

## **My Brother's Voice**

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“And the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother?’  
And Cain answered, ‘I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’”  
Genesis 4:9

Somewhere in the underbrush of creation the Spirit of God moved in the coolness of the day – in search of a heart that had grown cold. The offspring of Eden were living in a world where paradise was a faint memory and perfection an empty dream, and in that world between paradise and perfection Cain rose up and killed his brother Abel – death was the tragic consequence of jealous rage. But the crime for which God came to hold him accountable was the tragic lack of responsibility for the relationship that had made them brothers in the first place. *Where is your brother?*

*I don't know*, replied Cain with defiant indifference, *Am I my brother's keeper?* And then that eternal silence – you know, the kind of silence in which we wonder what God is thinking, even though we somehow already know -- and then the inevitable answer of the ages: *Yes, I hold each of you responsible for all of you, and all of you accountable for each of you. After all, you are my family!*

It has become a moral principle – being our brother's keeper – but the Bible doesn't leave it there. It goes on to reveal it as the spiritual tragedy – Oh let's call it what it is, *spiritual holocaust* –for the Bible goes on to describe in rather graphic detail how God can hear the brother's voice crying out from the blood stained earth. And the problem we all have, once we see that biblical image of our broken humanity, is that we can no longer be deaf or insensitive to the voice of our brother, to the voice of our sister, crying out from the earth.

Centuries passed, and Cain's crime of violence and of indifference multiplied in every culture and in every age. During that time, some tried to be responsible for certain types of brothers, others learned how to be there for some kinds of sisters, but everybody being responsible for everybody was just too vague a concept to imagine much less to accomplish. God's expectations for our responsibility needed to be clarified, more accurately defined, and what better time to do that than when the Only Begotten Son of God walked upon the earth! That's when we all – when civilization – hired a lawyer to pose the question: *Who is my neighbor?*

To assume that that lawyer did not represent all of us is to miss the point of the very passage of scripture that was meant to save us from ourselves. He was the embodiment of human nature asking of Divine nature: *Just how far do you expect us to go in being there for each other. The world's a big place! Let's be reasonable. Who do you expect us to be responsible for?*

(I just ended a sentence with a preposition! And every time I do that I just love to watch my eighth grade English teacher roll over in her grave. And now you can see her too!)

To answer the question, the Son of God took us all to a mountain pass between Jerusalem and Jericho. That's really quite amazing, when you think of it – before high definition television and interactive media – he took not only his own listeners but all of posterity with him to a place where a man had been robbed and beaten and left to die by the side of the road. And we are invited to watch – (let's move it now to the present tense, to see it happening again, only this time with our own interactive viewing experience).

See! ...a priest approaches, and our focus moves from the poor fellow left to die by the side of the road to the priestly figure who looks strangely familiar, not by face, but by mannerism. There is a pious bounce to his stride and his mind is clearly concerned with heavenly matters even though his feet walk upon the earth. And just as we begin to recognize some of the mannerisms we might have seen in the mirror, we notice his eyes shift to the side, as he suddenly realizes that life in the real world is not as pleasant as he imagines it to be in glory. For a moment we see him struggle with the challenge of living in this world as opposed to dreaming of life in another...and then he moves on by, with eyes fixed upon Jerusalem as though he were being drawn on by nobler purpose.

As he assigns the plight of another to his own peripheral vision, to the margins of his mind, our minds recoil: "My God, are our flaws always that obvious in your eyes?" But look! Another comes, plan B, a Levite. God always has a backup plan, we muse. Surely one so versed in the moral law, with a highly developed sense of ethical responsibility, will know just what to do!

Yet we watch in anguish as he stops, calculates the risks and the liabilities, evaluates the responsibilities and vulnerabilities, and then in his mind draws a circumference around the plight of another, walking the perimeter so as not to leave his footprints in the sand. Again the mind recoils, "Enough, my Lord, do we have to see ourselves reflected any

more?" But we asked the question, and Jesus was not finished with the answer!

The Lord holds our gaze upon that mountain pass until we see a despised Samaritan approaching – just minding his own business until he comes upon the man left to die by the side of the road, and the plight of another becomes his business! As we watch from some exalted moment, we realize that this despised Samaritan doesn't care whether the man by the side of the road is rich or poor, of his race or of another, whether he is well educated or ignorant (he doesn't even care if the man is gay or straight!). He just kneels down beside that wounded body as though it were an altar to the living God. And as he worships by tending the wounds of another, only then are we allowed to look away and look within – for the answer to the question, *Who is my neighbor?*

And the answer is: *You learn who our neighbor is by being one! We learn who our neighbor is by being one!* And suddenly words like *neighbor, brother, sister*, are not stereotypes to be assigned or definitions to be fashioned, but life experiences in which we prove ourselves family to each other!

It means among other things that there is no such thing as theoretical justice. If moral virtue has any merit at all it needs to roll up its sleeves and get its hands dirty trying to apply itself to life in the real world. It means that theological purity and ecclesiastical piety are worthless unless and until they find ways for us to prove ourselves neighbor to each other without exception! It means that the church must not only listen for the whispered voice of God but must also hear the cries of brother and sister, of neighbor, beyond whatever boundaries we try to set on God's compassion.

We need not go to the underbrush of creation to hear our brother's voice, or find that mountain pass beyond Jerusalem to see our neighbor's plight. The desert sands along our southern border are also stained with the blood of our Mexican brothers and sisters who perished in their quest for *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. Oh, I know the issues of immigration and border security make it a difficult social and economic and political problem to solve, and it may take us ten years to solve it. But here's the problem as I see it: God can hear the voices of those who are perishing for they are crying out from our own desert sands.

It is also true of Reservation Lands. There is not a person in this room who would not re-live our tragic history with native peoples in a more creative and compassionate way, but we cannot. Yet God still hears them crying for equality, for healthcare, for employment, for education and food and shelter (and some for sobriety). They are a beautiful multicultural

people with great variety of insight and spiritual experience, yet we get so caught up in our parish responsibilities and daily routines that – well, in their experience of us – we pass them by on the other side.

We are a very diverse and beautiful presbytery, divided by political allegiance, by economic disparity, by theological perspective, by sexual orientation – even by diverse spiritual experience. And the problem as I see it is that no matter where we draw the line in the sand, or build a wall in society, or establish boundaries of propriety in our churches, the fact remains that God still expects us to find ways to prove ourselves neighbor, brother, sister to each other! After all, we are family!

Following a perfect Lord through an imperfect world is not easy, but it is the greatest adventure of all. And in my humble opinion, the number one reason for new church development and old church renewal is not to run competition for the other sacred traditions of the planet. They are all beautiful and have much to offer. Nor is it to convert the world to a single mindset. (After all, in a world where no two snowflakes are alike, what could possibly be more boring than two people who think alike!)

In my mind, the best reason for new church starts and old church renewals is to awaken a passion in all of humankind for proving ourselves neighbor to each other – for claiming the great privilege of being brother and sister in the family of God.

You know, there are times, if we listen carefully, when we can still hear the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day! ...And then that whispered voice which every soul can recognize: "*Where is your brother?*"

And sometimes...sometimes I just don't know what to say...when I pray.