

Augusta First Baptist Church
Genesis 4:1-9
When God Asks The Question: Where is Your Brother?
January 14, 2007

NRS Genesis 4:8 *"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?"*

I do not know about your family, but mine is not perfect. In fact, I will wager that in every family here there are examples of deceit, division, and rivalry just like the first family of creation.

At an early age I identified with the story of Cain and Abel. No preacher had to explain what went wrong outside of Eden. I had brothers! My brothers and I truly love each other. I say this as a disclaimer for what I am going to say next. Growing up we fought all the time. Since I was the oldest and biggest I pretty much fought fair: hand to hand combat. But the brother in the middle, Scott, never fought fair. He would use anything he could get his hands on – from sticks to rocks to shoes. Sibling conflict is nothing new and is as old as Creation. The book of Genesis has its share of sibling rivalry. Not only do we have Cain and Abel, but there is Jacob, Esau, Joseph, and all of his brothers.

Most of us are pretty familiar with the story of Cain and Abel. We are introduced to them right after Adam and Eve were cast out of Paradise. We also stand alongside this family on the precipice of possibility. True, Adam and Eve are out of the Garden, but before them is a fresh start. Cain was the first born and his name means "Acquisition, production." His name implies that there is a future with possibility. Abel was the second child and his name meant "emptiness, futility." His name is counter to Cain's. The name Abel proved to be a foreshadowing for him: there would be no future. Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer – occupations that in the Middle East had a long history of acrimony. Cain brings an offering to God which is more or less rejected and Abel's is accepted. Read the story carefully: no explanation is given why Cain's was rejected and Abel's accepted. May not sound fair but that really isn't the point of the story.

And now, we come to the reading shared this morning. Cain killed Abel and after hardly taking a breath, God asks the question, "**Where is your brother?**" Last week, we the reader are probably shrugging our shoulders and wondering if God is just initiating some kind of courtesy question. It should be obvious by now that when God asks the question, God already knows the answer. What is important for us is how we respond to God's question: *Where is your brother?*

Last week's question, "Where are you?", addressed our relationship to God. This week's question, "Where is your brother?" addresses our relationship to each other. Eight times, "brother," is mentioned in this chapter. All of the Ten Commandments are grouped according to these two issues: relationship to God and our relationship to one another.

Let's be candid here. This story has some elements that beg for more explanation. For starters, I want God to be fair. Why did God accept one offering and not the other? Does God prefer carnivores over vegetarians? No, that cannot be it. We just don't know. It sure would be helpful if God looked a little less willy-nilly and there was some *reason* for the rejection. Of course, this has been our human frustration down through time. Life is most certainly not equitable for us all.

I think about Jim Ross, pastor of Madison Baptist Church, just up the road about an hour or so. I have known him for many years. Just a couple of years ago his 22 year old son – his oldest son – was killed in a car accident coming home from work. How can this be and how can this happen to such a fine family I personally

know? In our own sick minds we try to muster moral explanations to understand it better, but you and I know that this is going to fall way short.

Life is not fair and some of us come up short...*and* it hurts. This was what Cain was going through. Perhaps we have all played the role of Cain at one time or another. Have you ever felt like you were not the favorite child?

Cain fumed over his rejected offering. Why did God capriciously choose one offering and not the other? But God let Cain know that he still had some choices: (NIV Genesis 4:6-7) "*Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."*

Sin is that way, "Crouching at the door." Events don't go our way and the next thing you know we make a compromise here and a compromise there, and "boom," sin enters in.

Bad decisions happen in marriages, they happen in work, they happen anywhere and everywhere. Events will happen to us that are not right and not fair. Be careful! Sin is crouching at the door.

Cain could not take responsibility of his destiny and he made a very bad choice and now Abel is dead. God asks the question: "Where is your brother?" And Cain abdicates responsibility and throws a question right back to God: "I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?" God is saying through his question: *You are responsible. Cain is retorting I am not responsible*

The story reminds us that we are not "fated to fracture and alienation" (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation*). We have a choice and it is not just one major life decision but a thousand and one little decisions every single day.

