

The Chicago Way

Hespeler, November 5, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Remembrance Sunday

[Genesis 4:1 17, 23, 24](#), Psalm 43, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13, Matthew 23:1-12

You have all heard, I am sure, about the story of Cain and Abel. It is the story of the first brothers, and of the first sibling rivalry. It is the story, in the Bible, of the first time anyone tried to solve their problems with violence. It didn't go well.

It is also, and a lot of people don't realize this, the first time that the word *sin* is mentioned in the Bible. The notion of sin doesn't come up, not even once, in the whole story of Adam and Eve and the garden. It only comes up when Cain contemplates what he is going to do to his brother Abel.

Sibling Rivalry

So anyways, you probably know the part of the story that everyone knows – how both Cain and Abel made a sacrifice to God but God (in some way that is not explained) indicated that Abel's sacrifice was more acceptable than Cain's. And Cain was so jealous that he decided to attack his brother and killed him in the field. And so, the first sin became the first murder.

But what I am interested in today is what comes after that. God comes upon Cain and asks him where his brother is. And God knows – knows because the blood of Abel is crying out from the ground itself – what Cain has done.

Cain's Punishment

And God punishes Cain – punishes him with exile, casting him out from the soil that that sustained him as a farmer. And then Cain complains about this punishment. **“My punishment is greater than I can bear!”** he cries. **“Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.”**

Cain is saying that his punishment will not merely be exile; it will be death. People will seek him out and try to kill him because of what he has done. But think about what that is saying for a moment.

A World Full of People

A simple, straightforward reading of the Book of Genesis would lead you to think that, at this point in the story, there are approximately three human beings on the face of the earth. There is Adam and there is Eve and they have had two sons, one of whom is now dead. That's it.

But now Cain, the murderer of his brother seems to imagine a world full of people, many of whom are trying to kill him! I know the people often read this story of Cain and note that, at that end of it, Cain suddenly has a wife. They rightfully ask where his wife came from. It also says that he built a city, and a city does not exist without people to live in it. But even before we get to those thorny questions, we have to ask where all of these enemies come from.

A More-Than-Historical Story

All of that suggests to me that perhaps the author of the Book of Genesis is telling something other than a simple historical narrative. He is talking about something a little bigger than just the drama that has



consumed one nuclear family. He is making a commentary on the human condition and the problems that have beset us all down through the ages. And, because of that, I think we would do well to pay close heed to this story because I suspect that it has some important things to say to us and the challenges that we face as humanity today.

So, with that in mind, who is it that Cain is afraid, in all the great big world, is out to kill him. Is he afraid that the world is full of psychopaths who wander the globe seeking for random people to kill for sport? Such people do exist, but they are hardly everywhere. And, even if they were, Cain is certainly no more at risk of such a random attack than anyone else.

Family Feud

So, who is Cain afraid is going to target him for death? I think that the answer to that question would have been obvious to ancient readers. They knew how these things worked. Cain has killed Abel and so it would have been completely expected that someone from Abel's family or clan would target Cain for death.

And, yes, I know, there is no mention of Abel having a family or clan but, as I said, the author of this story does not seem to be concerned with such details. He is telling a bigger story about what commonly happened in his society when somebody murdered somebody else. And what commonly happened in that world was that justice was meted out by means of family and clan through feud, vengeance and vendetta. That is what Cain is quite justifiably afraid of.

God's Response

And so, God reassures Cain. And what does God say to set Cain's heart at ease? God, kind of famously, says this: **"Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance."** And I know how people have traditionally read that. They have understood God to be promising that, if anyone kills Cain, that God will carry out the sevenfold vengeance, presumably by killing seven of that murderer's people. And, once again, let's just note how very populated this world seems to be.

But I want you to notice something. I want you to notice that God does not say *who* is going to take that sevenfold vengeance. God doesn't say, "I'm going to do it," just that it's going to happen. And I would suggest to you that it would have been much more normal, in that world, to expect someone other than God to take that vengeance. The expectation was that the people from Cain's own family or clan would take that vengeance.

The Chicago Way

There is a famous scene in the 1987 movie, *The Untouchables*, when Sean Connery, playing an Irish Chicago police officer, who strangely has a Scottish accent, tells Elliot Ness, played by Kevin Costner, how to beat the gangster, Al Capone. "You wanna know how to get Capone?" Connery asks. "They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. *That's the Chicago way!*"

Well, that's kind of the same thing that God is saying to Cain in this passage. He's saying that the only way to prevent violence or murder from happening, is to continually increase the level of retaliatory violence. If you always make sure that you hurt the other guy more than they have hurt you, well, that's what's going to prevent them from hurting you in the first place. It's the Chicago way. God is saying that if they kill you, you just have to make sure you put seven of theirs in the morgue.

