you a Republican or a Democrat? Are you a Biden supporter or did you vote for Trump?" for the simple reason that he WOULDN'T HAVE CARED! He was ONLY interested in whether that person was lost or lonely or broken and in need of healing and love. He never denied a request or turned a person away- EVER! He thus establishes the model as to how we ourselves--as "little Christs"--should live our OWN lives and fulfill our OWN ministries. May this morning's lesson help us to see how we are ALL brother and sisters to each other and that we're ALL in need of the same forgiveness and love. And that if we look to God for help, he is faithful and just to not only cleanse and heal us of such destructive attitudes--in our hearts and in our relationships--but to establish a REAL peace, a LASTING peace, and one that will demonstrate to the REST of the world just how brothers and sisters OUGHT to live. Let us pray...

*Lord Jesus, remove from us any thoughts and feelings of jealousy and resentment and anger that might persist between ourselves and any of our brothers and sisters. Help us instead to see only your endless love for us and fill our hearts with your peace. In his name we pray. Amen and amen.*