

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“The Mark We Bear”
3rd in the series, “Beginnings”
Genesis 4:1-16
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Well, I have some good news for you. As dysfunctional as they may be, your family didn't invent crazy. Apparently it's been around since the very beginning. And the very fact that you're sitting here means your siblings at least aren't as off the deep end as they could be.

That's right. Take heart. Be of good cheer. Your brother's not Cain.

But part of what I love about these beginning stories is that they tell us what is true for everyone everywhere... and right from the start they tell us that families are dysfunctional.

It might not always be two brothers. Of course it seems to be an awful lot of time in the bible... After all there's Isaac and Ismael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers... The prodigal son and his older brother... to name just a few. But the truth is the dysfunction doesn't just stay there. We know that. It could be between any combination of siblings, or parents, or children, or cousins, uncles, in-laws, and step-whatever. You name it. If you're in a family, then chances are you know at least a little dysfunction... at least if you're paying attention.

I remember when I was in high school being really proud of my family... because we were the most normal family I knew. I still like to tell Jessi that I define normalcy. ... well, actually the first time I said that to her I said, “I define nor-mal-icy” Guess I shot myself in the foot on that one.

Anyway, I was convinced that we didn't have the problems that everyone else had. We liked being together. We were the perfect combination of the Cleavers and the Brady Bunch... and I took a little too much pride in that.

Because then we grew up, and what I didn't want to see came to light, and I watched dysfunction pull and rip at different relationships in my family. I watched it hurt and be hurt. And I realized that we're just as messed up as the next guy.

It's sort of like that famous saying you're probably heard, **“Be kind. Everyone you know is fighting a great battle.”** The longer I've been a pastor, the more true I've seen that to be. A lot of the time, you have no idea what the person sitting in the pew next to you is fighting behind closed doors. None of us get to see what happens between episodes of the Brady Bunch. An awful lot of the time, there's some dysfunction that is at work, that you and I don't know how to deal with.

Of course the other good news is that the problem doesn't really begin with us. It's mostly their fault. Right? Or at least it's our parent's fault. I mean, geez, Cain and Able would have gotten along fine if Adam and Eve hadn't screwed up so royally in the garden. I imagine Cain just needed a good therapist to help him work through all his childhood wounds, and maybe he wouldn't have had such an anger problem.

But... you know... being that there were supposedly only 4 people on the planet, a good therapist was hard to come by. And our childhood wounds being what they are... well, things happen, right? It's not our fault... at least not *mostly* our fault. The problem is with them.... whoever "they" are in your life.

If we're honest, that's how it seems to us most of the time, doesn't it? But the great spiritual teachers say something different. *They teach us that first and last, you are your major problem.* Or as Pogo the possum put it, "**I have met the enemy, and he is us.**" You are your major problem.

Of course, that's exactly what Cain is unable to see. He gives an offering to the Lord. His brother gives an offering to the Lord. And for some reason Able seems to be God's favorite.

You know as far as Cain was concerned, Able could probably have had his own show, "**Everybody Loves Able.**" And Cain would just be the goofy oversized older bother, who works for the EEPD, that the "East of Eden Police Department". He's the brother that doesn't seem to be very good with women, and who's always second best in their mother's eyes.

It's the same story, isn't it? Cain and Able... Jacob and Esau... Leah and Rachel... Raymond and Robert. It's always playing out... in the ancient world, and the modern screen, and in our lives. And it's pretty obvious to Cain where the problem is. The source of all his pain, his rejection is most certainly Able. I mean, if Able weren't around then his problems would go away.

We all assume this all the time:

I'm miserable because my parents always... fill in the blank.

I'm frustrated at work because my co-workers... you name it.

I'm angry because my siblings just don't get it.

If my kids were just easier... then I would be more patient.

I'm lonely... if I were just married, things would be different.

I'm lonely... if I were married to someone else, things would be different.

