

**Texts: Genesis 4:1-12; Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46**

**The Sunday morning Bible study group is reading through the book of Genesis. Last Sunday we read chapter 4, the story of Cain and Abel. I was surprised to learn that Genesis 4 does not appear in the lectionary, which means that ordinarily we would never hear this story in the context of worship. But this morning we need to hear it. So I have substituted it for our first reading.**

**This is the story of how murder and violence enter human society. Cain and his brother Abel both bring their offerings to the Lord. The Lord accepts Abel's offering of the fatlings of his flock, but rejects Cain's offering of the first fruits of the ground. So Cain lures Abel out to a field and kills him. When the Lord asks Cain where his brother is, his response is this: "I do not know – am I my brother's keeper?"**

**Am I my brother's keeper? Questions like this can be found all through the Bible. Even though a particular question is part of a particular story, we understand the question to go beyond that story. We understand the question to be addressed to us as well.**

**Am I my brother's keeper?**

**This week I find it necessary to reflect on the Biblical beginnings of violence. Because this week we have been confronted with violence on a scale we can't quite wrap our minds around – a gunman on a high floor of a Las Vegas hotel, shooting into a crowd a quarter of a mile away with weapons made for the battlefield. This is the legacy that we have inherited from Cain and Abel.**

**In an article in The Nation magazine this past summer, author Naomi Klein suggested that the stories that we tell have consequences for our common life together. She wrote that "where we have come to is the culmination of a great many dangerous stories**

**that our culture has been telling for a long time. That greed is good. That the market rules. That money is what matters most. That white men are better than the rest. That the natural world is there for us to pillage. That the vulnerable deserve their fate and the 1 percent deserve their golden towers. That we are surrounded by danger and should only look after our own. That there is no alternative to any of this.”**

**When that is the narrative that governs your life, nothing else matters but taking what you can get. Nothing else matters but looking out for Number 1. Nothing else matters but winning at all costs.**

**When that is the narrative that governs your life, why not bring 23 battlefield weapons into a hotel room, break out the windows and start shooting people at a concert? You can't actually see any of them. Their humanity makes no difference to you. They are simply targets for your rage.**

**Am I my brother's keeper?**

**The Hebrew word that is translated “keeper” is ha-shomer. It has the connotation of protection, preservation, keeping watch, having charge of. It is used to talk about livestock and sheep. It is not about possession, but about care and feeding, making sure that the animal thrives. When God created the earth and all the animals and plants that inhabit it, God gave humanity the responsibility to take care of it. Creation is not ours to exploit. It's the same with people. The story of Cain and Abel demonstrates our responsibility to care for others. God warns Cain that he had better curb his anger and resentment toward Abel – that sin is lurking at the door and he has the choice to either master it or allow it to overtake him.**

**And what about that other loaded word – brother. Am I my brother’s keeper? Who do you imagine your brothers and sisters to be? It is only the ones who are closest to you, your family? Does brotherhood extend down the block to the neighbors that you know, the ones you are fond of? What about the neighbors you don’t know? What about the people who live on the other side of the tracks? What about those who live on the other side of the world?**

**Genesis does not tell us how Cain killed his brother Abel. But I imagine that it was with his hands. In the millennia that have come and gone since this story was written, we humans have perfected the skill of killing each other. There is no more need to put your hands on the person you want to kill. We have invented weapons that can kill dozens or hundreds or thousands at a time and from a distance: machine guns, cruise missiles, nerve gas, atomic bombs.**

**This morning’s gospel reading also contains scenes of violence. In Jesus’ parable, the tenant farmers first kill the slaves who come to collect the produce, and then finally they kill the landowner’s son. We have become so numb to violence that the words hardly even register. The difference between this parable and the others that we have read in the past few weeks is this: Jesus does not begin by saying that this parable illustrates the kingdom of heaven. Far from it. Jesus speaks in symbols, but it is fair to interpret that God is the landowner, the religious leaders are the tenants and the Son of God is – well, the son. And the violent actions of the tenant farmers will be punished. We may take his words as exaggeration, but those of us who know the rest of the story know that the chief priests and Pharisees were indeed involved in putting Jesus to death.**

**Am I my brother’s keeper?**

**Jesus speaks pointedly about the responsibilities of leadership in this parable. In his metaphorical way, he lets the chief priests and Pharisees know that they are not caring for God's vineyard, that they will reap what they sow and that their actions will have consequences.**

**Because the vineyard does not ultimately belong to them – to the Pharisees or chief priests or to anyone else. The answer to the question “Am I my brothers’ keeper?” ought to be “yes.” How we treat the land, how we treat God’s creation and everything that inhabits it, how we treat each other as human beings – it all is determined by the narrative that governs our life. Is it the story of a zero-sum game, where the winners deserve to take it all and the losers are left with whatever crumbs they can find? Or is it the story of being stewards, caretakers, protectors, and keepers of a world where every single person, no matter how close by or far away, is a brother.**

**Am I my brother’s keeper?**

**Jesus did not discriminate. He ate and drank with both the Pharisees and the tax collectors. He healed the elite daughter of a synagogue leader and the untouchable leper. He fed 5,000 people without asking where they were from or what they did for a living. He came to bring you abundant, overflowing life. He came to redeem you from the power of sin and death and free you to live in a new way. He came to change your narrative from violence to non-violence, from wealth to poverty, from power to powerlessness, from selfishness to selfless service, from pride to humility, from indifference to love, from cruelty to compassion, from vengeance to reconciliation, from war to peace, from killing enemies to loving enemies.**

**It’s an entirely new story and an entirely new life, being your brother’s keeper.**