***AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Genesis 4:1-16 and 1 john 3:11-18

One of the great gifts that our son Dan and his wife Lucy have given us each year is a bound book of pictures of our granddaughter Tally taken month-to-month throughout the year. It is amazing to see how much she has grown in the course of the year and wonderful to relive memories of time spent with her in those pictures taken with us. In this year’s version, entitled *Talia Peterson and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, there were not only photos of Tally but also quotable quotes that reveal something of Tally’s red-headed four-going-on-five-going-on-fifteen personality. After being asked to wipe off her chair and table after dinner one evening, Tally was heard to say: “*It’s like being Gretel having to do all the work for the witch*.” One day Dan told Tally, “*Give your mom a big hug and kiss and tell her that you love her*.” Tally gave her mom a hug and kiss. “*And what do you say?*” asked Dan, to which Tally replied, “*Do you have mono?*” And in response to her mom’s question, “W*here are you?*” Tally called out, “*Downstairs, simple mortal!*”

Some of those quotable quotes came to mind in reading Cain’s response to the Lord in the passage from Genesis this morning. “*Where is your brother Abel?*” asks the Lord. “*I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?*” replies Cain. In the text itself we can hear the disdainful tone with which Cain speaks. Not only is he lying – for Cain knows very well where Abel, or at least Abel’s body, is – but he also speaks with a defiant tone that challenges the Lord’s right to even ask the question. Perhaps he inherited that smart lip from his father, for recall that when God asks Adam if he has eaten fruit from the forbidden tree, Adam replies, “*The woman YOU gave to be with me, gave me fruit and I ate*.” Rather than admit his sin, Adam suggests it was Eve’s fault and thus God’s fault since God created the woman. Like father, like son. Cain challenges God with his defiant response, rooted in his own angry, frustration with the Lord. It wasn’t always that way.

As you may recall, Cain was the firstborn, a farmer, and Abel was his younger brother, a shepherd. All seemed to be going fine; there are no accounts of sibling rivalry or conflict between them – until God enters the picture. Then the problems begin! Each brother brings an offering to the Lord. Cain, being the farmer brings an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel the shepherd brings an offering from the flock – the fat portions from the best the flock had to offer. Both brothers brought their gifts to the Lord in recognition that it was God from whom their blessings flowed, but for some reason the Lord approved of Abel’s offering, but not Cain’s. What was it that made Cain’s offering unacceptable? Was the cantaloupe not yet ripe or the green beans too stringy or did he bring only kale? Did he forget to wash the fruit before laying it before the Lord, or was it his heart that was unwashed so that his fruits and vegetables were offered grudgingly rather than gratefully? Why was Cain’s offering rejected and Abel’s accepted?

The text is silent on that count, though it does offer a more glowing description of Abel’s gift than it does of Cain’s offering. For whatever reason God rejected Cain’s offering, but could the Lord not see that choosing one brother over the other would not turn out well, that a fire of envy and jealousy would be lit in Cain’s heart? Did the Lord really think that playing favorites in accepting these offerings was a good idea? When Aunt Edna comes to visit and hands you her gift, yet another jar of her infamous home-made pickled prune dip, do you reject it or graciously accept it for the kind-hearted intent with which it is offered? Could not God have done likewise for Cain - accepted his gift and sent him on his way with a “Gee, thanks Cain!”?

Apparently not. God is free to accept what God finds acceptable and to reject what God finds unacceptable. For whatever reason, the Lord accepted Abel’s gift with glowing praise and made it clear that Cain’s gift had missed the mark. Thus were sown seeds of anger and jealousy that would lead to tragedy. Cain was no poker player; disappointment was written all over his face, leading God to ask, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?” and to add this warning:

“*Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”*

Sin lurks at all our doors. It lurks in the form of jealousy or anger, in the form of greed or gluttony, in the form of self-centeredness or self-loathing, in the form of hate, resentment, or sibling rivalry. It lurks there, waiting for a moment of weakness when it can enter your heart and find expression in your voice and spur to action your hands in ways that displease God. Sin lurks in the shadows of denial, rationalization, and self-pity that make thinkable the unthinkable. It bides its time, waiting for an opportunity to master you, which is why God warns Cain to master it. It is not easy to master sin, but God never said it would be easy. God simply urges us to resist temptation, to shut out the sin lurking at the door of our hearts. As the proverb reminds us, “*A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back.*” (Proverbs 29:11)

Cain was the fool who gave full vent to his anger. As Frederick Buechner describes it:

*Cain took it about as long as he could and then let [Abel] have it with his pitchfork one afternoon while they were tedding hay*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In jealous anger, Cain murdered his brother. He let sin into his heart and it mastered him. We all have moments when we don’t get along, but in this instance, sibling anger ended in death. Could nothing have been done to prevent that tragedy?