The intimacy in my marriage isn't what it used to be. If only my spouse would... romance me, take more initiative, be more patient, do more around the house, stop nagging me.... get a job... you fill in the blank.

We all do from time to time.

As human beings we have this amazing capacity to do and name everything under the sun in order to avoid the problem of ... me. now. here. When the reality is that if you find yourself frustrated, angry, resentful of those in your life, ***chances are the first problem lies with you, not them.*** Of course, that doesn't mean they are innocent, but your first problem lies with you.

Or as Richard Rohr puts it, **“My angers and irritations are, first of all, saying something about me, and that is what I must hear before I make any other judgments.”**¹

But most of the time, we don't see that any better than Cain did. We make our pain about them, and we try to get rid of the problem just like he does. Call it scapegoating. Call it projecting. Call it what you will, but we do it all the time. We do it as individuals and as a society.

All our problems will be fixed if we just get rid of them... if we just get rid of the heretics, the Jews, the poor people, black people, illegal immigrants, communists, gays, the man.... All my problems will go away if I could just get rid of you. ...so our anger and disappointments, and irritations tell us.

God tries to warn Cain. **“Be careful,”** God says, **“Sin is crouching at your door, ready to strike.”** Be careful... that lie is always there. **“It will entice you,”** God says.

Cain listens to his anger instead. And the sin crouching at his door does strike... It strikes just as Cain strikes Able in the field. And it strikes again every time we strike out against one another. Every time my pain becomes your problem,
my anger becomes your fault,
my unhappiness is because of them... sin strikes again.

This story is the beginning of dysfunction not just in families, but really in all human relationships. It's also a beginning of a different sort. It's a story about the beginning of our spiritual work... because all great spirituality is about what we do with our pain.

Rather than repressing it, or rejecting it, spiritual work is about learning to listen to what our pain has to teach us. In fact one thing I've heard Richard Rohr say again and again is that ***we dare not get rid of our pain, before we learn what it has to teach us spiritually.***

The thing is, life is hard. Pain is part of the deal. The goal is not to get rid of it by getting rid of “them”.

¹ R. Rohr, *Adam's Return*, 41.

In Matthew, Jesus tells a parable about a farmer planting wheat, but an enemy plants weeds in it at night. And his servants ask if they should go and rip up the weeds, but the farmer says, **“No! Because if you go around trying to pull up the weeds, you’re going to tear up the wheat too. Let both grow side by side until the harvest...”**

In other words, the wheat and weeds will always be there together in the real world. You can’t rip out the weeds, without ripping out the harvest.

But that’s exactly what we’re always trying to do. We try to rip out the weeds by denying it, but repressing it, by numbing our pain, by perfecting ourselves, and our kids, and our spouse. Sometimes we do it by demanding certainty in a world full of mystery. And in the process we rip out the wheat, we destroy the source of our greatest joy.

Ripping out the weeds isn’t going to work. The goal cannot be to get rid of our pain. Instead, our pain has to become our great teacher. We have to learn not to destroy it, but to transform our pain. ***Because if we don’t learn to transform our pain, we will most certainly transmit it out there... to those around us.*** Maybe, and most likely, even to those most dear to us.

Cain thinks the problem is Able. He spills the blood of his brother in the field. But that just makes things worse. Now that good and fertile land is cursed. That’s what happens when we transmit our pain. It always comes back to haunt us.

Cain tried to make Able’s flocks the problem, but now the farming of his fields, the work of his hands will never produce the goodness of life.

Getting rid of the problem in them, almost never solves the problem in us, or gets rid of the pain we carry.

Instead it haunts us even into the next field we go,
the next marriage we try,
the next work place,
the next church we join,
the next life we try to create.

Starting over never really means starting fresh... unless we allow our pain and our wounds to also become our great teacher.

We dare not get rid of the pain before we learn what it has to teach us spiritually speaking, says Rohr.

