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The Things We Do (Cain and Abel)
My Story, God's Story
Genesis 4:1-15

Stories are powerful. They tell us who we are and where we have been. Stories remind us that the here-and-now can't tell the whole story, that in fact our lives are much bigger than today's worries or troubles.

What we are doing over these weeks is exploring that truth that we each have a story—a sacred story. Our story is one in which God has been working out our wholeness, to bring us more into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we will also see that our story isn't only our story, but it is part of a larger story, God's story. We will explore this through focusing on seven biblical stories and looking at how these ancient stories—these God stories—are part of our reality also.

God has built us to be people who—at their best—experience life, reflect on what they have experienced, and then learn something for the next time around. But too often we don't reflect and don't learn.

The "Back to the Future" movies are a good example of this. You may remember how Marty, played by Michael J. Fox, cannot pass up a fight when someone calls him chicken. This gets him in some funny trouble, but also serious trouble, as we learn that one fight injures his hand so that his once-promising future as a guitarist is lost.

Sometimes the story we are called to know and learn from is more than just our life; it is also the lives of our parents. You will see that in today's story. Not remembering a family story leaves a child to repeat it. Our text today is the story of brothers, Cain and Abel. They are the children of Adam and Eve. Their story is found in Genesis. But before we hear it I want to invite you to do a couple things:

First, take what we already know about this story and put it aside. Let's hear the story fresh.

Second, work to be open to what the Spirit might have to say to us in the text. Scripture is alive. It can be understood in all kinds of ways, and that is why we need God's leading to hear what God has to say.

Third, I want us to realize that we are just scratching at the surface of our text. These ancient texts could be the study of weeks, and so we won't get to everything.

Today's story is the story of the first murder. Listen to Text: Genesis 4:1-15

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." **2** Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.

3 In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, **4** 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, **5** but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

6 The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? **7** 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."

8 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.

9 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" **10** And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! **11** And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. **12** When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

13 Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! **14** 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." **15** 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.

This is the story of the murder of a man by his brother. The murder is troubling, for sure. But does something else strike you as troubling? You may have missed it, but did you notice how God treats the brothers? The text says,

"In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard."

When I was growing up, we often made things for our parents' birthdays. You know how it is—you take the crayons and the construction paper and maybe the scissors and put together something to give as a card. Parents love it, and for a child, it is a way of expressing love and care for the parent. It is something made and offered by the child.

But what if I made a card and my brother made a card and my Mom said, "Nicole, I don't accept your card, but your brother's card, I like that one"? This is what it seems God does. Cain—who is the first one in the scriptures to bring an offering to God—is rejected. I thought God was this great parent. Why would God reject Cain's offering?

About ten years ago, Bill Moyers did a series on PBS on the book of Genesis. And when all the Biblical scholars got to this story, a couple talked about God not being a loving parent. They suggested that maybe God needed parenting classes. Is that what is going on in the text?

Let me read the part at which we just looked and include God's response in the New Living Testament, which is a bit clearer.

3 At harvest time Cain brought to the LORD a gift of his farm produce, **4** while Abel brought several choice lambs from the best of his flock. The LORD accepted Abel and his offering, **5** but he did not accept Cain and his offering. This made Cain very angry and dejected.

6 "Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked him. "Why do you look so dejected?"

7 You will be accepted if you respond in the right way. But if you refuse to respond correctly, then watch out! Sin is waiting to attack and destroy you, and you must subdue it."

God does reject Cain's offering, but not because he compared it to Abel's offering. He rejects it because he knew Cain's heart, which was made visible in the offering Cain brought.

Have you ever given a gift because you wanted credit? I mean, you gave it not because you really wanted to express love and gratitude, but because you wanted to purchase an unspoken insurance policy for the relationship? That is, you gave a gift to someone because she was your boss, or you knew you would need a favor later on? Maybe you felt you had to. Maybe you knew it would shut the person up.

If I am giving because my heart is full of gratitude, I am looking for just the right gift, but if I am giving because it is expected or I want a bit of unspoken insurance in the relationship, then the best gift isn't on my mind. The reasonable deal is.

Cain doesn't bring anything special to offer to God. The text says as much. Instead, he is trying to buy spiritual insurance. Sure, Cain thinks Abel is the problem, but in reality, Cain is the reason for his troubles. His worship of God is meager and he knows it.

God's words to Cain are not your standard issue religious exhortation to be a better person. Instead, God sees something Cain cannot yet see; that Cain is at a fork in the road and God wants to know which road he will take.

God doesn't say, hey, do the right thing and you will be rewarded, or do the wrong thing and you will be punished. Instead, God calls Cain to see the stark reality of his life, that he stands at the seminal moment that will either make him or break him, and that the choice he makes lies in his hands.

What are his choices? One is to see that the problem isn't his brother. A second is to see that his attitude is an issue. The third is to see that his choices bring consequences. One writer said, "Your contentment and happiness dependent not on the events of your life but rather on how you perceive those events and choose to respond to them.¹ It you were here last week, it may strike you that these choices sound familiar.

The story of Adam and Eve has eerily parallels to the story of their sons, Cain and Abel. Here are some similarities:

In both stories a choice is faced. For Eve it is whether she will eat the fruit from the forbidden tree; for Cain it is whether he will let his anger and hurt lead him to murder.

Both stories have someone hiding from God. Adam hides from God after he has eaten the fruit. Cain hides after he has killed his brother and speaks of being hidden from God forever.

