

# **Sermon Text for June 14, 2015**

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I John 3:11-18, Genesis 4:1-9

“Keeping after our brothers”

It's hard not to talk about one of the most famous verses in Scripture that has been picked up by society and culture and our language and turned it into a well known cliché, “am I my brother's keeper?” We are going to answer that question today, but it is hard to talk about a story in the Bible about brothers without getting a bit personal. This is a picture of the 4 of us a few years ago. When you are the runt in the family and ride on the coattails your entire life, it is encouraging to hear stories in the Bible where consistently it is the youngest brother, the youngest son who has the favor of God. I keep telling my brothers that, but they don't listen.

We are a very competitive family. Two weeks ago we had our yearly Bronkema family golf tournament. We have a trophy that travels depending on who wins it, I've won it twice, another brother has won it 3 times, and then there is one brother who has won it 11 times. In spite of the rivalries, the years of beating up on each other in tennis and in basketball, pingpong and any other sport you can imagine, we love each other tremendously. We also have been there for each other when we have just needed to be together for whatever is happening in our lives.

But in Scripture most of the sibling rivalries that we find are no laughing matter, and no, they don't love each other. In Genesis we have already seen that it is difficult enough to live on God's terms with Adam and Eve, but go figure what happens once you have to relate and live with others, especially brothers, it becomes even more of a problem. When you throw people into the mix of life, life can really become tough.

Today we look at the most classic and probably the most tragic of sibling rivalries. It is the story of Cain and Abel. In this story we find the question that has been used, I would even say misused over time by people as an excuse to shirk responsibility, am I my brother's keeper. I hope you are able to answer yes once we read the Scripture and hear what God is telling us today.

We just read about the classic Cain and Abel story, we all know the story. Both brothers are trying to please God, one is a hunter another a farmer. The older brother is rejected by God and the younger is accepted. We don't get a reason why, just that this is the way that things went. I John tries to explain it by saying that at the root of it Cain's

deeds were evil but Abel's were righteous. That's a great reason for why God would accept one brother's offering but not the other. But it isn't by chance that this happens with the oldest brother being overlooked and the youngest being favored. Throughout Scripture we find the eldest who by law is the favored one, is entitled to the inheritance, but eventually is overlooked and the younger sibling takes the blessing. Look at Esau and Jacob, look at Joseph and his brothers. According to the times the oldest should have been favored, but according to God, He has his own way of working things.

As a result of God's favoritism to Abel, Cain, the older brother rises up and kills his brother. We find in our reading for today the first use of the word Sin in the Bible. God describes sin as a crouched beast ready to strike at any time. Even with Adam and Eve we don't find the word sin used by God, only here. Sin described as an opportunist who looks for chances to steer us astray. Ready to pounce on us when we are weak and not willing to be disciplined by following the will of God. We find in this Scripture the first death of a human being, his death being the result not of his own sin, but rather the sin of his brother.

Once the murder takes place God approaches Cain and asks him: where is your brother? Doesn't it sound like God in the garden after Adam and Eve had sinned and were hiding because they were ashamed and God cries out where are you? Remember that lost child panic that parent go through when they cry out not able to find their child: "Where are you?". Cain answers the question posed to him by God with the infamous remark: I don't know, am I my brother's keeper?

Am I my brother's keeper? When the Prodigal Son returned home his older brother is indignant and says to his father you never give me anything. Jesus' own disciples argue over who will God be the most pleased with and have to sit at his right hand. This rivalry and this competition to please God and to be the one the most liked doesn't just happen with brothers but happens with all people. We are set up to compete in the business world. We are programmed to put down our brothers, to crush the competition from the business world to even in churches where the numbers become the most important thing and not so much ones relationship with Jesus Christ. Put a group of 5 adults in a room and you will have 6 opinions and 5 people who are in charge. How envious we are when anyone gets God's visible grace poured out upon them and it is not us. Cain was envious to the point that even though God counseled him and told him to

control his anger because sin was waiting for him to make a mistake so it could pounce. It was too much for him and his envy resulted in murder.

