

But...It's Not Fair
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Genesis 4:1-16

Genesis is the topic of the sermon series that began last Sunday, and will run through Labor Day. Genesis, which means beginning, captures the sense of something being started, formed, or originated. This summer we will hear narrative accounts contained within this first book of the Bible that begin the retelling of God's relationship with creation, God's relationship with humanity, God's relationship with you, with me. Last Sunday in worship, we heard passages from the first three chapters of Genesis, including descriptions of the creative nature of God and the disobedient nature of Adam and Eve. And today we'll ponder this tale of their two sons.

But, before we go too far, I need to preface this sermon with a disclaimer. So, in an attempt to be as transparent as possible—aiming at full-disclosure—let me fill you in on some background information. I grew up in the generation before SUV's, before minivans. Perhaps like some of you, I spent many hours traveling in the back seats of a family station wagon. These were the years when wearing seatbelts was not mandated as a state law, but considered optional. So, it was easy and fun to jump from the middle bench seat to the rear seat, where there was lots of room.

Also, I'm a middle child. I have an older sister and a younger brother. In addition, I'm what my brother calls "vertically challenged." On a good day, I'm 5' 3", while my sister is 5' 8" and my brother 6' 4". This meant, when our station wagon was full, and the rear seat was unavailable for climbing and acrobatics, my sister, brother, and I all had to squeeze into one bench seat. As the shortest and the middle sibling, I **always** had to sit in the middle, my brother on one side, my sister on the other...and the hump on the floor in front of me. As I remember it, that hump was at least a foot high and a foot wide; it was huge. There was no leg room—even for someone with short legs.

I'd look to my left, and my brother had space to stretch out his legs; I'd look to my right, and my sister looked comfortable. So...wasn't I entitled to more space and comfort? Why was I the one always stuck in the middle? This just wasn't fair.

My parents didn't let me get very far with this argument: It's not fair that my sister gets to stay up later than I do. It's not fair that my brother doesn't have to help with the laundry. It's not fair...

When I confronted my dad with my demands for justice and gender equality, they were met by the most reasoned—and infuriating—response: “Ann, no one ever said life was going to be fair.” My father didn’t argue or deny my feelings of injustice. He simply stated the obvious.

So, as I read this story of Cain and Abel, I do so with a tape playing in the back of my mind: “No one ever said life was going to be fair. No one ever said...” Even with years of hearing “Life’s not fair,” I still struggle to get past the first section of this passage in chapter 4.

Seemingly without request or any requirement to do so, Cain and Abel both bring offerings to God. It’s a gesture of worship and apparent gratitude. But for some reason, Abel’s offering is regarded as better than Cain’s. This just doesn’t seem fair.

Abel is a shepherd, and Cain is a farmer. So, maybe there was a drought that year, and the land didn’t produce a good harvest. Or maybe Cain’s motives weren’t pure, he didn’t bring the best of his crops; perhaps his heart wasn’t in the right place, he was just going through the motions of worshiping God—all just speculation. We really don’t know. And the text seems to intentionally avoid presenting any reason why this is so. Nor does the story tell us how Cain perceived that Abel’s offering was better than his own. Whatever the cause, it set in motion the first experience of sibling rivalry—leading to deadly conflict between these two brothers.

The narrative focuses, instead, on Cain’s response to this perception of life being unfair. How does Cain respond? He was angry and dejected. That’s close to how I felt, always being squashed in the middle of the station wagon. We’ve all wrestled with those feelings—anger, rage, frustration, rejection—when things in life don’t go our way. We frequently experience life as unfair. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. How do we respond?

Cain invited his brother into the field. Did Cain simply want to show Abel the evidence of a bad growing year: too much sun, not enough rainfall, and deer eating all the plants...No wonder Cain’s offering was meager.

Did they argue about the land? Fight about a fair redistribution of resources, in light of this bad harvest? Or...was this premeditated murder? What we know from the story is Cain rose up against his brother and killed Abel.

Seemingly with blood still on his hands, Cain hears God asking, “Where is your brother Abel?” I suppose, with a straight face, Cain lies, “I don’t know.” After which he asks God a classic, rhetorical question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” It’s as if Cain is trying to transfer the blame onto God. Look, God, I’m not the one responsible for my brother. After all, you’re God. You should be keeping track of Abel’s welfare and whereabouts, not me.

In the summer of 2001, when our sons were 8 and 10, my husband Jim and I took them on a family mission trip to Cuernavaca, Mexico. During the week we were there, most of our time was spent meeting people, learning some Mexican history, hearing about the political, social, and economic issues, and visiting a wide spectrum of locations. One of the places we visited was *La Estacion*: The Station. On the far side of the train tracks, a slum had materialized—a city on the edge of life—houses with dirt floors, cardboard, plywood, and other scraps of material for walls, and thin, corrugated metal sheets for roofs—hundreds of homes constructed out of any discarded items that could be scavenged. Often no windows or doors. No running water. No reliable electricity.

