

Imago Dei, Part 2: Raising Cain
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Countryside Community Church (UCC)
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Scripture: Genesis 4:1-17

Do you know the first thing Adam and Eve did after leaving the Garden of Eden? They “raised Cain” of course!

Do you know why God did not accept Cain’s offering? He just wasn’t Abel!

Sorry, couldn’t help myself on account of this week’s story ... But before turning to it, let’s remind ourselves of what we learned last week, as the story of Cain and Abel will pick up and reinforce what we found with Adam and Eve.

Last week when we looked closely at the biblical story of Adam and Eve we discovered something decidedly unbiblical about the way that many Christians have interpreted the story. Many Christians (in contrast to Jews and Muslims) believe that the story is all about Original Sin, and how the first couple so offended God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge that God condemned them and every descendant after them to burn in hell for eternity. Based on this assumption, many Christians believe that the purpose of Jesus was to save us from hell by paying the penalty we couldn’t pay for Original Sin, thereby rescuing those who believe in him from a fiery fate. “Turn to Jesus or burn” is the message, whether stated overtly or implied.

Yet, when we examined the story more closely last week we discovered that something extremely important has been overlooked by those Christians who believe that humanity was damned by Adam and Eve’s sin. They overlook how God responded to their sin with amazing Grace. Why would God create garments of skins for the couple to help relieve their feelings of shame if God’s desire was to damn them for eternity? And why would God usher them out of the Garden to keep them from eating from the Tree of Eternal Life if not to ensure that their sins would not have eternal consequences?

These are hardly the actions of a God who has such anger management issues that the misdeeds of God’s beloved couple could only be solved through eternal torture. Rather, they are the actions of a God who loves God’s humanity enough to scrap Plan A and move to Plan B when we prove incapable of living by the original plan.

The story of Adam and Eve sets up a pattern that is going to be repeated in this morning’s story of Cain and Abel. The pattern is: (1) God tells humanity not to do something; (2) humanity does it anyway; (3) God shifts from Plan A to Plan B – or in Cain’s case, Plan B to Plan C – in order to accommodate the new reality caused by human choice; (4) God gives humanity something beautiful that they do not deserve, as an act of pure grace, in order to relieve their suffering and restore something of their relationship with God and other people.

Sometimes, our interpretation of biblical stories is affected as much by whom we are as by what we find in the story itself. I think that many biblical stories, as well as Jesus' parables, are intentionally set up to hide something that cannot be seen unless one's heart is in the right place. And if your heart isn't in the right place, then the story or parable is meant to disturb you in such a way that you keep turning it from various angles, approaching it with different assumptions, until you stumble upon its message to you, and you come away a changed person.

The beautiful message of the story of Cain and Abel is definitely well-hidden. At first, the story just seems like one of crime and punishment for the sin of Envy. According to the Christian tradition, Envy is the second of the Seven Deadly Sins, right under Pride. Many people confuse Envy with Jealousy. Jealousy is worrying about someone taking something you already have. Envy is worrying about someone having something you don't have. Yet as we'll see later, this story is also about God's Grace, which is capable of inspiring Gratitude in the human heart. And this is the best antidote for Envy.

The story starts out with two sons who each make an offering to God – an offering that there is no record of God commanding, by the way, and thus seems to have been totally voluntary. God accepts Abel's offering but has no regard for Cain's. Obviously, this is totally unfair.

Yet I wonder how Cain would know that his offering wasn't deemed acceptable in God's eyes. The narrator doesn't say that God actually told Cain it was unacceptable. So Cain may simply have been expecting a higher "return" on his investment. Perhaps his fruits and vegetables didn't return a very large yield whereas Abel's sheep and goats multiplied handsomely, so Cain concluded that God didn't approve of his offering. Whatever God actually felt, the storyteller is baiting us. We're being invited to look for similar times in our own lives when other people have something or receive benefits that we think we ourselves should have, but don't. We're being invited to consider our own Envy.

In college, I had a roommate who was smarter than I am. Since we were both Economics majors, we took many of the same classes and thus had plenty of opportunities to compare who was doing better than whom. A week or two before an exam, I would be hitting the books hard, burning the midnight oil reading up on everything I could, outlining chapters, diagramming concepts, making up flash cards, and so forth. At the same time, my roommate would be watching movies, going on dates, and socializing with friends. Then, the night before the exam he'd pull an all-nighter and wind up getting an "A" on the exam while I'd get a "B+."

