

Restoring Broken Communities
February 24, 2008

Genesis 4:1-16:

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering God had no regard. So Cain was very angry and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If 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."

Cain 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. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen: your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today 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." Then 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. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **ALL: Thanks be to God.**

Let me tell you about a three-year-old girl who was listening intently to the children's sermon. The pastor explained that God wants everyone to get along and love each other. "God wants us all to be one," he said. To which the little replied, "But I don't want to be one. I want to be four!"

Most people agree that it is important to live together in unity and peace, but when we are the ones who have to sacrifice something we want for the common good, the situation becomes more complicated. It is hard to live together in peace. Some of our most painful fights can be with our own family because we understand how each other tick: brothers and sisters, parents and children know how to get under each other's skin.

Cain and Abel are brothers, born to loving parents, Adam and Eve. Cain, the older brother, is a farmer, while Abel becomes a shepherd. And surprise, surprise: these brothers become competitive about their different professions. Cain and Abel both bring an offering to God and the Lord prefers Abel's gift. Some commentators suppose that

Abel has a better attitude than Cain does; other scholars surmise that Abel brought his best animals, while Cain only brought some of his less desirable crops, but the truth is that the story does not tell us for sure why God favors Abel's present. Cain is certainly confused and hurt, wondering what he has done wrong.

One scene from Arthur Miller's play, The Creation of the World and Other Business, may shed some light into why Cain feels disappointed. The scene begins with the Lord gloating over Abel's piece of lamb meat.

God: Young man, this is undoubtedly the sweetest, most delicious, delicate, and profoundly satisfying piece of meat I have ever tasted since the world began.

Adam (*speaking to Abel*): Boy, this is our proudest moment.

Cain: Lord, there's still my corn. You haven't tasted my corn.

God: Oh, I can see it's very nice. You have done quite well, Cain. Keep it up.

(*With which he walks into the light with Adam, and Abel following behind.*)

Eve: *beckoning*: Cain? (*She sees his shock.*) Darling, he loved your vegetables.

Come.¹

I believe that both Cain and Abel wanted to please God. I can imagine Cain getting excited as he is preparing his gift, thinking about how proud he will make God. Have you ever worked really hard to try to get someone else to notice you or to try to earn someone else's respect, and then they seem to disregard your attempt? It's painful.

Almost ten years ago, the male psychologists Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson wrote the book Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys. They selected the title Raising Cain based upon Cain's experience in Genesis, which resonates with the struggles that many young men face in our society. In Cain's story they see "a boy's desire to be loved and respected, and his propensity to respond to humiliation and shame with anger and violence rather than reflection and communication."² Cain's countenance falls after God does not show any appreciation his gift; Cain is humiliated. It is not bad that Cain is upset: it is healthy to want to please those we love, especially God. The problem is what Cain does with his feelings: he does not verbalize them. God reaches out to Cain, yet he remains silent, seething with anger.

God sees the destructive power of Cain's anger and offers him helpful guidance. God observes sin lurking at Cain's door and tells him to resist its seductive power. God makes it clear that Cain must decide for himself. Cain is not a helpless victim, but a human being who is capable of taking charge of his own life. Cain has the choice to succumb to his rage or to redirect his energy in a positive direction.

Cain is like a stubborn child who does not want to listen to the well wishes of a parent. Cain chooses to ignore God's advice and he instead lashes out in violence and kills his brother Abel. Is Cain really angry with Abel? No, of course not: he may be jealous of his brother, but Abel has not done anything mean spirited toward his brother.

¹ Arthur Miller, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, 1972, Act 3, p. 90-91.

² Dan Kindlon & Michael Thompson, *Raising Cain*, p. 18.

Abel becomes the world's first scapegoat, the person who is blamed for something that is not his responsibility.

Our society likes to point out who is at fault. I think we spend more energy assigning blame than we do trying to find creative solutions. After the tragedy at Virginia Tech, it made me so angry that the news media and others were spending so much time trying to scapegoat decent people like the campus police and Virginia Tech's president Charles Steger when it was not their fault and they were doing the best they could under impossible circumstances.

We see misdirected anger all around us. What do you think road rage is really all about? Do you think the driver is so upset that the other person has cut him off or do you think the anger comes from somewhere else? I know the feeling of that misplaced anger. In eighth grade, a bully decided to pick on me. The bully's insults got under my skin and unfortunately I let out my anger by being mean as a snake to my friends and family throughout my eighth grade year.

