

If We Ran The World

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I got myself into this while I was serving on the pastorate and mentioned to Cindy that I may have a sermon cooking. Her ears really perked up when I said that I was thinking about the four women who appear in the genealogy of Jesus according to Matthew—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba—and how each of them was involved in something unconventional morally speaking, and yet they are the only women mentioned in the genealogy. There's something interesting going on there, but, alas, this isn't that sermon. That one is still only half-baked, and, like most half-baked things, it is still inedible.

Then I thought about the reading from the book of Job in the lectionary reading for today—you know, the reading in which Yahweh challenges Job out of the whirlwind. Well, my reading of that passage—in fact, my reading of the entire book of Job is that the Yahweh portrayed there is a real stinker, and I'm not ready to deal with that right now.

But then I came to today's reading from the Gospel of Mark—the one in which two of the disciples try to line their spiritual pockets a little. According to Mark's report, the Apostles James and John sought him out as if he were the genie of the lamp and all they had to do was ask for their wishes to be granted. And what was their wish? "We want to be your lieutenants, one sitting on the right and the other sitting your left..."

They saw the blessing/spiritual power as something to be desired and possessed. Their desire was sufficiently strong that they sought preferential treatment—they were in a kind of competition with their colleagues and wanted to exalt themselves over them. They wanted to have the edge.

Reading this story took me back to one of the oldest stories in the Bible—a story that is also about a competition for spiritual power. It's the story of Cain and Abel. The story of Cain and Abel is one of the very oldest of biblical stories, preceded only by those of Adam and Eve and the Creation. It is a dark and haunting story that, while letting much unsaid, says enough. From the book of Genesis, Chapter 4, we get the details: Adam and Eve had two sons, the elder named Cain and the younger Abel. Cain is identified as a "tiller of the soil," and Abel as a shepherd. And in the process of time, both Cain and Abel brought the fruits of their labors as a sacrifice to Elohim. Cain brought of the fruits of the ground and Abel brought of the first-born of his flocks. Elohim was displeased with Cain's offering and, unsurprisingly, Cain was not pleased to be the object of Elohim's displeasure. Elohim remarked that if Cain persevered, he would do all right; if he didn't persevere, he should beware. Cain later talked with Abel his brother and one day when they were in the field together, Cain killed Abel. Elohim then inquired of Cain: "Where is your brother?" Cain proclaimed his ignorance with those unforgettable words: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Elohim replied: "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." Elohim then pronounced a curse upon Cain for having killed Abel. Cain was told that the earth would no longer yield her strength to him and that he would be a fugitive and a vagabond. Cain cried out that the punishment was too great; that surely he would be killed by those he met. Elohim then put a mark on Cain so that no one would kill him. Cain set off towards the east,

and there took a spouse, fathered children and founded a city. These are the essentials of the story of Cain and Abel as it is presented in the book of Genesis.

Many interpreters do not read the story as one of a conflict between two individuals; they read it rather as an historical gloss on the struggle between two eponymous cultures, the "Cainfolk" and the "Abelfolk." The Abelfolk will have been a nomadic, shepherding people while the Cainfolk will have been a people landed long enough to know the cycles of planting and harvest. The Cainfolk will have developed some technological sophistication as well insofar as they forged metal tools—hence their name, because the name "Cain" means "smith" as in blacksmith.

The scenario and conflict then become more familiar: the Abelfolk and their herds were in search of graze and water. Their travels bring them near to and they finally overrun the agricultural settlement of the Cainfolk. The angry farmers understandably strike back at these invaders. What farmer would stand by and watch while a band of gypsies and their livestock wander through the fields eating a lot and trampling the rest? The story of Cain and Abel then becomes the story of the massacre of one culture by a technologically superior culture and the divine punishment that was meted out as a consequence of that massacre.

Interpreting the story with the assumption that Cain and Abel represent collectives does indeed help us to answer questions such as where Cain's wife came from and all these other people suddenly appeared from in the biblical narrative.

But the story also has a more intimate side that does not yield so easily to this collective interpretation. Cain and Abel are depicted not merely as neighbors, but as brothers. The bond between them is not only proximity, but blood. Cain murdered not only his neighbor: he murdered his brother. The story is not only about how we treat our neighbors, but how we treat our brothers.

Cain obviously believed that he deserved favor. Perhaps he was thinking of his rights as first-born. But note how Elohim responds: not by dismissing him or his anger, but by telling him to persevere. "If you're doing the right thing, then hold your head up high. You'll be all right so long as you don't give in to the dark side, " Elohim says, in effect. The line is clearly drawn for Cain: yes, you are jealous of your brother's apparent success, but don't let your desire for mastery and the temptation to turn spiritual success into some sort of coveted prize, or gold cup, or seat of honor or power that is awarded to the spiritually adept. If you do that, you will ruin your own chances for success. But if you can master your competitive jealousies and pursue your own path with integrity and without watching your brother out of the corner of your eye, no harm will come of it. Feeling jealousy is one thing; acting it out is quite another.

