

Calgary, Alberta

November 11, 2007

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

The Text: Genesis 4:1-16

The Title: the Matrix of Sin

10:30 am, Holy Communion

The Text:

Cain and Abel

1 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." **2** And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker 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 also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of 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 face fell. **6** The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? **7** If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

8 Cain spoke to Abel his brother. 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 Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" **10** And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying 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 work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." **13** Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. **14** Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." **15** Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. **16** Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

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One day a little boy got out of bed on the wrong side. He was having a very bad day. He disobeyed his mother several times, and then had a violent argument with his playmate. So, his mother told him he would have to have some time alone. She turned on the light in her large clothes closet, put a little chair in it, and told her son to sit there for thirty minutes. Thirty minutes later, she returned to find the closet was a real mess. All her clothes were in a pile. What have you been doing? She asked. The angry youngster replied, I have spit on your clothes; I have spit on your shoes; and now I'm just sitting here waiting for more spit.

Many of the social problems in our world, when traced to their sources, point back to the angry little boy or little girl in us, sitting in a closet,

so to speak, angry, brooding, jealous, or spiteful. That kind of anger can be traced all the way back to our human origins. In the fourth chapter of Genesis, we have a sad three-act drama introducing social conflict and violence into our world. There is no better lesson to consider on this Remembrance Day. So let's take some time now to glean some lessons from it.

In Act I, verses 1-5, we find Cain and Abel, the first two brothers born on Earth, offering sacrifices to God. Abel's sacrifice was accepted by God, but Cain's was not. Cain became angry and aimed that anger at Abel.

Why was Cain's sacrifice of his farm produce not acceptable while Abel's sacrifice of a lamb was? Some think that the problem was that whereas Abel offered the first or best of his lambs as a sacrifice, there is no mention that Cain brought the first-fruits of his harvest. God is impressed when we bring him the first or best 10 percent of whatever we earn. That demonstrates a priority of allegiance to Christ above all.

However, in verses 6 and 7, when the Lord talks with Cain, there is no mention of a problem with his sacrifice. The gift is not flawed. The problem lies with the giver. The problem is in the heart of Cain.

Thankfully this story is interpreted for us in the New Testament. In Hebrews 11:4 is this verse.

4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him

by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

This verse is illustrating what the writer to the Hebrews has written in verse 1: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Abel offered his sacrifice by faith in response to God's word. God had at some point earlier, not recorded for us in the text, revealed to this family his instructions that they should approach him in this manner. They were to offer sacrifices. It was Abel's faith in God's word that was the ground for his righteousness. His sacrifice was acceptable because he responded in faith to God's word. Not so with Cain. This is what we need to see in this story. It is the response of the heart to God's word that is so important. This the response of the Holy People of God in the Bible through whom God works out his purposes.

Cain on the other hand does not respond to God's word in faith, just as his parents Adam and Eve spurned the word of God. Cain did not want to live in obedience to God but rather he chose to live within the Matrix of Sin and was obedient to it's power. (I will say something more about this matrix in a minute.)

Verse five tells us that Cain was very angry and his countenance fell. Can't you see his furrowed brow, his narrowed eyes, his brooding and distancing from his brother? Rather than faith in God's word taking root in his heart, Cain nurses and cultivates anger. To have such a heart can destroy all with which it comes into contact.

John H. Hanley, CEO of the Mansanto Company, tells about a young chemist in his company who announced one day that he had discovered a great new solvent capable of dissolving anything:

concrete, steel, glass, plastic, really anything. The chief engineer in the company sent a memo to the chemist asking a simple question: "When it comes time for storing this revolutionary new solvent, what kind of container do you plan to use?" Anger, resentment, jealousy, and spite are like that new solvent. They will ruin anything which contains them, especially the human heart and mind.¹

How different the story might have been if Cain had responded to God in faith. What an alternate outcome there could have been if he had asked God in prayer, "How can I offer a pleasing sacrifice to you? Please teach me." How different the story might have been if Cain had asked his brother Abel to pray for him and with him. Prayer and honest sharing could have melted the animosity. How different the story might have been if Abel could have approached Cain and said, "Something is happening to our relationship, my brother. Have I done anything to offend you?" For you see faith in response to God's word breeds relational health, whereas anger and resentment breeds alienation and vengeance.

Act II in our drama records the first murder in history; one brother killed another. Cain killed Abel and then denied responsibility.

In addition, there are ways to half-kill. Most of us have never killed another person, but all of us have killed a portion of the happiness and well-being of other persons. Sometimes by poisonous gossip, or sometimes we sting other people with verbal darts. Or it could be a colder cruelty, a sneer, a contemptuous look, a sinister

¹ Dr. Bill Bouknight: "The Seeds of Social Conflict" at: <http://www.esermons.com/theDetails.asp>

disparagement. Jesus said that one who nurses brooding anger toward another is as guilty before God as the murderer. Matthew records these words of Jesus:

21 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matthew 5: 21-22).

In Act III of the drama, God punishes Cain, but puts a mark of mercy on him.

