

“Our Kindred Cry For Justice”

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Genesis 4:8-16

Let us pray:

God, may the words that are spoken and heard and in our lives enacted,
be faithful and true and touched by your grace. Amen."

Whenever he preached, Phil Wogaman, would begin his sermon with a prayer that went something like that. He was the Sr. Minister at Foundry United Methodist Church in downtown DC and my colleague there for many years, so I heard that prayer often. I always liked it.

At its best, preaching, like all expressions of faith is about the dynamic interplay between what is spoken and heard, and in our lives enacted, and how all of this is touched by the grace of God.

Living in this moment in the life of our country, particularly as we grapple with the continuing impacts of white supremacy and racism, I wrestle with how to respond in faith—
How to speak, hear and enact words that are faithful and true and touched by the grace of God.

Day after day we are confronted with stories of violence and death. Disproportionate numbers of these deaths are our siblings of color. The Covid 19 pandemic is highlighting the disparities in our systems. Intersecting issues of poverty, access to health care, nationalism, ageism, homophobia, gender discrimination and environmental neglect compound the issues of white supremacy and racism.

These are not new issues. This is not the first time we are addressing them in worship, nor will it be the last.

Racial justice affirms that all people are created in the image of God and God does not create any superior or inferior groups of people. Yet, from its beginning and throughout the entire history of our country, racism and white supremacy have been a part of our national story.

In addition, as Christian people of faith our sacred texts, stories, traditions and religious institutions, at points have been co-opted and at points have been complicit in perpetuating the evils of white supremacy and racism.

We face the ongoing challenge — as we craft our worship, say our prayers, read our Bible and share our faith— to identify and confront the racist elements embedded in our faith narratives, and to lift up and celebrate the liberating, life affirming message of the love of God for all creation.

Today our focus is a biblical text from the Book of Genesis—the story of Cain and Abel. It gives us a lens to consider some of the questions we are confronting.

What does it mean to have privilege and what do we do with it?

What does it mean to be our “brother’s keeper,” our sibling’s sibling?

How do we respond to the violence and death, and the plaintive voice of God—

“Your brother’s and sister’s blood is crying out to me from the ground.”?

The story of Cain and Abel is an extension of the epic creation stories in Genesis that wrestle with big questions of life and death, good and evil. Cain and Abel are biological brothers, the first two sons of Adam and Eve.

The question of privilege is an interesting one in this story. Consistent with the culture in which the story was written, there is a presumed privilege given to the first born son who will inherit his family’s wealth. This privilege belongs to Cain. We can even pick up the favoritism toward Cain from the name that is given to his brother, the second son, Abel — which in Hebrew is the word *hebel* which can be translated as “vanity,” “vapor” or “nothing.”

In his commentary on Genesis, Miguel De La Torre suggests this name for Abel may refer to his fragility or possibly to his brief lifespan which will be as “transient as vapor.” But regardless of why the child is named Abel, it indicates the “entrance of discrimination in the world, a system where some are privileged over others.”

But, there’s a twist, when the two brothers present their offerings to God, God favors the offering of Abel, the younger son, reversing the expectation and presumed favoring of the first born. Why?

The historical context when this part of Genesis was written might give us a clue. “Scholars believe that this section of Scripture was ... written during the early monarchy of Solomon.” This same motif of reversal is repeated throughout the book of Genesis, particularly when David and Solomon are anointed as kings. And, David and Solomon, just like Abel were not the first born. Could it be that this reversal is meant to challenge the presumed privilege of the right of the firstborn’s inheritance?

It is clearly the first example of an ongoing Biblical theme meant to restore the balance of power in the human family: the last shall be first and the first shall be last in the kin’dom of God.

But, equity and shared power is not how this story goes. Cain saw his brother’s success as a threat. And to protect himself, to protect his privilege, to get rid of the threat, he took matters into his own hands and got rid of his brother all together. He felt justified in killing him. How else could he stand his ground?

In our context in the United States today, we have created a culture backed by laws to protect privilege. In our culture it is not the privilege of being the first born but the privilege of being white. And the result can be just as deadly. As De La Torres puts it:

“Nothing needs to be said by those hungering for justice, for their very presence serves as condemnation. The very existence of the disenfranchised shames those who are privileged. The disenfranchised must be made invisible, or to the extreme, they must be killed.”

The story of Cain and Abel follows directly after the story of the “original sin” in Genesis when Adam and Eve eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. From that point on, good and evil become something humanity has to reckon with. This story about Cain and Abel expands on the theme of good and evil. It is about an evil act — a moment of human wrongdoing when Cain kills his brother Abel.

The act of killing a sibling is wrong, and is to be condemned and accounted for. That might seem obvious. But it can be uncomfortable to sit with this truth. We are quick to appease our discomfort. We change the subject. We might look for a motive. Why did Cain kill his brother? We look for an answer to this question. We might even try to find some reason to justify the killing and defend the evil act.

