

## AM I MY BROTHER' S KEEPER?



**There is practically no religion I know of that sees other people in a way that affirms the other's choice. You have only to glance at the daily news to see how passions are stirred by claims of exclusive loyalty to one's own kind, one's own clan, one's own country, and one's own church. These ties that bind are vital to our communities and our lives, but they can also be twisted into a noose. -- Bill Moyers quoting Elaine Pagals.**

**"God don't make no junk." – jhc**

*Scripture:*

**Genesis 4 (NIV)**

1. Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man."
2. Later Eve gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.
3. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD.
4. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering,
5. but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.
6. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?"
7. If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."
8. Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.
9. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

**Matthew 5:39-6:1**

<sup>39</sup>But I say to you, "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup>and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup>and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

<sup>43</sup>'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

<sup>6</sup>'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.'



## COVER BOYS

While we were putting together the bulletin on Friday, someone called me from the office and asked me what kind of picture to use on the bulletin cover. I said the theme comes from the story of the Cain and Abel, the two brothers in Genesis. There was a pause for thinking, and then a suggestion that we use the pictures of Cindy Larson's two sons that she has hanging on the door to her office. I'm not sure about the identity of the two guys that we selected as cover boys today, but there appears to be a family resemblance. I'm glad we decided not to use Cindy's two boys who will occasionally drop by the office after school. Here's why:

### **ABEL CARED FOR ANIMALS; CAIN TILLED THE LAND**

According to Genesis, after Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, they gave birth to two sons. Cain became a farmer; he tilled the land. Abel cared for the animals; he became a shepherd. When the boys were grown, they went into different occupations, they brought offerings of the things they had grown to present to the Lord.

Abel's offering of livestock was accepted.

Cain's offering from the fields was not.

A conflict escalates. Cain envies Abel's apparent favoritism.

Cain kills Abel.

Four chapters into Genesis the Bible tells of the first murder in a dysfunctional family. Isn't that remarkable! The Bible has named just four humans. Cain and Abel are the first children born of human parents, and one of them kills the other. The human race is not off to a good start.

Genesis later reveals that it was not the gift of livestock, or grain that was refused. It was the faith of one as opposed to the faith of the other that was accepted. There's not much comfort in that. It is sad when our gift of faith does not measure up. I think this is a case where history is written from the point of view of the winner.

### **BROTHER OR BOTHER?**

So how many sermons can we derive from this story?

- Here's one: Is envy the first sin? Yes, there is a close relationship between admiration that brings growth, and envy that can produce destruction. Envy is still the chief cause of crime, conflict, assault, and war. Is there anyone

you envied as a child? There can be no doubt that it had an impact on your character. If we are honest, we know that there was the boy who appeared better off or who had a toy we wanted, or a girl who seemed to understand things we could not. We have met people who excel in things that we cannot. The way we deal with envy is to either increase our own skills, or to try to knock down the person who appears to be better off. I can cite examples of both.

- Why did Cain say, "Am I my brother's keeper?" We often think that Cain's answer was sarcasm. We read our own sarcasm into it. But what if Cain really didn't know? Did he have the Ten Commandments? No. Did he have the Code of Hammurabi? Not yet. Where there is competition in nature, there is also death. I don't know if Cain is a real or symbolic human, but maybe a simple "yes, you are your brother's keeper" is all that is intended. Is it true that what is not forbidden is permitted? Don't kill family is the simple lesson. Maybe it begins here. At this point the human race is only one family. This is the most important lesson -- above all others.
- There are many reasons to care for your brother, or your family. But Cain's answer is not one of them. He either didn't know, or he didn't care. Care for your neighbor because Jesus demonstrated that we must heal the sick, because Jesus fed the 5,000, and because of Jesus' example of the Good Samaritan. Yes, we are our brother's keeper, but the story of Cain and Abel is not the reason why.

### **FROM REBELLION TO BLOODSHED**

**Cain killed his brother Abel;  
it was a short step from envy to bloodshed.**

Cain was condemned to a nomadic life, but God provided protection against his death. Remember that the Mark of Cain was protection, not a warrant.

The successors of this first family learn not only how to work, but how to play and enjoy music. Shortly after Cain is the legend of Jubal. Jubal is the father of stringed instruments. What did Jubal play? He played lyre, the harp, or an amplified harp that was a stringed instrument that was essentially a goat skin stretched over a gourd. A few thousand years after Jubal, some guys in the Deep South added a fifth string

and tuned it to G. Yahoo! Jubel is the father of Bluegrass.

It is of small comfort that the Bible is a collection of stories about dysfunctional families.

- Isaac and Ishmael were the sons of Abraham. Their family was no more functional than Cain and Abel's. One became the father of the Jews, the other became the father of the Muslims.
- Their descendants included Jacob and Esau. Jacob tricked his older brother out of his birthright.
- Then Joseph, the son of Jacob, was taken to a pit and left for dead by his brothers, who then lied to their parents about his disappearance.

