

Broken
Genesis 4:1-9
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I am preaching a short series of sermons in which I hope to capture a bit of the story the scriptures tell about this world and the God who reigns over us. The first sermon was a few weeks ago and it was titled *Beautiful*. Using the wonderful story of creation we heard God's verdict that all creation is good. We also heard the incredible news that human beings, male and female, every single one of God's precious children, is created in the image of God. To understand the story of God and the children of God it is so important that we begin with the goodness of creation and the image of God that marks human life. But we cannot preach a sermon about *Beautiful* and stop there.

There is a word and there is a sermon that follows *Beautiful*. It is a word and it is a sermon filled with heartbreak. It is the word *Broken*. That is the sermon I am preaching this morning. It is enough to break your heart to know that Genesis one and two tell of God's beautiful creation, humans in the image of God, a garden where God walks with his beloved children in the cool of the evening, and yet by Genesis three the humans are listening to another voice, turning from God, casting blame and hiding in shame. And then today's passage is unveiled and we realize the life we live in this beautiful world is broken. Brother murders brother.

While I was thinking of this sermon on brokenness I opened up a book by Wendell Berry. The book is a series of stories about the fictional community he has brought to life in Kentucky, and the stories cover many years of the families. The first story in the book is set during the Civil War. This small community in Kentucky had not really sided with either the north or the south, and so they lived in fear pretty much anytime soldiers came through town. And because their small community was isolated from other communities by a great distance, visits from bands of soldiers carried with it the possibility of great violence and even death.

In the story a young girl from the country has gone into the town to watch over things for the family. She was all alone in the house when a wandering group of soldiers rode into town. North or south, she couldn't tell. Maybe they were renegades. But whatever they were they were trouble. One of the soldiers fired off a shot. The young girl was upstairs in her bedroom, looking out the window. She watched what unfolded. Reading the story, I kept waiting for disaster, for her to be spotted, for the men to invade her house, to ransack it, to cause harm to the house, or worse, harm to the young girl. The men ride slowly through town, not finding anything of interest. She continues to stare out the upstairs window, almost holding her breath, waiting for the troublemakers to leave town. The men have just about cleared the main street when right in front of the young girl's house one of the young men in the group looks up and sees her. He catches sight of her. She fights back panic. I anticipated horror. But instead of attacking the house, or attacking the young girl, the man simply says, "Get your ugly face out of that window."¹

I hope that story isn't a letdown for you. I hope you didn't need there to be more violence, a physical attack, something destroyed. Maybe because I was thinking about broken that story just about broke my heart. "Get your ugly face out of the window." What has happened to humanity? Once we knew this world was beautiful, once we walked with God in the cool of the evening, once we saw ourselves and others and saw the image of God in one another. How did we ever get to the place where soldiers who have killed countless times see young girls in bedroom windows and call them ugly. Wars, taunting, teasing, threats, insults, disregarding the precious gift of life that dwells in a fellow human being and calling them ugly, well that makes me think of one word, and that word is broken. This is not how God intended it to be.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" What a profound question from that son of Adam known as Cain. The answer is crucial. If the answer is *no* we are free to do what we want in regards to others, our brothers and sisters on this planet earth. If the answer is *yes* then we are no longer free to do what we want but we are obligated to be the keeper of others. The plain

¹ Wendell Berry, *A Place in Time*, p. 13.

truth is that Cain has already put his brother Abel to death. He answered *no* to being his brother's keeper. Over and over again in the pages of the Bible God will make it absolutely clear that we are obligated to one another, that we are the keepers of our brothers and sisters in this world.

Unfortunately, it seems that humans have failed time and time again to understand our obligation to others. Equally unfortunate is how successful we have been in ignoring our obligation, or disregarding our obligation. One could make a case that when we fail to be the keeper of our brother or sister it has a snowball effect. One act of disregard leads to a second and soon violence and vengeance reign supreme. We see that in Genesis chapter four, which begins with Cain striking his brother Abel dead, and ends with a descendant of Cain's boasting, "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then I am avenged seventy-seven times." From the seed of Cain's aggression it takes just five generations to explode to a vengeance that is seventy-seven times.

