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Genesis 4: 1 – 16

Life Changing Questions: “Where Is Your Brother?”

¹“One day a zoo keeper noticed that an orangutan was reading two books: the Bible and Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Curiously he asked the ape, “Why are you reading two such opposite books?” “Well,” said the orangutan, “I’m trying to figure out if I’m supposed to be my brother’s keeper or my keeper’s brother.”

We live East of Eden. Outside of paradise—in the real world where we are careful about strangers, careful about who we open our door too, careful about anyone we don’t know. We keep people at arms distance because we never know. And its true, we don’t.

The porches on our homes have shrunk, the garages increased in size. Front doors are seldom entered because we enter our homes through the garage. Many streets are no longer neighborhoods because no one knows their neighbors. We don’t walk, we drive.

Work schedules mean fewer families have dinner together or time to visit with one another let alone others around them. Churches, clubs and businesses replace extended family gatherings. Children’s lives are structured and parents’ lives are over busy; grandparents are often no better or too far away. Isolation pervades our busy lives.

The TV news and the newspaper sensationalize and report primarily the bad, the scary, the tragic and the revolting side of human nature as individuals, groups, or as we function collectively as nations and governments: violence, religious factionalism, nationalism, terrorism. The media coverage plays on our fears. And so we are more fearful, anxious. We recoil. We react. We make judgments about our own goodness and the evil we find in others. We condemn and conclude, “Surely God is on our side and will smite the enemy.” Psychological walls are built in our minds.

We keep to our kind, our friends, our family, our church, our club, our ethnic group, our religious affiliation, our nation and the friends of our nation.

We want safety and certainty in an uncertain world where life feels increasingly dangerous. Differences among us heighten our sense of vigilance. Is it any wonder that increasingly large numbers of young people do not consider it their business to be concerned about the lives of people they don’t know?

Is it any wonder their goals in life are to get ahead for themselves without regard for the plight of the world at large?

We increasingly define people as bad or good, friend or foe, of my kind or not of my kind. The lines are drawn—we do it out of a sense of self-protection. Suspicion is the larger side of caution and distrust the outgrowth of our fear.

Fear of the unknown, fear of the future, fear of those who are different or strange to us—quick to conclude the worst—we react rather than reflect or discern. We dismiss rather than listen. We focus on self and leave others to fend for themselves.

Into this world God comes, asking “Where is your brother?” God asks because God created us to be in relationship with one another and to be in relationship with God.

It sounds so pat, so glib for the preacher to say so. But it is God who did the creating, and God who asks....out of love for us.

In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain strikes out and kills his brother Abel. He strikes Abel down because of perceived feelings of rejection.

He blames Abel for God not accepting his offering. He sees God as favoring Abel. He doesn’t look at himself. He hurts, He lashes out. He decides its Abel’s fault.

He reasons, with Abel out of the way his competition for God’s love will be gone. Cain’s problem with God will be solved. Until God comes and asks, “Where is your brother?”

Cain doesn’t want to hear. Cain doesn’t want to think about it. “I don’t know,” he says impatiently, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Translation: “What about me? My needs, my life,

my efforts? My hard work? Abel's no more—look at me!" Cain can only think about himself—feel for himself—act for himself.

In killing his brother he took into account the cost and found it acceptable: the cost would be no brother but also no more competition. What he doesn't consider are the consequences.

Cain's action only succeeds in further distancing himself from God and from the human community. God's pronouncement that Cain will no longer succeed at farming because the ground is offended—and therefore Cain is destined to become a wanderer on the earth with no livelihood-- is not God punishing Cain.

It is God stating the inevitable tragic consequence that follows Cain's action. The ripple effect of the action of his sin affects not only himself but others. Like dropping a stone into still water—the ripples go out.

Cain doesn't see it that way. He can only see himself, worry for himself, feel for himself, "Woe is me! I will be all by myself out in the world and someone will kill me!"

God says, "Not so! I will place a special mark on you so that all who see you will know you are protected and will have to answer to me if they hurt you."

God loves Cain just as much as Abel. God's mark on Cain is an act of love to protect him.

Cain can't see that. He just feels even more rejection. He just sees the differences between himself and his brother. He just sees God as loving Abel more than himself.

Cain could only think of riding himself of his brother—he never once thought about what he could do to change himself. And yet God told him when his offering wasn't acceptable, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" And warns Cain: "If you don't look at yourself—then sin, like a wild animal will devour you."

And that's what happened.

"A young man tells the story of his brother who ended his marriage, and along with it his relationship with his children disintegrated — all because of his fascination with another woman.

Years later the man confessed to his brother the tremendous remorse he had for what he had done. The brother asked him, "Well, when you did this didn't you count the cost?" The brother replied, "Yes, I counted the cost, but I greatly underestimated the consequences."