On Thursday night, I was leaving Food Lion after I had bought my groceries: I was tired after a long day and not particularly paying attention to where I was going. A young lady was in the path of my cart and she made no effort to move. I didn't notice her until I was a few steps away from her and then said I was sorry as I let her and her two companions pass by. She replied, "That's what I thought. You'd *better* be sorry!" The look in her eye made me shudder a little bit: I could tell she was ready to pick a fight with me right there on the floor of Food Lion. After I got over the shock of her anger toward me, I felt a little sad for her that she had that much pain and anger built up that she felt the need to lash out at a total stranger.

The question of why people let out their bottled-up anger in such destructive ways is fresh on many of our minds after the last year's senseless violence in Blacksburg. Then, within the last two weeks, there has been another tragic campus shooting at Northern Illinois University. Our hearts cry out for the violence to stop.

John Claypool tells the story of two Buddhist monks who were walking just after a thunderstorm. They came to a swollen stream. A beautiful, young Japanese woman in a kimono stood there wanting to cross to the other side, but she was afraid of the currents. One of the monks asked, "Can I help you?" The woman replied, "I need to cross the stream." The monk picked her up, put her on his shoulder, carried her through swirling waters, and put her down on the other side. He and his companion then went on to the monastery. That night his companion said to him, "I have a bone to pick with you. As Buddhist monks, we have taken vows not to look on a woman, much less to touch her body. Back there by the river, you did both."

"My brother," answered the other monk, "I put that woman down on the other side of the river. You're still carrying her in your mind."³ Cain is hurt and is unable to let go of the agony he feels. He allows his pain to cloud his judgment so that he sees no positive way out.

³ John Rowan Claypool, "The Future and Forgetting," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 109.

The authors of *Raising Cain*, Kindlon and Thompson, have seen people, especially boys, who have suffered terrible losses, including the death of a parent or sibling, a debilitating injury or illness, yet reclaim a life and a future for themselves. Kindlon and Thompson have seen others snap under the pressure of what could only be termed a bad day. The difference between people who overcome adversity and those who surrender to it always comes down to the emotional resources they bring to the challenge.⁴ All of us, like Cain, will find sin lurking at the door when we face life's trials and tribulations. We can resist the temptation of evil and sin if we have the ability to accept disappointment, the emotional intelligence to think creatively, and the support of a community of people, whether that includes family members, friends, or church members that care for us.

Community can help us weather life's storms. A few years ago, there was a relatively heavy snow of six to nine inches (you know with the lack of snow we've had recently, it had to be a few years ago). It was interesting to see the effect along Interstate 40 in North Carolina. Next to the highway there were several large groves of tall, young pine trees. The branches were bowed down with the heavy snow: so low that branches from one tree were often leaning against the branches or trunk of another. Where trees stood alone, however, the effect of the heavy snow was different. The branches had become heavier, and without other branches to lean against, the branches snapped. They lay on the ground, dark and alone in the snow. When the storms of life hit, we draw strength from standing close to other Christians. The closer we stand, the better we will be able to hold up.

However, there are times when it feels like we cannot hold up. Unfortunately Cain gives into temptation and commits murder. I find hope in God's response to this sinner. Yes, Cain is punished, not because God is vindictive, but because there are real consequences for our actions. Cain is worried that his punishment means that he will no longer be in relationship with God, but our Lord strongly disagrees. God gives him the mark of Cain, which is both a reminder of his shame and a sign that God will continue to be present with him to protect him. So we discover God's mercy embraces the murderer. No sin, no matter how bad it is, not even murder, can cut us off from God's grace.

The truth is that all of us allow sin to creep into our lives, distancing ourselves from our Lord. And how much does God want to reconnect with us? John 3, which we heard this morning, tells us that the Lord loves us so much that God sent the Son into the world to die. Christ suffered on the cross because he had a deep love for murderers like Cain. If God continues to claim Cain, I firmly believe that the Lord has a place in God's heart for each one of us. No matter how far we stray, God seeks us out to save us and to restore our broken communities. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ In this paragraph, I have quoted and paraphrased Kindlon & Thompson's argument on p. 19 of *Raising Cain*.