

Scripture: Genesis 4:1-16

Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 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 rule over it."

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

But the Lord said to him, "Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Am I My Brother's Keeper?
Genesis 4:1-16
Rev. Layne B. Brubaker

If you turn in your bulletins to Page 9 you will see a picture of a monkey.

A few months ago this photograph went viral. This photo is of a young monkey named Punch who was born in a Zoo outside of Tokyo. Punch, for unknown reasons, was rejected by his mother shortly after birth, and the Zoo keepers gave him a stuffed animal to



hold, a small plush monkey to serve as a surrogate for the mother who would not hold him. This image of Punch, lying alone, clutching his stuffed monkey, with an expression on his face that is so unmistakably lonely, caused millions of people around the world to feel it the moment they saw it.

I felt it. The first time I saw this photograph, something in me just hurt. It was instant. It was visceral. I literally felt a pain in my heart.

The internet, predictably, lost its mind. People wanted to adopt Punch. People were outraged on his behalf. People wrote long passionate posts about this small monkey and his stuffed mother and the injustice of his loneliness.

Shortly after the internet went bonkers standing up for Punch, Jon Stewart addressed the story on the Daily Show. And he did what Jon Stewart often does, which is to hold up a mirror to the rest of us using humor. He pointed out that maybe the other monkeys knew something we did not. Maybe Punch was awkward. Maybe Punch was difficult. Maybe there was a reason the monkey community had not rushed to embrace Punch, and we were all sitting at our computers projecting our feelings onto a primate without any of the context.

The audience uncomfortably laughed. I was initially annoyed at the commentary. But then I couldn't stop thinking about his critique.

Because I think Jon Stewart was asking a more serious question underneath the comedy. And that question is this: why is it so much easier for us to see loneliness in a monkey than in the person sitting next to us? Why did millions of people feel instant empathy for Punch, when we regularly walk past lonely people in our own communities without a second glance?

I have a theory. I think we can see Punch's loneliness so clearly because he is other. He cannot be awkward or difficult or complicated in the ways that actual human beings are awkward and difficult and complicated.

I recently heard a segment on NPR about the rise of male loneliness in this country. And in the middle of this interview, the narrator described a young man he had recently interviewed, a man in his twenties, who was so lonely, so starved for human presence and contact, that he developed a habit of going to Walmart late at night. Not to buy anything. Just to be around other people. Just to move through a space where there were other human bodies, other voices nearby. He had stopped hoping for connection. He was just trying to find proximity.

I have not been able to stop thinking about that young man. About what it says about us as a society that proximity to strangers in a Walmart at midnight is the only option for someone experiencing loneliness.

American society is currently in the middle of a loneliness crisis. This is a documented, measurable, public health emergency. The former Surgeon General of the United States Dr. Vivek Murthy made this diagnosis. His research found that loneliness is a widespread modern crisis that affects approximately half of U.S. adults.

Researchers have found that chronic loneliness has the same impact on physical health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.

Robert Putnam, an American Political Scientist and Professor of Public Policy at Harvard, predicted this loneliness crisis in his book *Bowling Alone*, which was published in 2000. Way before the pandemic lockdown and before the rise of social media, Putnam was already documenting the steady collapse of social

capital in American life. Social capital meaning the networks of relationships, trust, and mutual responsibility that hold communities together.

According to Putnam, for decades people have been joining fewer civic organizations. Church attendance is in decline, and people are attending fewer community events.

Putnam's argument was not simply that people were less happy. Rather, that the fabric of democratic society depends on people knowing each other. And when that fabric frays, everything frays with it. Institutions weaken. Democracy erodes. And people go to Walmart at midnight just to be near other human beings.

I believe that the Church is called to address this, urgently.

Which brings us to Genesis 4. To Cain and Abel. Which I want to suggest is actually the original sin story.

I know that sounds wrong. We usually give that title to Genesis 3. To the garden, the serpent, the fruit, the fall. But the word sin never appears in the story of Adam and Eve. Not once. The word sin appears for the first time in the Bible right here, in Genesis 4, when God warns Cain that sin is crouching at the door.

I think it is important to note that the first sin named as sin in all of scripture is not disobedience. It is not grasping after forbidden knowledge. It is what happens between two brothers. Sin arrives in the midst of a broken relationship. Sin enters our world when Cain looks at his brother Abel and decides that his brother's flourishing is a threat to his own.

Here is the story. Cain is the oldest son of Adam and Eve. He is a farmer working and tilling the land. His younger brother Abel is a shepherd caring and guiding creatures of the earth. Both brothers bring offerings to God directly from their work in this world. For reasons unknown and unspecified by the author of Genesis, Abel's offering is accepted by God and Cain's is not. Which causes Cain to be furious.

God sees Cain's anger and comes to him with a question and a warning. God asks, Why are you angry? God warns Cain: sin is crouching at the door. It wants you. But you can choose otherwise.

Sadly, Cain does not choose otherwise.

Rather, he invites his brother into a field. And he kills him.

And then God comes to Cain with a question. God asks "Where is your brother Abel?"

And Cain says, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for "keeper" means someone who watches over, guards, or protects. Earlier in the story, Abel is described as a keeper of sheep, a shepherd who cares for vulnerable creatures. So when God asks Cain, "Where is your brother?" Cain's response is essentially, "Am I supposed to shepherd my brother?" His answer is sarcastic and defensive. Cain not only kills his brother, but he rejects the idea that his brother's life is connected to his own.

Cain's question to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" is an important question to sit with.

Am I responsible for the people around me?