In verses 11 through 16, God banishes Cain from the agricultural life. Cain becomes a transient, a nomad. But to protect him from hostile, border-conscious people, God put a mark on him. What that mark was, we do not know. But remember, the mark was not part of his punishment. It was a mark of grace, protecting Cain from harm and serving as a message that God had not forsaken him. The story of Cain is a double tragedy. The first tragedy was in murdering his brother. The second tragedy was that he could not bring himself to say to God, "I have done wrong. I repent and throw myself upon your mercy."

What are we to make of this three act drama? What does it have to say to us? The heart of the matter is in verse 7: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

Knowing what we do from Hebrews 11:4, to “do well” means to respond in faith to God’s word. It is as we are able to live the life of faith that we are then given the power to rule over sin, rather than to have sin rule over us.

In the 1999 film *The Matrix* we have portrayed in a contemporary way the essence of Genesis 4:7. The film depicts intelligent computers that are dependent on human beings for the supply of their energy needs. Though every human is in reality in a comatose state sustained in egg-shaped containers filled with amniotic-like fluid, impulses to the brain create all the sensations of living. These electronic impulses give them a sense of identity, create the sensations of eating, and do everything else to maintain the deception. This system that creates the electronic facsimile of existence is the matrix. People are unaware of the matrix and believe that the existence they are experiencing is reality, and that it is all there is. One of the characters describes it this way:

The matrix is everywhere, it is all around us ____ It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth . . . that you are a slave . . . born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch,- a prison for your mind.

In a similar way, today we live in a fallen world where sin that wants to rule us is the matrix. It controls all that people do or think though we often choose to be unaware of its presence. It is pervasive and insidious in every way, and most people go about their lives not realizing that the world of sin is not the real world.

In the film a resistance group has broken free of the matrix and seeks to subvert it, in order to bring people out of it, and eventually destroy it. But there is one Judas in the group, who has become bored with the hard realities of the resistance movement and betrays the group in order to get back into the matrix. He chooses slavery rather than to give up its benefits:

I know that this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth the matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years [with the resistance] you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss!

Likewise, many, like Cain, would choose not to leave the matrix of Sin having become too attached to their sinful and selfish ways.

Through Cain, we come to understand more of the nature of depravity. Sin forms the matrix of our artificial existence in which spiritual realities seem distant. Our reluctance to fully take account of the reality of the spiritual world allows us to condone our own selfish behavior, refusing to take responsibility for the spiritual ramifications of our behavior. It is not surprising, then, that we find only despair as we discover the inevitability of evil. We live in Cain's world and follow in his footsteps.²

The seeds of conflict are always in every heart. There are temptations to anger, jealousy, prejudice, rage and envy. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit who is within those who are disciples of Jesus calls us to compassion, honesty, honorable compromise, understanding, and reconciliation. Which way will we go? The choice is ours.

In each of us who are in Christ there is an eagle in me that wants to

² John H. Walton: *Genesis; The NIV Application Commentary* (Zondervan 2001) pages 268-269

soar; but there is also a hippopotamus within me that wants to wallow in the mud. Haven't you felt both the eagle and the hippo within your own heart? One side of us wants to fight and rage, to prejudge and gossip, to brood and nurse grievances. But on the other side of us, inspired by the Holy Spirit within us, we want to withhold judgment, to make honorable compromises, to give other people the benefit of the doubt, and to build bridges of reconciliation.

There will be instances this week when you feel the seeds of Cain within you. Your spouse will insinuate, perhaps, that you waste money, and you will be tempted to rage in response. If you are a teenager, you may find yourself in bitter disagreement with a parent, and you may be tempted to rage in response. Your boss may blame you unfairly for another employee's error, and you will be tempted to rage in response. You will not get a promotion or a contract or a sale you hoped for, and you will be tempted to rage in response. Your own brother or sister may not help you care for an aging parent, and you will be tempted to rage in response. At those tough moments, remember the words of Genesis 4:7 "Sin is waiting to attack you, longing to destroy you. But you can conquer it! How can we conquer it? Because the One who is in us, the Holy Spirit, is greater than the one who is in the world.

May we remember that this three act play finds expression in every heart, every home, every city, every province, state and nation. When it becomes deeply rooted in a society, the matrix of sin results in war.

On this day we are reminded of the cost the matrix of sin has at times meant and means for those who have sacrificed their youth and their lives to resist its power. We are so grateful to our service men and

women of today and in the past who risk the ire of sin's vengeance as did Abel.

Every day of our lives the Matrix of Sin needs to be resisted. May we live as men and women who respond in faith to God's Word and so leave the Matrix of Sin so that instead we can live within the Matrix of Grace. While within the Matrix of Grace there is a vulnerability not experienced by those who live within the Matrix of Sin, the Grace Matrix leads to life, both now and eternally. It is then and only then that we can have the strength to master Sin's power and reject its rule in our lives.

This is the lesson of Genesis 4 and is an apt reminder for us all on this Remembrance Day.

Amen