

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?
Genesis 4: 1-16 September 15, 2013
The Church of the Covenant

A little boy was overheard praying –“Lord, if you can’t make me a better boy, don’t worry about it. I’m having a great time as I am.” And then he prayed –“Lord, I know I’m supposed to love everyone, but can I get an exception for my little brother?” The question posed by our scripture, “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” is always answered, “YES”.

The story we just read from Genesis 4 of Cain and Abel in the Bible is instructive. It comes right after God has created the earth and all that is within it, including humanity, and has declared it all to be “*very good*”. (*Genesis 1: 31*) Then immediately God places humanity into a perfect environment, The Garden of Eden, and sin and fallen-ness intervenes, Adam and Eve have but one simple, little commandment and it is not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the very thing they are not to do, that is the very thing they do. God confronts Adam, “*Who told you that you were naked?*” and Adam sins again by trying to shift blame from himself to Eve by saying, “The woman beguiled me.” And then Eve said, “*The serpent beguiled me.*” “The devil made me do it!” (*Genesis 3: 13*) Another story, the little boy shook an old Bible and a large, pressed leaf fell from within its pages. He ran and said, “Mommy, Mommy, I just found Adam’s clothing!” But Adam’s need for a fig leaf was really about his attempt to shift blame and responsibility from himself to Eve and Eve from herself to the serpent. No, Adam and Eve, you are the ones who are responsible for the fall of mankind; you are the ones whose sin lost us paradise; no one beguiled you but your own fallen, sinful nature. Alas, we are sons and daughters of Adam. The next story in Genesis is the story of Cain slaying his brother, Abel. The story continues to unravel –that which started in creation and the Garden of Eden now devolves into lying, dissembling, passing of blame and responsibility and murder, the shedding of innocent blood of the creation God called “good”.

So lying, dissembling, the passing of responsibility on to someone else, and violence that leads to the shedding of innocent blood are the signs and symbols of a fallen humanity apart from God. God wants humanity to be good and for us to dwell in paradise; but our sinful nature kicks us out of the Garden and takes us away from close, intimate “walking with God in the Garden” kind of personal relationship with our Creator. Cain offers an offering of grain to God but God does not accept it; Abel offers an offering of the first lamb without blemish and God accepts it. Therein, is the hatred that led to murder planted into the heart of Cain. As the Bible says: “*So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.*” (*Genesis 4: 5*) The invidious comparison between the two brothers planted a seed of anger and bitterness in the heart of Cain against his brother, Abel. So Cain concocts an insidious plot. With malice aforethought and planning he invites his brother to accompany him out into the field alone where there are no witnesses and then he rises up and slays Abel, and kills his brother. Anger is always the step cousin of murder; it is why Jesus equates the two in the Sermon on the Mount. By the way, there is always a witness and the witness is God. God will not be mocked. There is always justice, if not in this life then in the next. So the Lord comes to Cain and asks: “*Where is Abel your brother?*” Perhaps even in the question God is suggesting the close brotherly relationship that should be present, but isn’t. And Cain responds: “I do not know...(Of course he knows exactly where Abel is for he killed him and plotted and buried the body to hide behind a fig leaf of his own devising!) but then he adds: “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” (*Genesis 4: 9*) In effect he is saying, “GOD, I am not responsible for anyone other than myself.” I am not accountable, I am not responsible, I owe no duty or obligation to my brother –Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” And of course God, who knows the thoughts and deeds of men from afar, who knows the intentions of our heart and the depth of the fallen-ness of our nature, God says to Cain: “*The voice of*

your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." The shedding of innocent blood is an abomination in the sight of the God who created that life and called it GOOD.

You know, there's a lot more violence in Washington than I recall when I was here some 20 years ago. There's a lot more innocent blood crying out to God from the ground. Am I my brother's keeper? Is it my responsibility to create such a community in which to live in which random acts of violence do not happen? Or am I just to say, Oh, it must be someone else's responsibility, let's blame the police or the government, or the person who committed the act. Eve did it and so she is responsible not me. The devil made someone do it so no one is accountable. I'm just going to move further and further out into the countryside where I'll be safe, I'll install a state of the art security system so I'll be safe, maybe I'll even live in a gated community where I'll be safe. Am I my brother's keeper? Do I bear some part of the responsibility for random violence in my community? There is no safe place to hide, beloved. Evil triumphs when good men do nothing. And innocent blood is crying out from the ground calling us to do something about it.

I'm sure we all read with interest the story of the robbery at Giant Eagle a while back. A gunman came to the Giant Eagle where I shop and robbed it. But another man by the name of Vincent Kelly decided that this was not going to happen in his city and in his Giant Eagle. So he followed the robber doggedly and finally, it is believed, was literally hanging onto the getaway car when the robber pulled out a gun and shot him dead. Why did Vinnie Kelly do it? I've been part of several discussions where people say something like: "It was so foolish. He should have just let the robber get away. No reason to lose your life over something like this." I think courage is just what you do in the heat of the moment without thinking everything through too much. I think what we are made of shines through in those moments when we don't have time to think we just have time to act. Don't you think Vincent Kelly just sort of was offended by the thought of someone robbing his Giant Eagle in his community? Not here. Maybe in Pittsburgh but not in Washington. Not here. Maybe somewhere else. But not in my community. Not where I live. Evil triumphs when good men do nothing so evil was not going to triumph in his community. So he took a stand, some think it foolish, and lost his life in the bargain. No reason to lose your life over something as trivial as escalating random acts of violence. No reason to care. No reason to take responsibility (It was the bank's responsibility or Giant Eagle's or the government's or a security guard's, it's not your responsibility, Vinnie.) Am I my brother's keeper? And Vincent Kelly responded, "YES, it is." And he answered the question with his life and with his blood.

I am glad when the Lord Jesus was confronted with essentially the same question, Am I my brother's keeper?< that HE responded yes. He could have said, "O all these people who are fallen and sinful are unworthy of me intervening; O why should the Son of God have to perish for the likes of these?: O why should the best of God sacrifice Himself for a people who won't appreciate it. Instead, Jesus identified HIMSELF with us; Jesus took responsibility for sin He Himself did not commit; Jesus laid down His life for brothers and sisters He had never even met. How foolish to care. How foolish to intervene. How foolish to die for a community. How foolish to care enough to so give of yourself. How foolish to be your brother's keeper. Except it was through the stand Jesus took, it was through the willing shedding of His innocent blood, that humanity was awakened, and sin and death and violence overthrown. It is by the sacrifice of a person or of a people that the evil of violence is overturned and that Washington becomes more like the Garden of Eden and less like Dodge City.

Why am I optimistic for the city of Washington? Why is this an inherently optimistic sermon? Because I know that the city of Washington is filled with people just like Vincent Kelly. And I'm looking out at them right now. And good people who will not tolerate evil, willing to do whatever it takes to reclaim

our community, plus the love and the power of the Lord Jesus Christ equals victory. God triumphs when good people do something. It is God in action. It is MISSION POSSIBLE. It is what the Lord is calling us to do and to be as a people. When Jesus comes to town and when good people step forward and say “enough is enough” it is then that no more Vincent Kellys will go to Giant Eagle thinking they are picking up a loaf of bread and instead have to lay down their life for the community that they want there to be.

Am I my brother’s keeper? Am I responsible for my community and world and the people around me? I guess how involved or disengaged you are this fall at The Church of the Covenant will be your answer. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*