Am I allowed to just tend my own garden? To love the people I find easy to love, to show up for the people who show up for me, and to have no particular responsibility to the Punches of the world, the ones who have been left on the outside, holding their stuffed animals, lying alone?

Cain's answer: I am not my brother's keeper. What happens to Abel is not my problem. His flourishing is not my concern. In fact, his flourishing is the problem, because it makes me look bad by comparison.

And God's response: your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground.

The blood of those whom we do not like, or whom we ignore, or would rather just not think about, does not disappear just because we look away. It cries out. It makes itself heard. And God hears it, even when we do not.

Friends, as Pastor Scott stated last week, we believe that God is Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which means that at the very heart of the universe, before anything else existed, there was relationship. There was knowing and being known. There was love moving between persons. And when God created human beings in that image, God made us for the same thing. We are not meant to be alone. We are not meant to be isolated. Rather, we are created to live in community with one another, and to truly know each other, which requires vulnerability, and discomfort, and repair, and a profound respect for the dignity of every person we encounter.

Am I my siblings' keeper?

The answer the gospel gives us is not a gentle yes. It is a demanding, inconvenient, transformative yes. You are your brother's keeper. You are your sister's keeper. You are the keeper of the young man wandering Walmart at midnight. You are the keeper of the Punch in your community, the one who has been left on the outside holding a substitute for the real thing, waiting for someone to notice.

And here is the good news hiding in plain sight in this ancient, brutal story. After everything, after the rage, after the field, after the blood crying out from the ground, God does not abandon Cain. God does not do to Cain what Cain did to Abel. God could. The logic of retribution would allow it. But instead, God marks Cain with a sign of protection. God sends him out, yes, but not alone, and not unguarded. The God who heard Abel's blood crying out is also the God who refuses to let Cain be destroyed. That is not justice by our accounting. That is mercy. And it tells us something essential about God: God is a God who does not give up on the people who have failed the hardest. Which means, thanks be to God, God has not given up on us.

So what does this all mean for us today?

We need to reframe how we look at one another, and how we see ourselves.

When you look around this room, you probably see people who look like they have it together. People who are smiling, who came with someone, who know where to sit, who have been here long enough that their name is known. You are probably not seeing loneliness, but I think that is because loneliness has gotten very good at hiding.

To practice the kind of vulnerability I'm literally preaching about today, let me tell you what I see when I look in the mirror. I see a pastor. Someone who is with people constantly. I'm in meetings most evenings, I'm standing in a pulpit with the privilege of a lot of people listening to me speak, I have the privilege of serving this community that I genuinely love in many different and dynamic ways. I see someone who just celebrated fifteen years of marriage to a wonderful spouse. And I will confess to you all today that I am also lonely sometimes.

Not in a crisis way. Not in a Walmart-at-midnight way. But in the quieter, harder-to-name way that I think many people carry. The kind where you are surrounded by people who care about you, and yet you still find yourself in seasons where you know you should reach out to someone and just cannot quite make yourself do it. Not because there is no one to call, but because asking feels vulnerable. Like admitting something. Like maybe you are supposed to be more okay than you are.

It turns out that being around people is not the same thing as being known. Proximity is not presence. And you can sit in a sanctuary full of people and still feel alone.

I am telling you this because I think more people experience loneliness than we realize. Potentially, many of us are waiting for someone else to make the first move toward real relationship.

And friends, this is where the gospel speaks.

The God who heard Abel's blood crying out from the ground is also the God who hears the quieter cries we do not say aloud. God hears the grief we hide, the isolation we minimize, the aches we try to laugh off, the longing to be known that sits underneath so much of human life. And the good news of the gospel is that God does not stand far away from that loneliness. In Jesus Christ, God enters it.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the loving keeper of us all. Jesus is the brother who does not abandon us. The brother who moves toward people others avoid. The brother who notices those standing alone at the edges of rooms. The brother who gathers strangers into a family and tells them to love one another as he has loved them.

And that gives the church a vocation: to keep one another.

We were made for community. Real community. The kind that requires vulnerability and discomfort and repair and respect for the dignity of every person we encounter. Not the kind of relationships that happen at a comfortable distance, where we can feel warmly toward people without ever actually knowing them. Not surface-level friendliness dressed up as fellowship. But the slow, inconvenient, sometimes awkward work of letting people see us and choosing to see them back.

That is what the church is supposed to be. A place where all of us can stop pretending long enough to become something real. A place where nobody has to perform strength they do not have. A place where asking for help is not shameful. A place where nobody has to wander through life clutching substitutes for love because they have found something genuine in the body of Christ.

That takes vulnerability. It will make us uncomfortable. And it will require us to repair things that get broken along the way, because real relationships always do. But that discomfort is not a sign that something has gone wrong. It is a sign that something real is happening.

And we have to start somewhere.

So here is what I am asking of you this week. Before you rush out of worship, linger a little longer. Introduce yourself to someone you recognize but do not really know. Ask someone how they are doing and stay long enough to hear the full answer. Invite someone to coffee. Join the class, the group, the conversation you have been hesitant to enter. Let yourself be known a little more than feels comfortable.

Because this kind of community does not happen accidentally. It takes intention. It takes vulnerability.

And friends, this matters. We are living in a time of profound loneliness and isolation, which is why we are spending fifteen weeks doing this hard and holy work together: learning how to deepen relationships, how to practice real community, and how to become people who truly know and keep one another. This is only the beginning.

Because the answer to Cain's question, "Am I my sibling's keeper?" is yes. A costly, vulnerable, uncomfortable, beautiful yes. We are our siblings' keepers. And thanks be to God, we are being kept.

Amen.

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