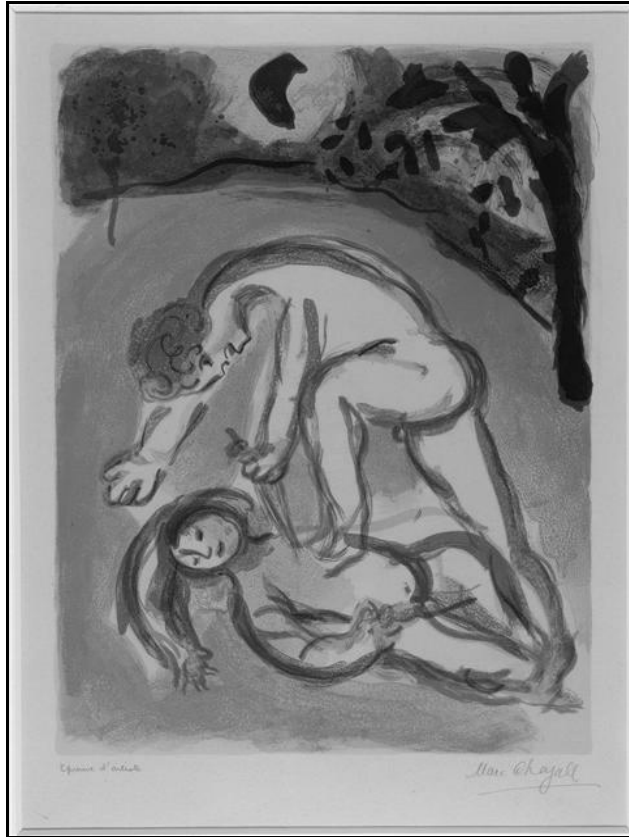


SIBLING RIVALRY



Scripture:

Genesis 4:4-16

⁴and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. ⁶The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? ⁷If 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.”

⁸Cain 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. ⁹Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” ¹⁰And the LORD said, “What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! ¹¹And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹²When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” ¹³Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! ¹⁴Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.” ¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. ¹⁶Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Matthew 5:21-24

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



Our guest preacher, Emily Stockert, is a fourth year Masters of Divinity student at San Francisco Theological Seminary. She recently served Knox Presbyterian Church (Santa Rosa) as their seminary intern. Emily hails from all over the place (Maryland, Ohio, Los Angeles) but she and her family have called Santa Rosa home for the past three years. Before seminary, Emily appeared in a few commercials, on television, and in film.

SIBLING RIVALRY

Abel brought a fatted calf and Cain brought vegetables as an offering before God. Abel’s offering was pleasing but God would not look upon Cain and his offering. It’s really hard to understand what this means because this story is at least three-thousand years old. It might be older. It was written down around the tenth century BC, a thousand years before Jesus. But people were telling each other this story for even longer than that.

We can guess what it might have meant to those who heard it originally. It was probably written down in the early days of ancient Israel, and there’s probably a message in it about proper worship. Back in those days there were religious rules about bringing the first of the fruits of your labor, and there were rules about what animals to properly offer in praise of God or to make atonement for sin.

Right now, we don’t need to get hung up on why Abel’s offering was pleasing and Cain’s was not because what makes this story stick over the years is the emotion that drives the tragedy: God turns away from Cain, Cain gets angry, and Cain kills Abel. Who does God love more, Abel or Cain?

ABEL

Is it Abel the good brother, the handsome, shining one, full of promise, the one who brings his best before God? But, he dies. He goes out there in the field with his brother, and he dies, senselessly, violently, with the ground crying out in pain for the unbearable loss of Abel, the good brother.

CAIN

So, we’re left with Cain, the bad brother. He’s jealous and deceptive and angry. Sin lurks in his heart, and he can not master it. He’s a murderer who responds to his brother’s death with a snarky little question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” And then he argues with God about his punishment. God exiles him from his home.

We readers turn away and exile Cain, too. We lift him up as the bad example in Sunday School, in Bible Study, and in church. “How can he not know he is his brother’s keeper?” we say. It’s simple “All I need to know I learned in Kindergarten” stuff. Don’t be Cain, kids. Be Abel.

We identify with Abel because we hope that we shine like Abel, pleasing God with our own fatted calves.

THREE MAJOR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

But the story of Cain and Abel belongs to three major religious traditions. Through Adam

and Eve, down through their children, through Cain's other brother Seth, you can trace a direct biblical genealogical line down to Abraham. And, like the old song, Father Abraham had many sons. His son Isaac had many sons, now called Jews and Christians. Abraham's other son, Ishmael, had many sons, too, now called Muslims. Jews, Christians, and Muslims; you could say we are siblings.

ABEL BELONGS TO GOD

Then, which one of us is Abel?