It just didn't seem fair! I expected the "economics gods" to smile on me more than my roommate. A lot more, since I sacrificed more.

As a farmer, Cain would likely have worked a lot harder to bring a sacrifice of fruits and vegetables than Abel did. He had to till the soil and carefully tend his crops from seed all the way to the harvest whereas all Abel had to do was let his flock roam around the

countryside until he needed to pluck one out for slaughter. Yet Abel got the “A” and Cain the “B+”. It just wasn’t fair!

By showing us what Cain does as a result of his Envy, the storyteller shines a light on our own struggles with Envy that we would prefer remain in the dark. I was never tempted to invite my roommate into a field and kill him, but I must confess that I harbored fantasies of my roommate being startled to find a big “F” written on his exam. “That would teach him,” I’d tell myself. But really, I wasn’t looking for my roommate to learn a lesson. I just wanted him to *suffer* for his crime of being smarter than I was and having to work less hard. And that’s exactly what Envy does. It refocuses our desire in such a way that we are more interested in the suffering of someone who has something we feel we deserve than we are in having the desired-thing itself.

When our attention is focused on destroying more than creating, our Envy ends up doing more harm to us than to those who are the subject of our Envy. As the 19th C English cleric Charles Colton once observed:

*Envy, if surrounded on all sides by the
brightness of another’s prosperity, like a
scorpion confined within a circle of fire will sting
itself to death.*

According to Genesis, human beings were created in the “image and likeness of God” (Imago Dei). Our nature is to create, not destroy; to relieve suffering, not promote it; to love, not to hate – even when it comes to our enemies. So Envy attacks the central nervous system of our very souls. That’s why the Christian tradition calls Envy a Deadly Sin. If left unchecked, it kills the soul’s central nervous system and often results in the suffering or death of others, as in the case of Abel.

Is there an antidote? According to Christian tradition, the antidote for Envy is Gratitude. The two can’t exist in the same brain at the same moment, and Gratitude is more powerful.

I eventually learned this lesson with respect to my college roommate. I learned that if I were full of gratitude for other blessings in my life, I was less concerned with comparing my grades to those of my roommate. My smoldering feelings of unfairness were cooled significantly by my gratitude over the privilege of being in college in the first place and drinking deeply from the well of knowledge it was offering me. What did I care if someone had a little easier go of it than I did? In fact, how wonderful that someone could enjoy all the blessings I did and have a little more. I was given more blessings in other areas.

Back to our story, once Cain kills his brother and his deed is discovered, he has to live with the consequences of his action through the land being less productive and human relationships being more fraught with problems owing to the fact that he will be known as a murderer. Cain calls this a “punishment,” but it’s simply a consequence that he brought upon himself as a result of his action. Envy destroys the inside and the outside,

and sometimes we can't undo the effects. Thankfully, because there is a God there is always a Plan B.

Cain can put the blame on God all he wants for his fugitive status and the land not being as productive, just as he blamed God for not having regard for his original sacrifice. But what often goes unnoticed is the one thing that God definitely *did* do in the story. God put a mark on Cain's head that protected him from being killed by others.

Considering that in the world of the ancient storyteller the penalty for murder was death, this is an extraordinary statement that is being made about God. Instead of punishing the murderer with death, God not only spares the murderer's life, but actually protects him from being similarly harmed! This is not the God of Wrath but the God of Grace.

This Grace seems to have had an effect on Cain. For when one receives Grace in one's heart, it inspires Gratitude. And Gratitude is the killer of Envy. This is how God's justice works. God's justice isn't retributive but restorative. God killed Cain's Envy, not Cain himself!

One might think that God seems weak by not taking a life for a life – like God is “soft on crime.” Yet look at the effect God's “softness” had on Cain. He goes from being unable to live near even his own brother at the beginning of the story to becoming the founder of an entire city full of people by the end of the story. Apparently, Cain had learned to live in close community with others, and loved it so much that he named the city he founded after his own son. That's what happens when God's Grace gets hold of you and you become more aware of what you have than what you don't have.

Is there any Envy inside you that God can kill with a generous helping of Grace? Likely, you've already received the Grace. All you need now is to start counting your blessings more carefully.