But Cain can't handle it. He connives to get his brother out into a field and there he strikes him down and kills him. Then Cain apparently goes on about his business. But the injustice of what has occurred is so great that the very earth itself has been defiled. Abel's blood cries out in a voice that carries from the earth to the heavens and ultimately comes to the ear of Elohim, who asks Cain the pertinent question: "Where is your brother?" Cain's answer rings in our ears: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Elohim's response lets no doubt that Cain's crime is known and that he will suffer because of it.

The story of Cain is not merely the story of how some one or some group came to be set apart for divine reasons. It is the story of a deep, deep sin. Even if we read the story on a collective level as being about a civil war, a civil war is nevertheless held to be more dreadful than a war against an outsider, because in a civil war, the fight is not against a stranger; it is against our neighbor, and even our brother.

When our neighbor prospers and we do not, when our neighbor fares well and we do not, or when our neighbor appears to be blessed and we start comparing ourselves to him or her to see how we rank. We not only want to catch up with them, we want to surpass them. We get caught up in competing with our brothers and sisters over the appearance of advantage. We want the advantage. We want dominion. And when we get caught up in such competition, then sin crouches at the door as it did for Cain. But, as we have seen, the story is not just about neighbors, it is about brothers.

In today's gospel passage, the brothers were not competing with each other. They were in cahoots, looking for an angle, an edge over their colleagues. (The account of this incident in the gospel of Matthew blames, of all people, their mother for seeking favor for her sons.) They wanted the special seats. They wanted to be first in line. To be sure, the brothers come across as more than a little naive and simply unaware of the implications of what they are asking for. Our rabbi Jesus has some patience with their naivete but not too much. In effect, he tells them they don't know what they're asking for, so he describes the road that he will travel and that they must travel if they intend to follow him. Like the rest of us, they can't help saying "Oh yes! We're ready!"

Then Jesus says a very strange thing to them. He tells the brothers, that yes indeed, they will follow his road in many ways, but that the competitive advantage they seek is not his to give. Now, how can it be that the Son of God is not a position to be able grant their wish?

Rather than getting caught up in the Trinitarian conundrums, my reading is something like the following: Jesus saw clearly that their desire for special advantage was rooted in the desire for dominion. We should well know that Mark notes that the other disciples saw it, too, and they were not pleased. But Jesus called it out: "You are not to be like the Gentiles, who lord it over one another and who give special privileges to their high officials. Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant."

What Jesus is doing here is undermining the whole principle of competing for advantage or dominion. "Don't come to me if you're looking to have power over others," Jesus says. "Don't come to me if you're looking to be first." Jesus knew that if his followers saw him as the dispenser of patronage and spoils, his kingdom and its followers would be exactly like every other kingdom and his message of salvation would be a lie. But what Jesus was about was exposing the web of desire to compete for dominion as being the pathway of sin and death: the pathway of Cain.

That's why Jesus's teachings in so many places turns the world's thinking upside down: "If somebody strikes you on one cheek, turn the other one; if he compels you to walk a mile, walk two....The meek shall inherit the earth...the first shall be last, and the last first." That's why he compels Peter to put up his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus's kingdom is not about the competition for domination. That's why he tells the disciples to keep their eyes on him, not on each other. When they ask him, what so-and-so is supposed to be doing, he replies sharply: "If I will that he tarry until I return, what is that to thee? Follow thou me!"

The Apostle Paul echoes this message when he writes about how we are to feed our enemies when they are hungry and give them something to drink when they are thirsty. We are not to get caught up in the struggle for domination, but are to overcome evil with good. When Paul writes that, in Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, and so on, what I think he is saying is that so long we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, we don't fall into the trap of comparing and ranking ourselves amongst ourselves.

In our modern setting and especially here in the Washington area with our proximity to the seat of power and dominion, and with our desires for self-advancement, it can be easy for us to get caught up in seeing the non-violence of Jesus as providing some alternative means of having dominion over the earth. "If only we Mennonites ruled the world...", we think, "the world would be a so much better place." At least, please God, let us be the chief advisors to those who make the real decisions. That way, we can get the things done that we want done, but without the direct line responsibility.

But when we think like that, haven't we already succumbed to the notion that it's OK for us to seek the very dominion that Jesus warned his disciples so strongly against? John Howard Yoder writes that the very question "How should the world be governed?" is a Constantinian question, not a Jesus question.

The rejection of violence that Jesus taught his disciples was not offered to them as an alternative means of gaining dominion over the world. Indeed, I think if we believe that the states of the world can be ruled according to the principles of non-violence, we're failing to understand how violence is at the very heart of the concept of the state and how fundamentally at odds the exercise of such coercion is with the message of Jesus.

Jesus's message is not only a rejection of violence, it is the rejection of the very desire to dominate, of which violence is only the most explosive part. We do not embrace Jesus's rejection of non-violence because it is the means to some other end; we embrace it because it is the Kingdom itself.