The snowball kept growing. Continuing in Genesis we find that God saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become. The psalmist laments that when the Lord looks down from heaven on human beings to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God, "All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Psalm 14:2,3) It is this very Psalm, along with an understanding of how thoroughly sin has infiltrated human existence that leads the Apostle Paul to write, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) It is precisely because the snowball had reached a critical mass that Jesus Christ entered this world. His explanation for why he came is offered in Luke 5. He has been criticized for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. In response he says, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Since we have already been alerted by the psalmist that no one is righteous, then it is pretty clear he came to call everyone who falls under the category of sinner. Friends, he came to call everyone. He came to a world that is broken. He came to bring a new way of living.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” There is little question how Jesus would answer that. The little episode I just referred to in Luke 5 has Jesus seeing a tax collector sitting at his tax booth. It would have been so easy for Jesus to walk on the other side of the street and ignore this tax collector named Levi. By all convention Jesus was not obligated to give one bit of attention to this tax collector. Unlike our time when tax collectors are beloved members of the community (wink, wink, note the irony), in those days they were bad characters, despised by just about everyone....despised by just about everyone except Jesus. He takes one look at that tax collector named Levi and says, “Follow me.” This leads to one of the most happily strange episodes in the bible. Levi not only follows Jesus, he holds a banquet at his house and invites all of his friends to come and meet Jesus. Since Levi ran with other tax collectors, the group that gathers at his house is a group made up of tax collectors and “sinners.” And Jesus is right there in the mix eating and drinking with this motley crew. Cain couldn’t stomach the existence of his brother Abel, but Jesus, Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners. He felt obligated to enter fully into relationship with them, so much that he sat down at table and shared a meal.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” I wonder if that was wandering through the mind of Jesus when a leper, a leper covered with sores that filled his skin, fell with his face to the ground and begged Jesus, “If you are willing you can make me clean.” Was Jesus his brother’s keeper? He reached out his hand and touched the man with leprosy. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean.” Friends, do you realize how important it is that we recognize Jesus is God’s one and only Beloved Son? We believe God visited this earth, that God became incarnate, born into this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And while Jesus, God’s beloved Son walked this earth, it is almost as if person by person he answered the question Cain wanted to avoid, to disregard, to ignore. Jesus was his brother’s keeper. The lame, the leper, the losers, the lost, the sick, the hungry, the blind, the widows, the mourning, the seeking, the list goes on and on.

Read Luke 7 about a woman who enters a Pharisees house and to great shame and rebuke and judgment washes the feet of Jesus with her tears and anoints him with oil and just watch how Jesus treats her. Jesus doesn't call her ugly. He just doesn't do that. He doesn't shame her. He doesn't judge her. He loves her and he welcomes her and he even affirms her for her great love. When he encounters a man possessed by demons and shackled in chains and living in true bondage, he doesn't jump back in his boat and exit stage right. He feels a responsibility for that man, he heals that man, Jesus delivers that man. Jesus was his brother's keeper, and if we ever are trying to avoid our responsibility or get ourselves off the hook and we hold out our hands like Cain and ask, "Am I my brother's keeper," well we better understand that Jesus stands in marked contrast to Cain. The hands of Jesus are open, the hands of Jesus are spread out, the hands of Jesus are reaching out, the hands of Jesus are welcoming, the hands of Jesus are embracing, the hands of Jesus are saying, "Of course I am my brother's keeper," and Jesus is saying, "Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."

One of my favorite statements about Jesus is that he came for the least, the last, and the lost. Was Jesus his brother's keeper? When someone says Jesus came for the least, the last, and the lost, what else are they saying except that Jesus is his brother's keeper. We were doing a study with a group of people and it involved some journaling and reflection. We had been talking about Jesus coming for the least, the last, and the lost. One woman kept thinking of Jesus, how he really did take time for people. As that phrase about the least, the last, and the lost was running through her mind she thought of a story she had heard and so she wrote that story out in her journal. It is the story about a beach littered with starfish. You might have heard the story before. The starfish are destined to die unless they are returned to the sea, but the thousands of starfish made that an unrealistic hope. Nevertheless, one lone person was walking along the seashore, bending down, and one by one, picking up starfish and throwing them into the sea. Someone said to her, "Why are you doing that? There are thousands of starfish dying on this beach. What difference does it make if you pick up one starfish?" Holding a starfish in her hand, she said, "It makes a difference for this one." Then

after throwing that starfish in the sea, she bent down and picked up another.

The story about the starfish doesn't tell everything about the gospel. But it does tell us something, and it tells us something very important. Jesus Christ came to seek and to save the lost. Jesus Christ knew he was his brother's keeper. And if Jesus was walking along a sea shore littered with starfish, I think everyone of us here knows what he would do. A while after my friend wrote about the starfish in her journal I used that story in a sermon. Now that story has been told many, many times. With a story that has been told many times there is the danger that people roll their eyes when they hear it. But when you talk about the least, the last, and the lost...when you talk about how Jesus was his brother's keeper, I think that story is helpful.

A guy used to walk his dog by our church in Houston. He walked by on his way to a park. He walked by for years and never stopped by the church. Then one day he walked by and there was a little sign out that said, "Adult Vacation Bible School." Adults going to Vacation Bible School? That got his attention. He showed up, did some crafts, worked on some projects, heard a few speakers, sang some songs, and before you knew it he had found a new church home. He was the most kind and loving guy. He bent over backwards to help others. After he had been a member for a while he told us his wife had cancer. She couldn't get out much, and so he was taking care of her, loving her, and praying that she would get better. His wife was sick and couldn't get out, so he would bring home an audio tape of the sermon from our church and they would listen together. His wife didn't get better. She passed away and his heart was broken.