How can we get moral guidance from families who trick each other out of their inheritance, sell their brother to foreigners, and kill the brother who was most pleasing to God?

**We can learn that choices have consequences, but we must always affirm each other's right to choose.**

### **AFFIRMING THE OTHER'S CHOICE**

I keep a file marked "Holy War," says Bill Moyers.

It bulges with stories:

Of Shias and Sunnis in fratricidal conflict.

Of teenage girls in Algeria shot in the face for not wearing a veil.

Of professors whose throats are cut for teaching male and female students in the same classroom.

Of Muslim suicide bombers bent on the obliteration of Jews.

Of the young Orthodox Jew who assassinated Yitzhak Rabin and then announced to the world that "Everything I did, I did for the glory of God." (*Bill Moyers*)

The Orthodox Jew who assassinated Yitzhak Rabin and pronounced, "Everything I did, I did for the glory of God," **was wrong**.

**HERE'S WHAT I THINK THE BIBLE SAYS:  
CONFLICT IS BORN OF HUMANS,  
RECONCILIATION IS BORN OF GOD.**

**WORK FOR RECONCILIATION.**

**CHRISTIANS! YOU MUST BECOME  
AGENTS OF RECONCILIATION,  
NOT MESSENGERS OF DEATH. - jhc**

The reason the Bible begins with the gruesome story of Cain murdering his brother Abel is not to say that it is right, but to condemn fratricide as wrong.

### **A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS**

Who is my brother? Immigration is in the news. What was legal for my ancestors is illegal for modern day immigrants. Our hard-line attitude on immigration is the byproduct of international terrorism. But immigration stresses our country deeply. America is dotted with mosques in places like Toledo, Phoenix and Atlanta. We have huge Hindu temples in Pittsburgh, Olney, Maryland and our own Silicon Valley. There are Sikh communities in Stockton and Santa Fe, and Buddhist retreat centers in the mountains of Vermont and West Virginia. In our own neighborhood, Hispanics grow our crops, while people from Fiji are the first people we call to care for the aging. The Chinese built the railroad, and the French sold us Louisiana. And all of this was after the Native Americans had lived in North America for hundreds of years.

The founding of our nation is a contest of ethnic narratives.

Numerically, the racial ethnic membership of the Presbyterian Church in 2008 was nearly 200,000. (184,000)

Our denomination has increased with a growing share of Asians, blacks, and Hispanics.

In response to Arizona's controversial immigration law, delegates of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) agreed to refrain from holding national meetings in states where immigrant members might be subject to harassment.

The PC(USA)'s 219th General Assembly – the highest legislative body – voted 420-205 Thursday evening to stand with immigrant Presbyterians.

"It is not right to have meetings and do things as a church, when the entire church cannot be there," said Trina Zelle, a minister from Grand Canyon Presbytery.

Do you remember sometime ago, when Santa Rosa boycott organizers created an event they called "A Day Without Immigrants"? The boycott grew out of pro-immigrant rallies across the country, in an effort to pressure Congress to craft legislation to allow millions of illegal immigrants to obtain legal U.S. residency. Not long ago at coffee, we talked about the continuing need to find ways to

make immigration legal, and after legal immigration, then citizenship. Were any of you here when the Church of the Roses helped a number of people go through the immigration process? What a great thing to do.

### **IMMIGRATION**

Ruben Navarrette, Jr. said we need to create an earned pathway to legal status for illegal immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for at least ten years, but make it conditional, where applicants pay a fine, undergo criminal background checks, demonstrate knowledge of English language so that they could be awarded legal status though not U.S. citizenship. Immigrants often have strong family values. They work hard. They build community groups. Their church membership and religious faith are extremely important in their lives. They have traditional ideas about family structure (low divorce rates, support elderly parents financially). They spend what money they have on their families - higher than average Americans in purchases of children's furniture and children's music. The second generation families are middle class and pay taxes that more than make up for the costs of the first generation.

There are serious issues before us this morning. We must always treat our neighbors with respect. Cain and Abel remind us that it is important for brothers to learn to live together in peace. Cain and Abel are children of the same parents. They are found today on the frontiers of the Middle East, on the borders of India and Pakistan, on the borders of our nation, and in the streets of Santa Rosa.

### **"RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES"**

Religious boundaries are not the same as political boundaries. They are broader. Jesus Christ is international, and so were the prophets. It is important that we never make our spiritual borders smaller.

How important it is that brothers learn to live together in peace!

### **THE MERCHANT OF VENICE – WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

**To paraphrase the Merchant of Venice:**

**We are fed with the same food,  
hurt with the same weapons,  
subject to the same diseases,  
healed by the same means,  
warmed and cooled by the same  
winter and summer ...**

**If you prick us do we not bleed?  
If you tickle us do we not laugh?**

**If you poison us do we not die?**

**And if you wrong us  
shall we not revenge?**

**... The villainy you teach me I will  
execute, and it shall go hard  
but I will better the instruction.**

**Surely, we are our brothers' keepers. Yet we  
continue to be haunted by the legacy of Cain and  
Abel.**



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