Learning about what to do with our pain, is the beginning of spiritual work. It is the beginning of the great Christian teaching, or what is sometimes called the paschal mystery.

Jesus tells his disciples, **“I must go to Jerusalem and there I will be handed over and crucified,”** because he knows that the cross is the path to resurrection. And he teaches us, **“Take up your cross and follow me... follow my way. For whoever tries to save his life will lose it. But if you loose it you will save it.”**

You see, for all of us there is a suffering that is ours to bear... to bear for our own salvation, and for the sake of the world. But sin is always there at the doorstep, ready to convince to you strike it down. **“It will entice you, but you must rule over it,”** God says. And the only way to rule it, is to transform it, to learn from your own woundedness.

I know, it’s counter to everything our culture teaches us, but the place of the wound is also the place of the greatest gift. Carol Jung put it this way, **“where we stumble and fall is where we find pure gold.”**

Well, that’s exactly what happens to Cain.
When God makes him face reality,
 when there is no longer anyone left to blame,
 when his projected pain comes back to haunt him, he’s faced with a
greatest crisis and wound he’s known. The fertile ground will be cursed. And he will be cast out.

It’s not until this point, that he finally cries out to God. He finally faces his deep fears and wounds. **“My punishment is more than I can bear... I’m driven from your presence. I’m going to become a homeless nomad... and now I will be the one who will be killed.”**

Of course, all that serves him right. The murder is now the one in threat of being murdered. But something happens when Cain finally owns his life before God. Something happens when he faces the truth. He’s no longer projecting his pain. He’s no longer blaming.

He’s owning it.

He’s learning that all this pain has something to say about him, first and foremost.

And once he sees that and names it before God, he is given a mark... a mark that will somehow protect him. It’s a strange thing, and we don’t know what the mark was or what it meant. But it seems as if somehow the mark of Cain carried both judgment and grace...

...both the honest reality of Cain’s pain(the rejection he’s felt, and the death he’s caused) and it’s a mark of God’s protection over him, which is to say, it’s a mark of profound grace.

Now, here’s the thing. We have no idea what “the mark of Cain” was... or what that looked like. Was it something you could see? Was it something spiritual? A protective presence? We don’t know.

But I imagine the mark had to somehow have a vertical dimension to it... because it is a recognition that Cain is not his own. There is a new connection to the Divine. Despite Cain’s deep wound, God has promised to protect him in all places at all times.

Maybe this vertical dimension is a reminder to Cain that despite how he feels, despite his perception of things... ***he is and has always been acceptable to God.*** Despite the difference between his fruit sacrifice and Abel's animal sacrifice, Cain, Cain's own self, was never rejected by God. For even now, after this great evil, ***God does not reject the one that cries out to God.***

In Cain's vulnerability,
he's learning that the shame he's carried has always been a lie.

Well, I imagine that mark had a **horizontal dimension** to it... reminding Cain about his connection to his fellow human begins... that even the relationships that have been broken can be healed...

if we will not allow our pain to entice us... or strike out within us,
...if we'll learn to practice vulnerability with each other.

A vertical dimension, and a horizontal dimension... intersecting in this mark... crossing right there on his forehead for all to see? Maybe. Or the mark, the cross piercing the center of his being, his heart... where only Cain remembers and God can see?

I don't know, but it is his cross to bear, to take up... his cross, that is both his judgment and his salvation... just as it is ours.

This mark of Cain is the beginning of the Christian journey, where finally we meet our brokenness... where we stop lying to God and to ourselves... and we pray just as Cain prayed, "**O God, this judgment is too much for me to bear...**"

Where we pray that ancient prayer, "**Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner...**"

...and in that place, the grace of God comes over us and into us... and marks us for eternity... so that death can no longer threaten us.

And finally we begin to trust... that we too are,
and have always been,
and always will be,
deeply beloved by God, despite what you have believed.

Despite the whispers you speak to yourself,
it's true: God both knows you fully, and loves you profoundly.

Amen.