

Cain – The Character of Some Faith

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“And the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ ... ‘What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.’

“And Cain said to the Lord, ‘My iniquity is greater than I can bear!’

“And the Lord said to him, ‘Therefore whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.’ And the Lord set a mark on Cain, lest anyone finding him should kill him.” (Genesis 4:9,10,13 & 15)

In January we had a series of sermons on self: – self esteem, self-denial, and in general the feeling that life is our own. Then in February the general topic was others: – the teachings about real charity toward others, and how to love others even when we really don’t like them. These sermons are all up on our website or you can get printed copies any time.

Now we are turning our attention to the topic of faith. What is true faith and how does it work? Is it, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews said, “the substance of things *hoped for*, the evidence of things *not seen*” (Heb. 11:1)? Or is it actually an awareness of something very real and *present*, a kind of *spiritual sight*? What is the *purpose* of faith? And what is the relationship between faith and charity, or faith and good works?

It is very common in the Word (the Bible) to find stories and even statements of wisdom or poetry presented in a sort of dualistic form. For example we read about food and drink, sun and rain, love and wisdom, justice and judgment... and in many stories we read of relationships between husbands and wives, priests and kings, or two brothers – sometimes even twins, like Jacob and Esau. Wherever we see dualities like this we can know that they represent the two aspects of God’s presence with us, that is, His love and His wisdom, either in the world around us or in our own minds. Justice, for example, has to do with love or mercy, whereas judgment has to do with wisdom, truth or facts. Priests represent Divine love, Kings the rule of law. Jacob represents our response to the truth in wisdom, reasoning, and all the powers of thought, whereas Esau represents the things that have to do with will: goodness, love, spontaneity, and affection.¹

In this same way in Genesis Cain represents faith and Abel charity. So it is a powerful, symbolic thing that we cannot get four chapters into Divine Revelation before Cain KILLS Abel and then tries to avoid taking responsibility. What a sad commentary on our spiritual lives! And what a challenge to our understanding of the order of life in general. Cain and Abel start out together, Cain the firstborn, and they both offer sacrifices to the Lord. Interestingly, Cain’s offering is “of the fruit of the ground” and Abel’s “of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat.” And the Lord respects Abel’s offering but not Cain’s. So then, we read, “Cain was very angry,” and this anger eventually spilled over into the murder of his brother.

What, then, does this represent in our lives? Does faith come before charity in us? Is it jealous?

¹ Note, these are the two faculties psychologists call the cognitive and the affective.

Does it overwhelm and destroy charity? Can it live or provide for life without charity? These are all questions raised by the story of Cain and Abel – questions we will try to address now.

Some say faith is *everything* in spiritual life. Martin Luther, for example, reacting to the abuses of the Catholic Church decided nearly 500 years ago that salvation comes by grace through faith - *and faith alone* - in the merit of Christ who suffered and died to provide a vicarious atonement for the sins of the whole human race. But if this is so, why does the Lord repeatedly emphasize throughout the Gospels and Revelation that we must take responsibility for our own lives, and that we *are* judged according to our *works*?

The truth is that faith and charity are meant to work together, just as Cain and Abel might have worked together. So what happened?

Well, in the story we aren't told what Cain did that caused God not to respect him and his offering, but we do know this: "the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door'" (Gen. 4:6-7). The unavoidable conclusion is that he had not done well. And then in spite of the warning he did even worse, killing his brother.

But what is this about in our lives? What *is* faith, and how does it work?

Curiously, the word for faith in Hebrew is *amün*, the root of which is the same as "amen," meaning "it is so." And the word in the Greek of the New Testament is *pistis*, from which we get the word, epistemology, the study of knowledge, or how we know what we know. So it translates as persuasion, or confidence or assurance, all of which comes from seeing and knowing that a thing is so. The definition of faith given in our teachings therefore is "an internal acknowledgment of truth," or "*the acknowledgment that a thing is so because it is true*" (D. Faith #1 & 2), all of which implies some understanding, or at least knowledge. This is why we say that faith is *not* blind, as some would like us to think. Of course it includes things we can't see with our *natural* eyes, but we *can* and *must* see them with our spiritual eyes – the eyes of our mind – or the faith really isn't our own, it's just taking somebody else's word for it. In fact believing is seeing, and "seeing *is* believing."

Now it's just common sense that faith in our lives must precede charity because otherwise we would have no idea how to behave charitably. First we learn, then we do. Indeed, the word, Cain, means acquisition – and not just because Adam gained a son, but because Cain symbolizes the acquisition of knowledge. But if a person learns just for the sake of learning, or in order to feel important, or in order to take advantage of other people, then faith does not lead to charity, it leads to arrogance and abuse. In fact charity is the first thing to suffer and die, and then faith also becomes "a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth," that is a concession to mere thought without a commitment to anything except itself. So Cain goes out from the presence of God and dwells in the land of Nod, a play on the Hebrew word for vagabond, or wanderer – which on a spiritual level suggests a sort of intellectual nomad living by his wits and ingenuity.