And, in both stories they suffer exile. For Adam and Eve, it is Eden from which they are exiled. For Cain, he is banished and becomes a wanderer, never having a home.

In some ways, today's story is a story of Adam and Eve with each similarity more severe, more long-term, more troubling. I wonder if Cain knew the story of his mom and dad eating the fruit? Or was this one of those stories best not shared, and a story not known is often a story that is repeated.

I want to be clear, I am not talking about focusing on what our parents did wrong or didn't give us. In John Welwood's wonderful book, *Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships*, he writes:

“As long as we fixate on what our parents didn't give us...we will never become rooted in ourselves and heal the wound of our heart. To grow beyond the dependency of a child requires sinking our own taproot in to the wellspring of great love.” (Page 52)

OK, back to Cain's choices. Why does Cain see Abel as the problem? Certainly he feels overshadowed by his younger brother, but as much as he wants to project the problem onto Abel, Cain is his own problem. But behind Cain blaming Abel, Cain blames God too; after all, God is the one refusing the offering.

It seems to be natural to blame others. I can often see how a friend is responsible, but seldom how I am responsible. And you know how it goes: voices get raised and things just get louder until someone leaves or breaks something, or even something more serious occurs.

Being shown up by another, especially a member of your family, is humiliating, and maybe that is why things turn so quickly for Cain. If you feel your pride is wounded, that your inadequacies are apparent, punishing the person “responsible” raises to the top of your agenda.

I think about this every time I hear one of those articles on people suing McDonalds because their food made people overweight. Every one of us has a story about projecting our problems on others. Like a hot potato of which we want to be free, we blame whoever looks like a possible suspect.

In reality, the issue is Cain's attitude. He has been caught. He brought a gift to God that wasn't his best, that was about trying to buy spiritual insurance, and God saw it. That is, of course, one of the problems with God. God knows it all.

What story is Cain telling himself that makes him react in this way? “We can create tremendous pain in our lives, our communities, our corporations, and our world by confusing fiction with facts, interpretation with truth.”ⁱⁱ Is there another way Cain could have seen this? Were there other choices he could have made?

Lets go back to me and my brother making a card for my Mom's birthday. What if my Mom had said, upon receiving my card, “You know, Nicole, this looks like something you threw together with little regard for me. Try again.” Can a Mom do that? Can a Mom know her kid well enough to know her heart? Probably most Moms wouldn't say anything, but God? God knows and speaks up.

Cain has been caught, and here he faces a choice. Does he fess up and move forward or not?

God's words to Cain are:

6 "Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked him. "Why do you look so dejected?
7 You will be accepted if you respond in the right way. But if you refuse to respond correctly, then watch out! Sin is waiting to attack and destroy you, and you must subdue it."

God is basically saying, *rethink your attitude and respond with different motivation and activity and you will be lifted up, but stay in the mood you are in, keep blaming others, keep not being honest with yourself, and you will fall prey to sin.* God invites Cain to see things differently. God does that a lot.

Our perspective is so personal, isn't it? And so fickle. I think about the days I am doing well, I have gotten enough sleep, and then someone cuts me off, doesn't return an important call, forgets an appointment with me, or whatever it is, and it rolls off me. I can say, "I bet that person is in a rush today" and not take the cut-off in traffic personally. I can say, "I bet they were busy today, I am sure I will hear soon," instead of ascribing negative things to people who have let me down.

Having an attitude adjustment is just what God often prescribes for us. What adjusts our attitude? Simple things, like measuring what really matters. Harder things, like not trying to change others, and instead supporting them in becoming who they already are.

What else adjusts our attitude? Getting that you are not the most important person in the universe. Getting that exercise and eating right will do more for a long-term attitude adjustment than will drugs, shopping, alcohol, controlling others, and other things we often try first.

"Delineation between fact and fiction is one of the most powerful life practices you can develop. It is also pretty tricky because we wander back into our 'fictions' so easily (for instance, *you are fired* becomes *I am incompetent*). Having someone to talk to who can help you look at the facts can be indispensable."ⁱⁱⁱ

In the end, Cain has to make a decision about how he will live. God gives him the opportunity to see that how he responds this time is a big deal. Will he accept his responsibility, get over the public embarrassment, and look up, or will he let these things fester until they take on a terrible life of their own?

Cain's desire to have his offering accepted, his desire to do well, isn't wrong. But he wants things that are not then backed up by what he does. He brings less than his best product; he wants to get the credit, but not do the work.

God's word to Cain doesn't negate Cain's passion to succeed. Instead, God invites him to direct his desire properly. God's words to Cain call him not to be ruled by his passions and desires, but to rule over them, to direct them for good.

Maybe one of the great discoveries we make in life is that what works in this moment may be the worst choice we could make; that what satisfies me now, what is easiest, isn't the way we are called to live. Today as we hear Cain's story, I want to ask you:

- So, what about your story?
- What stories of choice are you currently facing?
- Can you see things clearly, or does emotion blur your vision?
- What interpretation do you give what is happening to you right now?

- Does the interpretation you give serve you? Is there a kinder story you could tell yourself?
- Are you seeing people and situations as they are, or as you are?
May your vision not be clouded. May your understanding be rooted in grace.

And may God's spirit guide you to make choices that lead to life.

For more info on the Story of Cain and Abel, see: <http://www.jewishexplorations.1shoppal.com/page/page/2034263.htm>

ⁱ Jennifer Louden in The Life Organizer

ⁱⁱ Louden page 53

ⁱⁱⁱ Louden 57