

Cain

Rebecca Clancy

Sermon

Genesis 4:1-16, I John 3:11-18, Matthew 5:21-26

Shortly after the Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared that December 7, 1941 was a date that would “live in infamy.” Roosevelt was perceptive that certain dates indeed live in infamy, but the same could well be said of names. Certain names live in infamy. Cain is such a name; Cain – the first murderer, and it only adds to the infamy that one he murdered was his brother Abel.

Their start was promising enough, at least on the surface. Adam and Eve produced two sons, first Cain then Abel. Cain grew to be a farmer and Abel a shepherd, two respectable and mainstream professions -- almost as if to say today that one grew to be a doctor and the other a lawyer. But as life should have taught us all by now, things are seldom as they seem on the surface.

Cain was possessed of a low character. How do we know this? From the outcome, of course. He murdered his brother. People who murder anyone, much less their brother, very seldom do so in a way that is inconsistent with their character. No, it’s just the opposite. People who murder do so in a way *consistent* with their character. In my community, for instance, there was a recent murder. A woman left her husband, and he shot her to death. Now the murder was not inconsistent with his character. He was not a devoted husband and a model citizen who was driven in a sudden outbreak of insanity to murder his wife after she left him. She left him in the first place because he was the kind of man who would murder her. So it was with Cain. We may infer that Cain was possessed of a low character because he murdered his brother. We may safely read that back through the story. Despite how things seemed on the surface then, Cain was a scoundrel.

Doubtless Cain’s low character too had something to do with the fact that his offering was rejected. Both brothers made offerings to the Lord. Cain, as a farmer, naturally made his offering from the yield of the earth, and Abel as a shepherd made his from his flocks. But Cain’s offering was rejected. Most likely, the reason that his offering was rejected was because it was defective. Old Testament law amply warns against making defective offerings. You don’t, for instance, offer the Lord your ox that has grown too old to pull the plow, or your chicken that no longer lays, or your guard dog now gone in the teeth. You don’t attempt to kill, so to speak, two birds with one stone -- dumping your broken-down old animals, while at the same time fulfilling your religious obligation. So Cain probably offered moldy grain or some such. Or perhaps his offering was rejected for a different reason. Perhaps he made his offering with unclean heart. This too is warned against in Scripture. Per the apostle Paul, for instance, “The Lord loves a cheerful giver.” The bottom line is that it was doubtless Cain’s own fault that his offering was rejected.

And in rejecting Cain's offering, the Lord was taking a serious gamble with this man of a low character. The Lord was in effect withholding his blessing from Cain in order to force him to come to terms with his unrighteousness. Withholding one's blessing as a way of compelling righteousness is, as I said, very risky. The reason one withholds one's blessing in the first place is because the one seeking it has proved unworthy of it. He or she is *somehow* incapacitated, is *somehow* deficient. People who are somehow incapacitated or deficient aren't good candidates to rise to the occasion. Normally when one withholds one's blessing as a way of compelling righteousness, it simply creates a deadlock. One continues to withhold one's blessing, and the one from whom it is withheld continues in unrighteousness. But in this case it was even worse because, again, of Cain's low character.

Cain was angry. More, Cain was enraged. If he were a different person, he might have made apology and made amends, but he wasn't a different person. He was enraged, and too he was ashamed and humiliated, not just before the Lord but also before his younger brother. The oldest brother in the Old Testament held a position of great authority. He stood to inherit everything – not just the property but too the family name and lineage. For Cain to have failed where his brother succeeded was simply too much for him to bear, and certainly too much for him to live down.

And so Cain led his brother to a field and rose up against him and struck him dead. But even that twisted act did not bring him to his senses. His response was nothing along the lines of, "Dear Lord, what have I done?" Even when the Lord interrogated him directly, he refused to acknowledge his guilt -- and this was because he felt no guilt. He was defiant, and this should not be particularly surprising. There are common traits among people of low character. They tend to act true to form. And one trait is an impairment of conscience. Think for instance of Adolf Eichmann, the so called "architect of the Holocaust." Eichmann once declared he would "leap in his grave laughing" for the millions of Jews he killed. During his trial in Israel after his capture, his guilt became undeniable – countless eyewitnesses offered testimony, there accrued a mountain of documentary proof. And yet, his final words before his execution were, "Long live Germany".