Am I my brother's keeper? This Scripture tells us that whoever violates his brother must face God and explain. But who exactly is our brother? We could say that our blood family is to be considered brothers. We all know our responsibilities of keeping and looking after our brothers in this context.

But Scripture describes our brothers more along the lines of the Good Samaritan where the question is posed in a different way: Who is my neighbor. Am I my brother's keeper is another way of asking am I my neighbor's keeper? Jesus' answer was a resounding YES!

Let me tell you about a church in New York City called 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Presbyterian Church. It is situated in the highest priced district maybe even in the world. Homeless people have taken to sleeping on the steps of this church. Well, the members didn't think it was right for them to be sleeping on their steps, especially in this kind of neighborhood so they built them a homeless shelter with much pomp and circumstance.

If you have ever worked with the homeless you know that a large number of them don't trust and won't sleep in shelters so they continued to sleep on the steps of the church. Well, the church could have said, we did what we could, it's not our job to worry about them any more. But instead, a group in the church began cooking breakfast for them, bringing out toiletries and letting them go in the church for showers. Welcome to God's house they would say when they came in.

The city got upset with someone taking responsibility for them, especially in this neighborhood, because no one had ever really cared about them before, and they were worried about the image in the middle of Manhattan. They sent the police to drive them away and the members were there in full force. They were tossed around and harassed, but they saw these neighbors as their brothers and they were going to take care of them as they knew they were supposed to. The courts finally got into it and a ruling came out: they stated that what the members were doing fell well within the understanding of the church's mission so it was legal to provide hospitality and relief on their property. No kidding. We don't need a court to tell us our mission, we need members saying, yes, I am my brother's keeper.

Today is Stephen ministry Sunday and what is exciting for me is that not only is this a ministry offered to members of our congregation, but I think a majority of those

receiving care are not members of the church, but rather people in the community. What a great approach to being a church, a church that insists on keeping after its brothers and sisters, and doesn't worry about boundaries or lines drawn.

If there is one area of ministry that excites me more than any other, it is the ministry in which we find ourselves called to be our brother's keeper. The New Beginnings House and its ministry is one that stirs up my passion and leaves me with the certainty that we are doing God's will. The food closet is another as it grows that strikes me as a ministry that has God's approval in a very clear way. God is going to honor our attempts at being our brothers' keeper, and the converse is true. If any of our ministries are set up so that those from the outside have no place, then these ministries will be self serving and will ultimately not please God and so fail.

So often we find ourselves as the Cain's of this world who are the oldest big brothers who feel entitled to whatever God might provide us. We deserve to have our freedoms, we deserve to have homes and cars, we deserve to live as we please. Do you know what Abel means in Hebrew? It means vanishing or breath, basically insignificant or meaningless. It is a person who is there but does not make much of an impact or is easily discarded. Someone who is considered the lowest on the totem pole. There is a reason why Jesus said blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.

Jesus calls his disciples and the crowds in Matthew his brothers even with his own blood family there present. It wasn't an insult, it was a recognition that our relationship with Jesus Christ is even deeper than our blood relationships. We have in our neighborhood, in our family the unseen and the unknown of this world, the Abel's. We are called to reach out and lend them a hand, even if they don't attend or aren't involved in activities that we want them to be involved in.

John tells us how does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother in need and yet refuses to help? Let us love not in word or speech but in truth and action. We are our brother's keepers and we don't have to look across the seas to minister to the Abel's of this world. We need to look at our own county and realize that God is calling us to this ministry to those who are without food and shelter and live in very difficult conditions. We are called today to love in truth and action and to lift up from the ground the ones who have been beaten down for these many years.

I encourage you today to look to Christ and see him telling you to love in truth and in action and to consider yourself your brother's keeper. Amen.