Instead this story calls forth a different response. After Cain kills Abel, God confronts Cain. God asks the question directly. “Where is your brother?” Presumably God already knows what happened. God does not need a surveillance video. God’s question is not meant to get more information, but to hold Cain accountable for his evil deed. God is there, God notices. God cares, and God does not let it slide. God calls the evil-doer to account.

When Cain gets defensive, and responds “Am I my brother’s keeper?” God, like a good prosecutor, keeps the question focused on Cain’s action. “What have you done?” God’s next move is to call for justice. The cry for justice comes through the bloodshed itself. God says: “Listen, your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!” The imagery is strong and graphic and so familiar in the perpetuating images of violence and bloodshed today.

We know that the killing and violence has continued far beyond the biblical story. Blood represents violence and death, and the desperate plea that the killing stop. And ironically blood also represents the shared humanity between two brothers—two people who are as closely related as two people can be.

They are the first two offspring of the first two parents. They represent one family, the human family—and hope for the future, through generations to come. Blood is the sacred bond that unites the two brothers, and more broadly, is a symbol of life that unites all living beings.

The story of Cain and Abel extends the Creation narrative that begins with our relationship with God—we are all children of God—and broadens it out to include our relationships with one another. It pushes us to think about what it means to be kin. If we go back far enough, our best

scientific evidence to date, suggests we are all descendent from a common ancestor — who lived on the continent Africa. She has come to be known as the Mitochondrial Eve. So in a very real sense, we are one with each other. We are offspring of the same parents; We are siblings who share the same blood.

Just like the lyrics from the song by, Sweet Honey in the Rock, *We are One*.

We are our grandmothers' prayers
We are our grandfathers' dreaming
We are the breath of our ancestors.
We are the Spirit of God.
We are One.

Beyond proclaiming our Oneness, the story of Cain and Abel also calls forth in me a level of personal accountability as it relates to my own history — my own ancestry and my own family.

We each identify ourselves as descendants of the people who came before us. The story of Cain and Abel reminds us that we share a common origin. Yet we are siblings who have very different stories as it relates to the evils of racism. Some of our siblings, like Abel, did not survive. Some of our siblings have been hurt, and even killed at the hand of their brothers and sisters through acts of racial violence, and our larger systems that denigrate, disadvantage, and destroy the lives and livelihoods of those not deemed “white.”

We each have family stories of that have embedded within them elements of the evils of racism. Some of these stories are not often told. I wonder why this story of Cain and Abel does not appear in any of the lectionary cycles?

As I wrestle with this story, it challenges me to understand myself in the large story of our faith, *and* the ancient story of human history, *and* in the very particular history of my own family. I would say:

I am Jennifer— a child of God,
 and a so-many-greats granddaughter of Adam and Eve,
 and a sibling of Cain and Abel,
 and a many-greats granddaughter of Mitochondrial Eve,

and through my mother's mother,
 I am a great granddaughter
 of Rosalie Kelly and John Peter Cousins who were Irish —
 He immigrated from Ireland to New Orleans, Louisiana,
 land originally inhabited by the indigenous people of the Chitimacha Tribe.

and I am a great-great granddaughter
 of Francois Landfried who immigrated from Switzerland to New Orleans

and had a coffee house in the French Quarter.

and through my mother's father,

I am a granddaughter of John George Kneipp, who was of German decent and a member of the White Citizen's Council in New Orleans, a white supremacist organization much like the Ku Klux Klan that emerged in the 1950's largely in the South in response to desegregation.

and through my father's mother,

I am a great-great granddaughter of Etienne Coulonge who came from France to New Orleans.

and through my father's father,

I am a great-great-granddaughter of Theodore Ramirez who immigrated as an unaccompanied minor from Mexico, and at age 13 went to work in the blacksmith's shop in the town of Paincourtville, in the bayous of Louisiana.

Eventually he married the blacksmith's daughter.

She was Cajun, descendant from the Acadians who had come from Nova Scotia.

My grandfather Walter Frederick Ramirez grew up speaking Cajun French and was the first in his family to learn English when they moved to New Orleans.

And now I am married to Karl Knutsen, who is largely of Swedish and Norwegian decent and we are parents to a biological daughter Elise, and an adopted daughter Nicole, whose birth parents are Chinese, and whose names we do not know (yet).

In the next chapter of Genesis, immediately after this story about Cain and Abel, we learn of the many more siblings and subsequent generations that followed them. It makes me wonder: How might this story have been different if there had been a sibling who had been there with Cain and Abel and had chosen to get involved?

A brother who had talked with Cain before he went out to the field — to help him internalize the equal worth inherent in all siblings —all humanity —where no one has presumed privilege.

A sister who had interceded and followed Cain into the field and held him back, so his jealous rage could not cause more harm. A sibling who had come to Abel's defense, and interrupted the narrative, dismantled the system, and stopped the cycle of perpetual violence?

The story is not finished. It has come down to us, and we must ask ourselves: How can we be those siblings today? Amen

References

Miguel A. De La Torre, Genesis pp. 95-97

David Carr, "Cry of Abel's Blood ", n.p. [cited 15 Jun 2020]. Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/people/related-articles/cry-of-abels-blood>