Part of answering this question lies in reframing the question:

Who is your brother?

Remember the story Jesus told of a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell among thieves. Left to die, a priest passed him by and then a Levite. Finally, a Samaritan stopped, helped the man and saved his life. Who is the neighbor in the story? Well, of course we know the answer: the one who met a need.

Who is our brother? Who is our sister? The one in need, comes in many shapes and packages. Yes, there is a social dynamic to this: Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and so on. But there are other needs. Feed the lonely with two precious commodities: time and attention. Feed the spiritually bankrupt, not with sermons, but with authenticity. Authenticity is in my vision for this church – ***let your light shine.***

Let's reframe the question another way. Instead of *where is your brother*, how about:

Where is my brother?

This is a little different way of asking "where is your brother?" By rewording the question where is my brother(or sister), we are making a claim of connection. We are embracing the question as our own. Cain distanced himself by saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" But God's intention is that we all function as family and know where we are. In a Hebrew commentary on the Torah, a Rabbi writes that in the beginning, in a most literal way, we all started out as brothers, connected one to another.

But the sin of self was crouching at Cain's door. I don't know about you, but I contend with this sin constantly. You see, my lesser self wants me to believe it is all about me – all about me in my marriage, my family, even my church. We pastors get in a whale of trouble when we begin to think that the church is all about us.

One of the biggest problems with self-centeredness is that we don't see when others are drowning or getting lost. Instead we are consumed with "What is God's will for my life?" Or, how can I find self-fulfillment, self-actualization, etc.

Sometimes we cannot answer "Where is my brother," because we are just too self-absorbed, and therefore no longer "see" anyone anymore. Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, wrote that selfishness and self-centeredness is original sin.

I often hear the question, "What is God's will in my life?" Sometimes the question is asked of me directly, as if, because of my ordination I am mystically endowed with some hidden knowledge. More often, the question is just posed for anyone. Part of the answer to the question, "What is God's will", rests in how we answer God's question, "Where is your brother?" Another way of stating this is "What is your relationship with others—all others?" We cannot come to a full knowledge of God's will if we are ignoring God's will in the life of others.

What happens to our neighbors in the CSRA and Darfur and Somalia is important to understanding God's will for this church. What happens to our neighbor in the classroom, cubicle, subdivision or pew is just as important as God's will in our own life.

It is not so much where is your brother – it is *where is my brother (and sister)?*

Several years ago, I chaperoned a three day field trip with one of my sons. It was a large gathering of fifth graders. Let me say two things: our public school is great and I'm proud to support it as a taxpayer. Secondly, teachers are not paid nearly enough! Anyway, the Blue Ridge Outdoor Educational Center is set up to be a full interactive learning experience to teach children what it means to live in a community, specifically an ecological and biological community. There were four fifth grade classes participating and we all ate our meals together. The food was pretty much all you could eat, with a very nice salad bar on the side. At our first meal, everyone filled their plates full and went back for seconds. Glass after glass was refilled with water or kool-aid. But we soon found out that we were being tested. When it was time to clean up, we were instructed to separate our left-overs into three categories: liquids; biodegradables; and left-over food. And then they weighed our waste. The first meal we tipped the scales to over thirty pounds of waste from 91 students. By the time we ate our last meal, a couple of days later, the waste was down to six pounds.

The environmental lesson was obvious: "When you have no regard for others and greedily serve yourself, ultimately everyone suffers." There is a theological parallel: **Hell is self-centeredness.**

The Church and her members cannot afford to be a congregation of the self absorbed and self-centered. Look around – do you feel connected with others here? Just as importantly are you connected with those in this community? Or is church for you a place of self-achievement and betterment and gratification? To be a church that claims we are to let our light shine, means that, when God asks the question: "Where is your brother?" we will know the answer. We will know who our brother and sister is, and we will know they belong to us. We are our brother and sister's keeper.