But the really striking thing in all this is neither Cain's low character nor the murder. It is that the Lord let him off with so light a sentence. The Lord, who had cursed the ground beneath Adam's feet so that only by the sweat of his brow would he earn his bread, cursed the ground beneath Cain's even further. It would now yield nothing, leaving Cain a fugitive and wanderer upon the earth. A pretty light sentence, if you ask me. Yet, Cain had the temerity to protest it, hypocritically because it would place him at risk of being murdered. And so, the Lord lightened his already light sentence. He put a mark on Cain that would serve to protect him. Cain eventually resettled and bore a slew of sons, all of whom turned out to be men like their father. Yes, Cain is a name that lives in infamy, as well it should. Scoundrel is too kind a description for him.

So infamous is Cain's name that the evangelist John warns us against his example. "We must not be like Cain," writes John, "who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous...." And John warns us well. We must not be like Cain. Of course not. But, then, how could we be? We bear

him no likeness, no likeness whatsoever. John then continues... “And all who hate a brother or sister are murderers.” Uh, oh. In these words we may find trouble.

And come to think of it, someone else said something very similar to that. His name was Jesus of Nazareth – ‘You have heard it was said as of old, ‘You shall not kill’ and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother or sister shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother or sister shall be liable to Council.”

John writes that all who *hate* a brother or sister are murderers, and Jesus goes an extra mile. He declares that all who *are angry* at a brother or sister, who *even insult* a brother or sister are murders. But how could this be? Surely anger and insult, even hatred are not so bad as murder; and so much may be true, but it’s only a matter of degree. Hatred, anger, and insult all arise from a like inward disposition, a murderous disposition, a disposition we could call the Disposition of Cain.

What Jesus is saying may be difficult to accept, but he is undeniably right. When we act hatefully towards others, when we act in anger towards others, when we insult others -- whether we rise up against them and strike them dead, whether we murder them or not -- we are on the spectrum of murder. We are of the Disposition of Cain. We don’t enhance life, we diminish it. We don’t up-build life, we tear it down. We don’t give life, we take it. We don’t create life, we destroy it. We do violence unto another.

And hatred, anger, and insult take a profusion of forms. They include the sabotage of others’ hopes, aspirations, or self-realization. They include rumor mongering and gossip, or any words that fall from our lips that defame others. They include the discouragement or disregard of others out of selfish motives or insecurity or cowardice. They include the collection and perpetuation of grievances. They include the harboring of bigotry over others’ religion, the coddling of phobia over their sexual orientation, and the fanning of racism over the color of their skin. In all these ways we are of the Disposition of Cain.

What Jesus instead commends, and indeed offers us in his Spirit, is another disposition, his own disposition, what we could call the Disposition of Christ -- a disposition of divine love, which by some unfathomable mystery that lies at the very heart of the Godhead, extended even to those who hated and persecuted him.

Jesus, you know, was very canny, to my mind the canniest man ever to live. He was anything but naïve or sentimental or idealist or utopian. He knew what life is. He knew that life is a rat race. He knew it’s a jungle out there. He knew that it’s a struggle to survive. He knew that everyone is out to get you. He knew the caldron of malice that is human society, for he knew that human society is peopled by those of the Disposition of Cain. Jesus, in short, was a realist, and like all realists, Jesus was a pragmatist.

Jesus knew that human society will never be transformed if we respond to the Disposition of Cain with the Disposition of Cain. To the contrary, he knew that if we respond to the force of murder with the force of murder human society would only degenerate, as did Cain’s society down to Noah’s. You can’t fix problems, after all, with the same mentality that created them.

You can't achieve a new morality within the confines of the old moral order. Jesus knew that the Disposition of Cain could only be transformed by the Disposition of Christ, could only be transformed by divine love. There was no other way.

If then we want to transform our world, if we want to make Christ's difference in it, this is how we must proceed – in his spirit, by his spirit, and for his spirit – the spirit with which he has gifted everyone one of us. Amen.