One day he was telling me about listening to the sermons on tape and he said, "Her favorite sermon was the one about the starfish." I guess when you have cancer, and your health is failing, you begin to understand just how broken life can be. And then in the midst of the brokenness you hear a simple story about someone picking up starfish and you get a glimmer of hope. And then to know that there was a man named Jesus, God's Beloved Son, who came and didn't just pick up starfish, he picked up broken and shattered lives and put them back

together. All of a sudden that story hits home in a powerful and a personal way. Does God care about me? I feel broken and alone. Does God care about me? And there is Jesus, his brother's keeper, picking up broken lives and putting them back together.

I am preaching about *Broken* today because in a real way we are all faced with the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" And my guess is each one of us has failed to say yes in countless ways. My guess is we have all fallen short in one or another in being one who is a keeper of our brother, our sister.

There is a day I will never forget. It is a day I will forever associate with Broken. In 7th grade I attended Woodrow Wilson Junior High. In the middle of our courtyard was a big statue of someone riding a horse. Our nickname was the Warriors, so maybe the horse had something to do with being a warrior. Anyway, one day right near the statue there was a huge crowd of kids gathered. They were all packed together so I couldn't see what was going on. All I could see was that every few minutes a sweatshirt would fly high into the air. As it rose, the crowd of kids would roar with laughter. I wanted to see what was happening that was so funny, so I pushed my way forward.

In the middle was a girl I recognized. I saw her around school. She was in the special education classes. She was born with something that caused her to be different, to learn slower, to look sort of strange. Someone had taken her sweatshirt. She chased after them, and so the person threw it up in the air. Someone else caught it. A game of keep away got started, a crowd gathered, and now the poor girl was frantically spinning in circles while all the *normal* kids roared with laughter. Guess what I did when I figured out what was going on? Inside, my stomach was turning because I knew this was cruel and mean. Guess what I did?

There is an old saying that if you want to get along, you go along. As a young man in seventh grade, I wanted to get along. So I went along. I laughed with everyone else, because I didn't want to be different. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be cool. I look back on that day with deep regret. I look back on that day with deep shame. Of course I have anger at the kids who were doing the teasing and taunting. But most of all, I

am angry with myself. I chose to ignore the needs of this little girl, this girl who did not fit in, this girl who was excluded. As long as I belonged, as I had a place, I was willing to let her suffer alone on the outside. Was I my sister's keeper? No, in a real way I fell in line with the way a broken world treats others.

I am so thankful for another day in my seventh grade year. On that day I was at a rally. Our junior high youth leaders found out one of Billy Graham's associates was preaching at an outdoor revival. It was at an area high school and so we all went to the rally and spread out on the football field. The man preaching talked about a broken world. He talked about how each one of us was broken. In a powerful way God spoke to me that day. I felt my own brokenness. That day with the girl with special needs and the teasing and taunting was not the only day I turned my back on my neighbor. So the man talked about brokenness and it home with me. He told about how Jesus came to seek and save the lost, how he came for the broken. But then he did more than talk about how Jesus loved the leper, the lame, the least, the last and the lost.

This man began to talk about a journey Jesus made to the cross. On the cross Jesus did something that confronted the brokenness of this world head on. Instead of putting himself and his own needs first, the Son of God willingly laid down his life for the sins of this world, for the brokenness of this world. I don't believe we will ever completely understand the full implications of the death of Jesus on the cross, but somehow the offering of his life met the brokenness and sin and evil of this world and defeated sin and Satan and brought healing and life out of all the brokenness of this world. When God raised Jesus from the grave on that day life conquered death. Everything that was old was wiped out and a new life was given, a life that is filled with the Spirit, a life that is transformed through being in a relationship with Jesus Christ. On that day the man speaking asked if anyone was feeling the weight of their brokenness and wanted to find healing, wholeness, and new life in Jesus. On that day I walked forward and I prayed for God's forgiveness. I asked Jesus to be the Lord of my life and the Savior of my soul.

I truly believe that faith in Jesus Christ brings forgiveness and new life, that what is broken is made whole. I believe that Jesus Christ will one day bring that forgiveness and new life to all creation, and that this world will be made completely whole. And I believe that as Jesus Christ brings healing and wholeness to our lives, one of the most powerful ways we demonstrate our faith is in the way we change the question of Cain. No longer do we ask, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” No, filled with the love of Jesus Christ we commit to live the way he lived. Now we say with bold conviction, “I am my brother’s keeper.”