The Solution to Violence!

And so, there you have it, right? Right from the mouth of God, no less! Here we have the solution to the problem that has plagued humanity from the very beginning – what to do about violence, murder and war. Apparently, so long as you always meet violence with more violence, so long as you live according to the Chicago way, it seems as if the problem is completely solved.

And surely there could be no message better than that to celebrate on this Remembrance Sunday, that we can have the promise of peace so long as we follow the Chicago way.

Except, wait a minute. I can see a few questions percolating in a few brains out there. I think, maybe, some of you are wondering if that can really be the solution to the problem of violence in this world. Because, in many ways, is not all of human history pretty much a story of us trying to solve the problem of violence in the Chicago way? It seems to me that people have actually tried responding to violence with even more violence. I think they've tried that a whole lot, and I'm not exactly sure that it has worked, are you? So, is that really the end of the story?

More to the Story

No, it's not. It's not even the end of the story in the Book of Genesis. I know that people usually stop reading once Cain is marked and sent into exile, but that's not the end of his story. That's why we kept reading this morning. And I want us to note where the story ends up with Cain's great-great-great-great-grandson, Lamech. I mean, isn't this a wonderful opportunity to check in on this family and how they're doing living under the Chicago way five generations later. So, how are they doing?

We are told very little about Lamech apart from what he says one day to his two wives. But what little he says speaks volumes. **"I have killed a man for wounding me,"** he says, **"A young man for striking me."**

And isn't that just wonderful? Here we see that Lamech is keeping up the good old fashioned Cain family tradition of the Chicago way. Somebody just put one of mine in the hospital so I put one of his in the morgue. That's what he just said.

So, if he's keeping up the tradition, all must be well, right? Violence must have been banished from the face of the earth. Well, not exactly because Lamech isn't done.

Seventy-Sevenfold Vengeance

"If Cain is avenged sevenfold," he goes on, **"Truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold."** And here we see the real problem with the Chicago way. In five generations we have apparently gone from seven-times vengeance to seventy-seven times vengeance. Where once it was enough to put seven of theirs in the morgue, now we are putting seventy-seven of theirs for every one of ours.

And there is the real problem with eternal vengeance. It just keeps spiraling bigger and bigger and more out of control with each new generation. Vengeance is not the solution to violence; it is what makes sure it keeps growing.

So actually, the story of Cain and Abel, far from advocating the Chicago way as the solution to violence, shows us that it leads us further and further down the path of destruction. There has got to be a better way.

A Better Way

And there is. The story of Cain and Abel does not just end five generations later with the sayings of Lamech. There is, in the Bible, an epilogue to the story, but it doesn't come until millennia later in the

Gospel of Matthew. One day, we're told, Peter came up to Jesus and said, **"Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"** And Jesus answered him and said, **"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."** (Matthew 18:21-22)

And I'm sure that you'll notice that Peter and Jesus refer there to exactly the same numbers that appear in the Book of Genesis – 7 and then 77 times. That kind of thing doesn't just happen by accident in the Bible. This is meant to connect the two passages and the application is pretty clear.

The story of Cain and Abel tells of violence and vengeance spinning out of control – killing more and more people each succeeding generation. It is the story of how the Chicago way doesn't solve anything and only makes everything worse. And this passage offers the only possible antidote to that – and the antidote is spiraling mercy and forgiveness. As Sean Connery might put it, "They hurt you one time, you forgive them seventy-seven times."

Real-World Application

And all of this, as we are all too aware, has so many real-world implications for all of us here today. The world is in the midst of a war that could all too easily spin out of control.

I have all the sympathy in the world for the people of Israel – mostly civilians – who were targeted in last month's Hamas terrorist attack. It was horrific and unconscionable. The impulse to strike back and take a Palestinian life for an Israeli life, a wounding for a wounding is also completely human and quite understandable. But is it the solution? Does it solve the underlying issues and make the possibility of violence go away? I don't think it can – not even (and this is likely impossible) if you manage to wipe out the entirety of Hamas leadership and infrastructure such as it is.

So, if it isn't going to solve it, what are you left with? A continual spiral. We have already passed the point when it is seven Palestinian lives for every Israeli life lost. But, despite what God promised to Cain, that won't end it. And it won't end it when, five generations and so much blood after this all started, it is seventy-seven lives for every life either.

Where is Hope?

So what are we left with? Where is there hope for the future of the human race? I can only offer the answer of Jesus to Peter – the only thing that can overwhelm spiraling violence is the spiraling power of forgiveness. I don't offer this as the easier path – it is so much harder to pursue. Nor do I suggest that it is the safer path; it isn't. It is just, in the long run, the only path and until we find it somehow, we have come no further than Lamech sitting around and boasting to his wives about how many people he has killed for wounding him.