In the end, of course, he settles down and builds a city, which he names after his son, Enoch. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The point here is that when a person is first entering into the spiritual life, or as some might say, when he is first becoming a Christian, all the emphasis is on

faith, that is, learning, knowing, understanding and accepting – being persuaded about the good news of salvation by the Lord. Whether a person is “born again” or just coming into his own as a young adult, this acknowledgment is the main thing, seemingly the only thing that matters. His or her spiritual life is all about knowing something and believing it, and when good works are mentioned they are dismissed as irrelevant – useful, to be sure, but irrelevant to the matter of salvation, lest we do something good and take credit for that good rather than acknowledging the Lord as our Savior.

This is not just a Protestant or Evangelical Church problem, by the way. We have it in our own church when we think that simply knowing and believing all the wonderful truths the Lord has revealed in our many books about heaven and hell or Divine Providence or the spiritual meaning of the Word somehow make us better than others or more qualified for Divine respect. Shame on us. “All religion is of life, and the life of religion is to do what is good” (DLW #1). Truth only teaches *what good is to be done*. Cain and Abel are supposed to work together!

So let’s go back to what we might call Cain’s “original sin.” What went wrong in the first place, that caused the Lord not to respect him or his offering? Again, we don’t know exactly, but we do know that his offering was “of the fruit of the ground” as distinct from Abel’s, which was “of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat.” What’s the difference?

Well, “ground” in the Word has a specific meaning or symbolism referring to the basis or foundation of our spiritual life. In Hebrew it is “adamah,” from which we get the name, Adam, because he was *made* from “the dust of the ground” (Gen. 2:7). This foundation, again, is faith in the knowledge that teaches us how to live. And an offering obviously is an act of worship, and so represents worship in general. Therefore what we have in the offering of Cain is the worship and life of faith *apart from charity* (AC #346), faith that claims priority and wants recognition no matter what the cost, faith that feels superior and looks down on others’ forms of worship.

In contrast Abel’s offering represents the tender innocence of a pure affection for the Lord leading directly to the good of life. That Cain despises his brother’s offering is symbolic of our own contempt of such innocent, “unenlightened” affection, which can often seem naive and foolish. If only faith and charity could work together – helping and supporting, honoring each other! – what a different world we would have.

But, after all, we are born natural and we have to *become* spiritual; we are born self-centered and we have to *become* other-centered. The innocence of infancy, the charity of the early church in us doesn’t last long. The word for Abel means breath, and like a breath this aspect of our life is transitory, stifled by the hard knocks and cynicism of the world, overwhelmed by the demands of thought and reason. And when it is lost there is only one way left for the church, that is, the spiritual life, the kingdom of heaven, to be established. As sad and as difficult as it will be, the hope of the world rests in Cain.

Therefore the Lord does not allow Cain to be destroyed. Instead He puts a mark on him “lest anyone finding him should kill him” (Gen. 4:15), and He lets him go off to the land of Nod. Now we can speculate about this mark, but whatever it was or might have been, in simplest terms it represents the recognition that this early faith, despite its limitations and failings, is the only viable means we have to begin a spiritual life. It is by means of faith – that is, the acknowledg-

ment of truth – that we can develop a conscience, and it is through conscience that the Lord establishes a new will in which we feel the delight of heavenly love.

So Cain goes off and gets a wife and has a son and builds a city that he calls Enoch. But wait! If he was the only person on earth besides Adam and Eve where did he find this wife? And why was any mark needed to prevent him from being killed? Who would have killed him? The point is he and his parents *weren't* the only people on earth, the whole story with all its characters is simply contrived to illustrate the issues and concerns we all face as we are being formed and prepared for heaven. These anomalies in the story are among the many hints and clues the Lord gives us to look beyond the literal into the spiritual meaning of it all.

Enoch, as it turns out, is a Hebrew word that means to initiate, to teach or to instruct. So the theme of learning and *building up* a systematic understanding (which is what cities generally represent in Scripture) continues. And from the children of Enoch we get a whole string of descendants down, finally, to Lamech who, among others, begot Noah.

But here's a curious thing: the whole genealogy from Adam to Noah is listed in Genesis, chapter 5, but Cain is completely missing from that list. Instead, the genealogy begins with Seth, who was the *third* son of Adam representing a fresh start. There is even a suggestion at the end of chapter 4 that Cain may have been killed after all by Lamech. In any case he's gone, never to be mentioned again. So what is this saying about our faith?

Well, remember, this is still only the very beginning of the Lord's Word – page 5 in fact, out of well over a thousand. Characters come and characters go, and when one dies in the stories another comes along to carry on the representative thread. But the fact is that the jealous, arrogant, self-centered faith that gets us going, *the faith* represented by Cain that *despises charity* in the beginning, has no part in the truly spiritual life the Lord promises at the end of all our struggles. It's iniquity is, as Cain said, greater than it can bear. It is, for awhile, all we have, and by means of it the Lord can prepare us for the challenges that lie ahead. But there is so much more to look forward to when love and wisdom work together....

In this part of the Word it is Seth who takes over the role of Cain and it is his descendants who populate the earth. This represents a new beginning with a new kind of faith rooted in charity and so providing for the future of the church.

Let us hope and pray today that we too may soon get over our initial states of proud, self-centered faith, that we may learn the truths of the Word for the sake of the good we may do with them, and that we may apply them to the work of our own regeneration first of all.

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 4:1-15
 Children's talk on Cain's horrible evil
 Arcana Coelestia #392-394: selections
 Matthew 23:1-12 & Luke 18:9-14