What a sad commentary. In everything from the decisions we make in our personal lives, to the decisions we make as communities, to the decisions we make as a nation, we may count the cost; but we almost always underestimate the consequences."²

God asks a life changing question, "Where is your brother?" The truth is we are all interconnected, interdependent. Our welfare and our future linked to the welfare of the entire human community. There is no acting in self-interest that will succeed in providing us with what we need if our brother or sister is left out.

There is only looking out for one another. In that, and that alone rests our well being, our security, our peace, our future and our children's future.

Jesus comes into the world embracing the whole world—the bad and the good guys, the rich and the poor, the responsible and the irresponsible, the outcast and the well heeled.

He doesn't differentiate between them as children of God. He does differentiate between those who differentiate—he does chastise those who would try to separate sheep from goats and count themselves among the sheep.

The fact of the matter is that Jesus tells us very plainly, "The love of God is the love of neighbor." Poor Cain. Poor us when we don't get it.

What does this look like in a complex world? It looks like this:

"Every Sunday for the past nine years, members of the Landisville (Pa.) Mennonite

² —Linda A. Jacobus, "Cost, commitment and consequences," *Colesville United Methodist Church Web Site*, September 14, 2003, Cumc.org.

Church have prayed for a son of their congregation. Every month they send him a small sum of money, and every month some of them visit him. Prayer, money and visits: fairly typical examples of congregational care giving, one might suppose. What's atypical is that nine years ago, after a meal with relatives on a calm Sunday afternoon, 14-year-old Keith Weaver killed his parents, Clair and Anna May, and his sister, Kimberly. The inexplicable horror of the crime and the loss of lives rocked the Weavers' family, church, and community to the core.

□ In the middle of their grief and disillusionment, however, members of the Landisville congregation got busy. They helped clean the house where the murders occurred, established a legal support committee to care for Keith's needs so that the surviving brother and sister wouldn't have to, and founded a seventy times seven fund to collect money for his expenses. They studied grief, forgiveness and victimization in Sunday school and sermons, calling on the expertise of area chaplains and counselors. A year after the tragedy, they held a memorial service to lament the loss of their loved ones and to recommit themselves to the journey of forgiveness.

These days they are continuing that journey, through prayers and financial help and visits to Keith in prison. Forgiveness is an act of God's grace, says Landisville pastor Sam Thomas. You don't forgive and forget; you forgive again and again and again."³

And it looks like this: In the 1980's around the altar [in a refuge in San Salvador on All Souls' Day] there were various cards with the names of family members who were dead or murdered. People would have liked to go to the cemetery to put flowers on their graves. But as they were locked up in the refuge and could not go, they painted flowers around their names.

Beside the cards with the names of family members, there was another card with no

³ -Valerie Weaver-Zercher, God's Crime Bill, www.christianitytoday.com.

flowers, which read: Our dead enemies. May God forgive them and convert them. At the end of the Eucharist we asked an old man what was the meaning of this last card, and he told us this:as we are Christians, you know, we believe that our enemies should be on the altar, too. They are our brothers in spite of the fact that they kill us and murder us. And you know what the Bible says. It is easy to love our own, but God asks us also to love those who persecute us.⁴

And being your brother's keeper looks like this: "In the 4th century A.D. in Korea, a man had two sons. The elder rose to become Chief Justice in the land and the younger became an infamous bandit.

The elder brother loved his younger brother but was unable to persuade him to change his ways.

Eventually the younger son was caught and brought before his brother, the Chief Justice. Everyone in the courtroom thought the younger brother would get off because it was well-known that the Chief Justice loved his brother.

But at the end of the trial, the Chief Justice sentenced his brother to death.

On the day of the execution, the elder brother came to the prison and said to his brother, "Let's swap places." The younger brother agreed, thinking that once they realized that it was the elder brother, the execution would not go forward.

He went up on the hill to watch the proceedings. His brother was brought out at dawn and to his horror executed.

Filled with remorse, he ran down the hill and told the guard his name and that he was the criminal who should be executed. The guards said to him:

⁴ --Jon Sobrino, Latin America: Place of Sin and Place of Forgiveness, Concilium 184 (1986), 50, cited by L. Gregory Jones in Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 266.

There is no sentence outstanding on anyone with that name.

The death of Christ was a tragic victory. But because of it there is no longer a punishment or sentence outstanding in our name."⁵

When God comes asking "Where is your brother?" Christ answered for us from the cross, "I am my brother's keeper."

It's not about Abel. It's about us. It's about our relationship with God. And so Christians are those who know right from wrong, but who also have made it a moral commitment to show God's love for a person right or wrong.

Christians are those who can love the person and not approve of the wrong they do, but who can work for the welfare of all people regardless of the right or the wrong they do.

Are we our brother's keeper? Try hearing Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves this way:

"Look out for one another as God has looked out for you."

⁵ Homiletics, Online Illustrations.