The hard truth is that nobody can claim Abel. Abel dies in the story. From the beginning, Abel belongs to God.

CAIN BELONGS TO US

Cain belongs to us, though. Cain, the "never-good-enough" one, the impulsive one, goes with his brother out into the field, and the pain and the rage and the humiliation of not being enough, the searing, blinding, brokenhearted agony of rejection overcomes him like a wild beast and he lashes out. In an instant, he's no longer Cain, brother of Abel, tiller of the ground. He is Cain, Murderer, with a capital M. A marked man, known for all eternity as a jealous killer, forever an exile.

Yet, for us to disown Cain is to forget that sin lurks at our doors, too. Who among us doesn't have the sting of rejection, the shame of inadequacy, or the hatred of another lurking just beneath the surface?

SIN

The sin in the story is like a wild beast. It waits in the darkness, just beyond the threshold, feeding on secret fears and jealousies, getting fat, licking its wounds and whispering, darkly, "You're right, you're always right. You deserve more."

Sin is a word with a lot of baggage! In more liberal, progressive churches we don't talk sin too much anymore because of all the pulpit-thumping baggage of hellfire and damnation that comes with the word. Yet, sin here and, actually, in most of the Bible doesn't mean "Sin" with a capital "S."

To sin both in the Hebrew and in the Greek languages of the Bible literally means "to miss the mark."

To sin is "to miss the mark" in big ways or in small in our relationships with each other and God.

To sin is to fail at loving God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

The irony of the story is that Cain, the one who can not master this sin, actually spends more face-to-face time with God than Abel ever does. Cain gets the most attention. God may not look upon Cain's offering with regard, but God does have an entire conversation with him about why he looks so upset, and God tries to impart a lesson about mastering sin. Of course, Cain doesn't listen to God and he kills Abel. Later, even after Cain argues with God about his exile, God protects Cain, not wishing harm to come to him from those who might seek revenge for Abel's death. God doesn't return Cain's violence with more violence.

A JESUS VIEW OF CAIN AND ABEL

We could stop here, and get enough value out of the story for one Sunday morning: in the story of Cain and Abel, God doesn't return violence with more violence. But as Christians, our unique position among the three religious traditions that claim this story is to look at Cain through the lens of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So, let's take a moment to add a little Jesus to the story. In Jesus' ministry, during his "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said in ancient times, 'You shall not murder' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment...so when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; be first reconciled to your brother or sister and then come offer your gifts.'"

According to Jesus, we should put our emphasis on *reconciling* with our siblings *before* we come to worship God. So, we might read into the Cain and Abel scripture that Cain's first sin was the jealousy Cain holds in his heart for his brother. It's the little "sin" that leads to the big "Sin" of murder. Had Cain reconciled with his brother before making his offering, his anger might have cooled and he might not have killed Abel.

ONE STEP FARTHER

If we go one step farther, it's not just our literal siblings that Jesus has in mind. Jesus also says in Matthew that "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." And expanding the circle ever outward, as Jesus does, to include our neighbors, even our neighbors who disagree with us religiously, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, then that's pretty much *everyone*.

Basically, the ministry of Jesus is consistent with the earlier biblical story of Cain and Abel: God most highly values our making peace within our families and with our neighbors. Also, God values giving second chances for reconciliation with God, too, and the story of Cain is filled with God's grace. Cain with his "not-good-enough" offering and his treacherous, sinful heart is given God's protection. The "mark of Cain" is not a scarlet M, it's a blessing and a forgiveness of sins that allows Cain to go on to live a new life in peace, to marry and have babies. The Bible says generations of people come from Cain, both city dwellers and nomads, farmers, musicians, and artisans. Cain gets forgiveness and new life. Sound familiar?

THE PROMISE OF GOD'S GRACE

Just as God answers the violence of the cross with the hope of the resurrection, the grace in the story of Cain and Abel is that God accepts Abel's perfect offering, and God *also* forgives Cain's imperfect humanity. The promise of the story of Cain and Abel is that God does indeed have enough love for all of us. God doesn't choose Abel over Cain; God chooses both Cain and Abel.

Perhaps we should read Cain and Abel not as a lesson on how to be good, but as a lesson about God's gracious love for all. When we turn away from Cain, we turn away from our own precarious humanity. To turn away is to ignore our own moments of shame and "not-good-enoughness," to deny the possibility that we too might slip and make a fatal mistake. Ironically, to deny our own sinfulness, is also to turn away from the promise of God's grace.

The promise of grace is that we don't have to compete, be perfect, or never miss the mark to win God's love. We just can't win God's love. It's impossible. Because the absolute, ultimate truth is that God's grace is a free gift we never need to earn. The promise of God's grace is that there is enough love for all. For God is love. Love is God.

Shalom. Salaam. Peace be with you. Amen.



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