Howard and Betsy Friend, who were leading our mission trip, had arranged for us to meet with several of the families living in this slum. As we walked from one home to another, we passed many stray dogs. These were skinny, often emaciated animals that were not being well cared for or fed properly. Coming around a corner, our younger son, Michael, spied a sad, mangy looking dog, lying in our pathway. As he got closer, Howard reminded Michael not to pat the dog. We had our own golden retriever at home that Michael patted all the time. So, he wondered why he couldn't touch this dog, too. Howard explained that some of these animals were mistreated. Sometimes people get angry, and they take their frustration out on the nearest and easiest target. There can be vicious chain reactions when a husband slaps his wife, parents hit their kids, and everyone kicks the dog—in anger, rage, and frustration. What's our response when life isn't fair?

On our trip, we were given this advice in preparation for witnessing such extreme poverty: Pity is when we touch people's lives with fear. Compassion is when we touch their lives with love.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating fruit they were told not to eat, they compounded the sin of disobedience with additional sin. They denied and blamed their way out of the Garden of Eden. God provides Cain with an opportunity to confess and be forgiven, a chance to respond with honest love and compassion. "Where is your brother Abel?" However, Cain's response also is to cover up his sin. Violence, murder, fratricide enter the story, followed by more deceit and blame. Sin does have a habit of encouraging additional sin.¹

Twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth described the response of human beings, like Cain, who resist, avoid, and fail to respond to God's relationship of love in this way: he said, these people turn their backs on God, rolling themselves into a ball like hedgehogs with prickly spikes.² Sin causes alienation, separation, and estrangement from God, from creation, and from one another. Those prickly spikes get in the way of our relationships.

One of the remarkable aspects of this story is our awareness that Cain's sinful acts did not place him beyond God's love. He murdered, lied, and blamed, and yet God still remained committed to him. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote, "Human sin may certainly pervert human beings' relationship to God, but not God's relationship to human beings. That relationship was resolved upon by God, and was created by [God], and can therefore never be...withdrawn except by God."³ God's relationship with us is solid, true, and right. Our relationship with God, however, is skewed and distorted by sin.

God takes sin very seriously, but God takes even more seriously God's faithfulness, remembrance, and steadfast love of creation and humanity. God maintained the covenant with Cain. With a mark, God protected Cain into his future, which would include a wife, children, and community. Cain's sin is met with judgment, but Cain himself, the sinner, is met with God's surprising mercy and amazing grace.⁴

It's all too easy to shrug off the lesson from this text. After all, I haven't murdered anyone. At least I haven't physically murdered any one. But what about the many subtle ways we kill: the poisonous gossip, the deadly indifference, and the cutting remarks we make. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, "You have heard it said...'You shall not murder'...but 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."⁵

Our words, said in anger and frustration, have the power to kill. Our comments have the capacity to destroy peace, joy, and hope. Our rage has the ability to sever our relationships with God, with creation, and with humanity.

Who is my neighbor? My sister? My brother? It's not just our siblings, or the people we're squashed next to, or the people living next door. It's all of humankind—each person who God has created in God's image.

Our church contribution to the 2011 Offering of Letters will be dedicated today and delivered to members of Congress by the members going on the Mission Trip to Washington, DC next week. The number one goal of Bread for the World is the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. You can find lots of harrowing statistics on their website. Perhaps one of the most staggering is this one: "24,000 children die every day from poverty, hunger, and preventable diseases. That's one child every 3.6 seconds."⁶

How do we respond?...with love and compassion, not with pity and fear.

John Donne, who was a seventeenth-century poet and preacher, wrote the well known line, "No [one] is an island, entire of itself." He continued this thought by stressing, "Every [person] is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod

be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less...any [person]'s death diminishes me, because I am involved in [human]kind." Abel's death diminished Cain. The death of 24,000 children each day diminishes all of us. When life isn't fair, how do we respond?

Sin is a reality in our lives, often experienced like a predatory animal lurking and waiting to pounce on us. Cain was overcome by sin. He did not master it. Instead, his life was torn apart by this powerful force lurking in the shadows of his emotions.

As Christians, we have the assurance that in Christ we have been set free from sin. If we confront it, we can master it. We are no longer slaves to sin; rather, we are able to live in righteousness under God's grace. New life in Christ means having the freedom to respond not with pity, but with compassion. Being in a right relationship with one another and with God means being able to respond with love, with the love of God we find in Christ.

Amen.

¹ Arnold B. Rhodes, *The Mighty Acts of God*, 35.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. IV, The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 405.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 233.

⁴ *Interpretation*, Genesis 4:1-16, 61.

⁵ Matthew 5:21.22.

⁶ Bread for the World, 2011 Offering of Letters, Hunger and Poverty Facts, 15.