Marj Carpenter tells of a primary Sunday school class that was hearing the story of Cain and Abel for the first time. The teacher asked, “Why do you think this happened?” One young lad answered, “*Maybe Cain and Abel wouldn’t kill each other so much if they each had their own room. It works with my brothers*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Was that the answer that somehow escaped divine thought – separate rooms or separate homes or separate countries in which to live, safely removed from one another?

No. The reality of our lives as a family of faith is that we live *together*, eat *together*, work side by side *together*, come to worship *together*, and so end up in conflict with one another from time to time – and only COVID can keep us apart. The solution is not to be removed from one another in order to end the conflict. The solution is to master the sin that lurks at the door intending to bring tragedy to our family. God doesn’t want us to flee from one another. God wants us to face the sin that tempts us and deal with it in faithful and constructive ways. God wants us to speak the truth in love and to exercise patient forbearance while seeking to be faithful. God urges us to love one another when sin tempts us to throw the other under the bus.

It has been only about six weeks since an insurrectionist mob egged on by a disgruntled president overran the Capitol while the Senate was in the process of certifying the election of a new president. Those who stormed the Capitol that day believed the false accusations that the election had been stolen and gave vent to their anger with violence. Sin not only lurked at the door but burst through it, and the result was violence and death and a brief disruption of our democratic process. Sin lurks at the door in our individual lives but also in our common lives, daring us to act contrary to all that Jesus has taught us.

Our democracy calls us to work through these disagreements in less violent ways – through the exercise of our first amendment and voting rights, through legislation, and through the courts if necessary. Violence is not an acceptable option, but the temptation to turn to it often lurks at the door. As Christians we are called to work through our differences in love and in faith, trusting that God will guide us by the Spirit. We speak the truth in love; we work for justice, we love one another through our differences, and we restrain the sin that lurks at our doors.

Cain could not restrain the sin, so he killed Abel and then tried to escape God’s judgment with a sassy retort when God asked, “Where is your brother?” It is God who asks that question. It is God who sees into Cain’s heart, God who confronts Cain with what he has done, God who rejects his sassy disclaimer, “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*”, and it is God who convicts him of his sin and imposes upon him the punishment – loss of his vocation and home. Cain, the farmer tied to the land, becomes a wandering nomad, the fugitive living on the lam and waiting for vengeance to overtake him and end his life. But God did not abandon Cain. God marked him in a way that both protected and convicted him. There was a time when some slave traders justified their actions by arguing that the mark of Cain was black skin; that is nowhere in the text! Black skin is no more the mark of Cain than is white skin or blond hair or blue eyes; their misguided rationalization was itself sin, deserving of God’s judgement every bit as much as did Cain’s killing of Abel. But while God punished Cain, God did not kill him or desert him. God allowed Cain to live with the weight of his sin squarely upon his shoulders.

*Am I my brother’s keeper?* It was a sassy retort, but it is a significant question. *Are you your brother’s keeper, or your sister’s,* *or your neighbor’s*? Do you bear responsibility for their well-being? Jesus seems to answer that question in the parable of the Good Samaritan with a resounding, YES! John too seems to answer it in that portion of his first letter that we read this morning:

*How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?*

We who are called to love our brothers and sisters and neighbors are called to look out for them, to help them with the gifts with which we have been blessed, to do good rather than harm. We bear responsibility for brothers and sisters in need, whatever the need may be!

There are those in Texas who need help in the cold, so we send blankets provided through Church World Service with our gifts to the Blanket Fund. There are those who need food, so we support the food pantry and the Shelburne project and our Four Cents per Meal offering. There are those who need housing, so we build with Habitat for Humanity and Rebuilding Together and support Valley Mission. But there are also those who have less tangible needs:

those who need encouragement

and those who need love

and those who need a patient ear to listen to them

and those who need hope to hold onto

and those who need health care

and those who need Jesus

and we are called to help them too, to love them too – not just with words but with actions that boldly declare, “We are our brother’s keeper and our sister’s and our neighbor’s and the stranger’s.” For we are called to love them – all of them – as we love ourselves. So says the Lord! Amen

1. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who*, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1979, p.20 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Marj Carpenter, “In this Corner”, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 26, 2014, p.9 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)