

Genesis 4:1-16

January 24, 2010

South Plains

The Brother Problem

There's a cost to belonging to an interfaith organization such as IMPACT. The financial cost is only a few hundred dollars. The spiritual costs are more substantial. They are the costs of discipleship. I'm not thinking so much of the time we invest, although time is often the most useful contribution we make to the cause of justice and righteousness through IMPACT. The other costs come in the requirement that we answer the hard question raised in the gospel: "Who is my neighbor?" Whom would Jesus have me love? Whose cause should I serve in the name of Christ? Who needs my advocacy? Or to use biblical language, Who is the orphan, the stranger, the naked, the thirsty, the prisoner that I am called to lift up?

The question is easier to answer if we wear blinders and only see those who are right in front of our feet, the neighbor down the road who is burned out or the traveler whose car breaks down in our parking lot. It's more difficult when we look around at the wider community or at the news reports from around the world. Who is the neighbor made poorer because of laws that benefit other people?

The story of creation in Genesis asks that question more poignantly: Who is my brother or sister? What

responsibility do I have for brothers and sisters who are so close to me that they crowd my space and compete with me? The brother problem is as old as humankind and as knotty a problem as any we face.

Cain and Abel represent you and me in all the conflicts inherent to human society. Cain is a farmer and Abel herds sheep. Both live off the land, but each one gets a different living from the land. The older brother brings his harvest as an offering to the Lord. The younger brings one of the first born from his flock as an offering. Surely this is the pattern for all our offerings. Last week a number of people gave time and various gifts in kind to make up hygiene kits for people in Haiti. Each gave what he or she had to offer. No problem.

But, there is a problem in the case of Cain's gift. In the eyes of the Lord it is not equal in value to the gift that Abel brings. We don't know why that is so. The scripture simply says, "The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard (4:4-5)." We cannot read God's mind, but the fact is that Cain realizes that his gift is unacceptable. So, Cain is angry and depressed.

Up to this point, Cain has done nothing wrong that we know about. This is not a story about bad offerings and good offerings. It's about how we react to disappointment when someone shows us up, when someone outdoes us. In one church I served, a woman came to worship one Sunday wearing a genuine mink

coat. The coat was second hand, a gift from a person who no longer wanted it. But, some people in that church could not bear to think that a woman no better than they were would wear a real fur coat. They criticized her uppity ways. I don't think she ever wore that coat to church again. The cost of seeing their neighbor happy was too high a price for the church to pay.

The Lord points out that Cain is treading on dangerous ground by being angry and jealous. Sin is coiled like a snake ready to strike. Cain ignores the warning. He invites his brother into the field where he kills Abel because his offering was regarded by the Lord. The first murder is for God's sake, motivated by an unhappy experience in worship. Immediately the Lord confronts the murderer, "Where is your brother Abel?" The question echoes the one asked by the Lord in the garden of Eden. Now, however, the problem is not, "Where are you?" but "Where is the brother? Where is the neighbor?"

Cain tells a lie, and cleverly tries to turn the question back on the Lord. "Am I my brother's keeper?" It's almost a pun: Am I supposed to keep the keeper of the sheep? But this is not a laughing matter. The ground that Cain plows for a living has been cursed by drinking up the blood of Abel. It will no longer support his farming. He must become a fugitive, a wanderer separated from his work and from his God. But, the punishment is not absolute. The Lord will not permit the murder to be compounded by allowing anyone to murder Cain. Cain is

marked, perhaps tattooed, as one protected by the same Lord from whom he is separated. And so he shuffles off the stage to the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Who are my brothers and sisters? Are they the Methodists and Baptists who are so close to Presbyterians that many of us move easily from one denomination to another? Are they the Unitarians and Catholics? Could they be the Jews or the Muslims or the Bahai' or some other religious group? Or, people of no faith at all?

When Jesus began his ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth he made an exclusive claim for himself and commissioned his followers with a universal claim. For himself he claimed the title of the anointed one, the Messiah, the one sent to bring good news to the poor. To his followers, he gave the commission to imitate him in proclaiming "release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." It's a pretty universal mission meant to reach out to anyone who needs good news, anyone counted poor. These are our brothers and sisters.

The issue is our attitude and our action toward brothers and sisters. There's plenty of opportunity for jealousy and resentment in our world. The novelist John Steinbeck says "these sixteen verses are a history of mankind in any age or culture or race (*East of Eden*)."

We are prone to resent any other person or group that

seems to gain a little more favor than we have. I learned one of the great truths of Christianity from the wife of my pastor when I began to talk about going to seminary. We were talking about the opportunities for Christian service and what was necessary to take advantage of those opportunities. This wise woman said, "You know, preachers are a jealous lot." I think about that comment often when I'm tempted to compare my ministry to another preacher's ministry. Sometimes it seems as if the Lord has favored another pastor more than me. Sin is ready to spring up and devour me.

Of course competition can be a good motivation to do better. We have that drilled into us every day in America. What is not so often said is that competition slides quickly into resentment and anger when we believe someone else has an advantage. The story of Cain and Abel endures because Abel seems to have an advantage with the Lord and because there is no explanation for that advantage. There's no good reason for Cain not to be angry. So often, that is the situation in which we find ourselves.

Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists and Lutherans; Pentecostals, Catholics and mega-church members are all Christians. Each denomination has its strengths and weaknesses; and each of us has an angry complaint about the way the world has treated us. Sin is lurking at the door.

Palestinians and Jews are brothers of the same land. Each has suffered greatly. There's good reason for each to be angry. Sin is lurking at the door.

Immigrants and citizens of the United States are living side by side in the same nation. In our poor economy, many Americans have lost their savings or their jobs or their homes. Immigrants who are legal and those who are illegal are often here because of terrible losses in their home countries. There's reason to be angry. Sin is lurking at the door.

We are all tempted to look out for ourselves first, and if that entails some well justified anger, so be it. Sin is lurking at the door. The good news of Genesis is that the Lord believes Cain can master the temptation to sin. The Lord's warning is for us also. The good news Jesus proclaims to the people of Nazareth is the year of the Lord's favor: release, freedom, sight to those of us who are blind.

Our participation in the IMPACT network of congregations is one small way we can work constructively beyond the anger and resentment and jealousy among competing groups in our society. It's not the only avenue we have for keeping our brothers and sisters, for treating them justly, for seeking righteousness in our community. Many of us are part of other organizations where our voices can be heard on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

IMPACT is a connection that broadens my experience with love and justice to include friends with a different commitment to religious faith. Because our commitments are different, I am reminded that the love and just of the God we worship are universal values.

Perhaps a dozen times a day, we are confronted with opportunities to be resentful and jealous. One of the reasons I come to church is that here my better impulses are encouraged and nurtured. Here, I find not only restraint for my angers, but more importantly I find opportunities to reach toward justice in ways that are constructive and satisfying. And, I find my sisters and brothers.