



Cain: More Than He Could Handle

TEXT
Genesis 4:1–16

July 21, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This reads like a story of a tragic moment that happened a long time ago. But this is a story that describes what happens, not once upon a time, but something that happens all the time. This is not a story simply about Cain and Abel; it's a story about us.

Brother trouble is a common thing in Genesis — and in life in general. Jacob and Esau will be conflicted.

Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. Not saying he didn't deserve it.

Slavery is not enough for Cain; he murders Abel.

Brother trouble is common. I get that. I have brothers. I haven't killed either one; I'm not saying I haven't thought about it. The truth is, with my youngest brother, I got close once.

We were visiting my grandmother. My mother made my younger brother take a bath in the middle of the day because he got filthy playing in some mud outside. Then she said, "Your grandmother and I are going shopping. We will be back in a little while. I'm leaving Jim here with you. You are in charge."

I said, "No problem."

What you need to know is my brother has spent most of his life

getting on my nerves. He spent most of his young life running to Mom, telling her lies about me, telling her I had caused him trouble, when you know it wasn't true. But he's the baby, spoiled little thing. Mom always took his side. He'd just run to her, "Mom, Tom did this ... and Tom did that."

"Go to your room," she'd say. No trial by a jury of my peers; just convicted and sentenced. It's OK. I'm over it. Injustice is a common reality in life.

Mom leaves, and I decided to go next door to play ping pong. I hollered through the bathroom door: "I'm going to the Murphys to play some ping pong. Come over there when you get out of the tub."

I go next door, but the Murphys aren't home, so I come back to my grandmother's house. I enter the front door. Close it. Boom! From the bathtub I hear, "Tom? That you?" I didn't say anything.

I walked into the living room. There was a lamp there by the sofa with some bells on the chain. I turned off the lamp and the bells rang: *Ching*.

"Tom? That you? You better tell me that's you. I'm telling Momma if you don't tell me that's you."

I didn't say anything. I started up the stairs. The third step from the top squeaked. We all knew it. We skipped over that step. There I am standing on the fourth step from the top. The bathroom is right in front of me, and there is no sound coming from that bathroom. But I step right on the third step: *Squueeeek*. Water started moving in that bathroom.

I started scratching on the door. I pushed open the door: *Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!* But Jim wasn't in there. I look in the cabinets. No Jim. I look up at the ceiling to see if he is doing one of those Mission Impossible moves.

Then I see the curtains moving in the window over the tub. Oh Lord! This is the second floor. He's jumped out of the second floor window. There is nothing but a sidewalk below. He jumped out of the window. If he's dead, I'm in big trouble.

I ran down the stairs. I threw open the front door. Below the bathroom window, there was an awning right over the front door. My brother was hanging off that awning, and he was wearing nothing but Mr. Bubble.

My brother is naked and hanging off the front of the house, where the Moravian star usually went at Christmas time. That was the moment my mother

got home. I wasn't allowed out of my room until shortly before you called me to be your pastor.

Brothers can be hard. But Cain and Abel look like they will be fine. They go to church together. That's when things went south. The real troublemaker in this story is God.

Both Cain and Abel make an offering. But after church, instead of going to First Watch for brunch, Cain takes Abel out in the field and kills him. And what happens between worship and murder is God. God accepts Abel's offering, but has no regard for Cain's offering. I can't tell you why. I can just tell you, it was more than Cain could handle.

I'm not saying folks haven't offered all kinds of explanations. Some say the problem with Cain's offering is that he brought grain while Abel brought meat. They say God is not a vegetarian. But that can't be right.¹

Some have said it's not that Cain brought grain, but that he didn't bring an adequate offering. One scholar claims, while Abel brought the best — the fat portions — Cain's offering was a "minimal offering."² But the text makes no mention that Cain's offering was inadequate. They brought what they had to bring. They both brought the fruit of their labor.

Some say the problem wasn't in the gifts, but in the giver. John Calvin asserted that Cain's heart was not right. But Calvin just says this because he assumes everybody has heart problems ... but the text says nothing about Cain's heart.³

And yet, if I understand the text, when it comes to the explanation as to why God chooses one offering and has no regard for another, the text is silent.⁴ It leaves us confused and offended by the unfairness of it all. But this is where the text becomes both instructive and honest.

There is no parent who has escaped that teachable moment with a child when the child faces some injustice or another, some inequity, and the child protests with the words: "But that's not fair!"

And the parents respond, "Life is not always fair."

I think that's what this story is about. Life will disappoint you. Life will not fall upon all in pleasant places. Life is one long story of inequity. And the question is, how do we handle that?

After church, God talks with Cain. "Why are you downcast? Cain, what are you going to do with this disappointment? You can do well," God says, "but if not, that's when sin enters the story. But you must master it."

If I understand the text, this is less a story about sibling rivalry. It's not a story about proper offerings. It's about the ever-present struggle to deal with the disappointment that life will inevitably deal us.

Life is not equal for all. Some receive blessings that others do not. Some excel at school and never have to crack a book; and others struggle and struggle and it never comes.

Some can do things with a ball or a paintbrush or a pot roast; and others may try but the gift never comes.

I play guitar, and then every Sunday I hear Nathan Bliss and it inspires me to put my guitar back in the case where it belongs. It's just the way of life. Life is not the same for all of us. We may not like that, but it is honest.

With no explanation, Cain finds disappointment. God says, "You must master it."

Two things: First, Christian faith is very conversant about things being wrong in the world. And the most consistent teaching of our faith is that when we see something wrong, when we see injustice, inequality, when we see things that have gone wrong, we are called to do what we can to make them right. The love of God for all means that we are never casual about the pain or mistreatment of any. When it can be made right, we should do what we can to make things right.

But sometimes things simply can't be made right. And sometimes you know a disappointment that can't be made whole. There is no justice coming; there is no repair. What do we do then? How do we master that?

Sometimes wrongs have to be made right, but sometimes we just have to let them go. And to know when it is time to fight to make things right and when it is time to just let the hurt go ... well, that takes wisdom and maturity, and that's a whole other sermon.

I visited with a woman to plan her father's funeral. He had been quite successful in some manner of things, but in the ways of family, he had largely missed the boat. She said her father had approved of little in her life, and

when she married a man Daddy didn't approve of, he all but cut her off.

Then he got sick. He had divorced her mother, and there was no one to take care of him, so she had to decide what to do. She dropped what she was doing, and for 18 months, she watched after the man who had done very little to watch after her.

I asked her, "How did you get over all that disappointment?"

She said, "I don't know that I did get over it, but sometimes you just have to let things go. Neither of us could go back and fix what had been broken. Sometimes you just have to let things go. I guess that's what I did."

"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."

He failed miserably. I have failed on occasion too. But I know this: I know what I would like to choose when disappointment comes my way. And it will. Life will disappoint you. You will make your offering in this world, and it won't always matter. And when things go wrong, sometimes you need to do everything you can to make it right. And sometimes you just need to let it go.

To know when it is time to fight to make things right and when it is time to simply let the hurt go ... that takes wisdom ... and that's a whole other sermon.

We are given this story — because seeing the consequences in Cain when he is unable to let it

go, maybe it will help us choose differently when life disappoints us.

¹Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis* (1972), p. 104

²E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (1964), p. 30

³Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (1982), p. 56

⁴Ibid.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.