

## “IN THE BEGINNING: II - CAIN AND ABEL”

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Genesis 4:1-16

Those of you who know me well, know that I have a lot of family. I am one of six children in my family, and as of a few weeks ago when my most recent great-niece was born, I am the proud aunt of nine nieces and nephews, and six great-nieces and nephews. That's fifteen in all, and each one of them is special and unique.

I'm closer to some than I am to others. One niece lives with me, one nephew is being married next weekend, and I'm blessed to be officiating his wedding. And then there are two others - Damien and Robbie - probably the ones you've heard me talk about most - they are pretty special.

Damien is almost eleven and Robbie just turned five. Each of them, I think I can safely say, thinks I'm pretty special. If I'm ever down or stressed, I spend time with them, and soon, all's right with the world.

I usually spend time with them by themselves, since Damien is local and Robbie is outside of Philadelphia. So when I'm with either one of them they get my undivided attention. Which brings me to the event in question - our family vacation at the Outer Banks the week after Easter.

Most of the family went down to North Carolina the day before Easter, which obviously, I couldn't do, but on Monday I headed down there, and as soon as we pulled up in the driveway of the beach house, Damien came flying out the door with his arms open wide, yelling, “Aunt Karen!” What a way to be greeted!

Right on his heels was Robbie. Same thing! Arms open wide, “Aunt Karen’s here!” Oh man, it doesn’t get better than that!

Well, let me tell you that it didn’t take long for things to get interesting. The first morning there, I went into the kitchen to get a cup of coffee and Damien came over to give me a big hug, and boom, in a split second, Robbie was there to hug me too! Hmm... . . .

A little while later I was sitting in this big cushy chair by a window with these big arms on it, and Robbie came over to sit by me, and boom, in a split second, Damien was there sitting on the other arm.

And so it went. If I sat down to work on a puzzle, one of them would show up, and then, boom, the other. Everybody noticed it. We started calling it “dueling nephews”!

Even a couple of weeks ago on the fourth of July, I was in the backyard talking to my brother and older nephew while they were grilling, and Damien came over and put his arm around me, and boom, there was Robbie staking his claim! It’s too funny to see, and not a bid hard to take!

Now while that kind of jealousy is somewhat humorous, most assuredly the jealousy in this morning’s lesson from the Hebrew scriptures is not. The jealousy that Cain has for his brother Abel is dangerous and turns out to be deadly.

You heard the lesson. Adam and Eve had a son Cain, and then another son Abel. Abel was a shepherd, and Cain was a farmer. One day Abel presents an offering to the Lord, and so does Cain. Abel’s offering is pleasing in God’s sight and He had regard for him, for some reason of which we are not aware, the same is not the case for Cain.

And suffice it to say, Cain does not handle it at all well. His jealousy flares up big time, and he ends up taking his brother’s life over it.

Jealousy. It has been a human problem since time began. Some say that jealousy was even behind the first sin - Adam and Eve’s sin, because they were jealous of God. They wanted to be like him, and that’s why they were tempted to do the serpent’s bidding. And now - this jealousy between their sons which led to a tragic ending.

Jealousy. You know what jealousy is, don’t you? It’s not the same thing as envy. Envy is wanting something that someone else has. Jealousy on the other hand is “the fear that something which we possess will be taken away by another person.” (On-line, “Who Can Stand Before Jealousy?”, Rev. Francis Balla)

Jealousy and self-esteem, or the lack thereof, go hand in hand. We become jealous of others when we’re not sure of ourselves. Cain was not sure of his relationship with God apparently, so that when Abel was treated with such high regard by God, suddenly Cain thinks God doesn’t love him.

Jealousy left unchecked can be disastrous. Perhaps you’ve heard about the two shopkeepers who were bitter rivals. Their stores were directly across the street from each other, and they would spend the day watching out their windows keeping track of each other’s business. One night an angel appeared to one of the shopkeepers in a dream and said, ‘I will give you anything you ask, but whatever

you receive, your competitor will receive twice as much. Would you be rich? You can be very rich, but he will be twice as wealthy. Do you wish to have a long and healthy life? You can, but his life will be longer and healthier. What is your desire?" The man frowned, thought for a moment, and then said, 'Here is my request: Strike me blind in one eye!" (Ibid.)

That's the destructive power of jealousy, friends. When one is so insecure or unsure of themselves that they strike out at another for what they perceive is being taken from them - whether it is a blessing from God, money from sales, a promotion, a relationship - whatever. When jealousy rears its ugly head, it can really get ugly.

It got ugly in this scripture passage. And it's so sad, because it didn't need to be that way. Cain didn't need to do what he did, but it's apparent that there were some very important things that he didn't understand.

The first thing that Cain didn't understand was just how precious he was in God's sight. He didn't remember that each one of us is "fearfully and wonderfully made", loved by God so dearly and deeply that we can't possibly understand how much. I wish he could have heard scriptures like today's Gospel lesson, and be reminded that God clothes us and cares for us and we have no need to fear. I wish he could have heard how God knows every hair on our heads, how when we wander away like lost sheep He never stops searching for us, how when we wandered so very far away, He sent His only begotten Son to bring us home.

Cain didn't remember that he was special and unique in God's eyes, created just as he was for a purpose.

I read this week of another person who was struggling to understand that too. Her name was Gladys Aylward. She apparently struggled with the looks that God had given her. "When she was a child, she had two great sorrows: one, that while all her friends had beautiful golden hair, hers was black. The other, while her friends were still growing, she had stopped. She was about four foot ten inches tall. Years later, she answered the call to be a missionary, and when she arrived in the country to which she was assigned, she stood on a wharf in Shanghai and looked all around her at the people to whom she had been called to minister. 'Every single one of them,' she said, 'had black hair. And every one of them had stopped growing when I did.' And, as the one who told her story said, 'She was able to look to God and exclaim, "Lord God, you know what you're doing."'" (On-line, sermonillustrations.com, "Self-Acceptance")

If only Cain had understood that, that even when God was blessing His brother instead of him, God knew what He was doing, and that he, Cain was still a precious, special and beloved child of God in his own right.

But he didn't get that.

And the second thing he clearly didn't get was that God's love is bigger than we can imagine, and that His love was big enough for both of them. It wasn't a competition.

I remember years ago hearing a former bishop, Bishop Joe Yeakel preach a sermon about his family. He said that when he and his wife had their first child he was overwhelmed by how much he loved that child. He couldn't believe how much - more than he had ever loved anything else in his life. He delighted in being a father.

Then when his wife became pregnant with their second child, he was actually worried - really worried that he wouldn't be able to love another child the way he loved their first. And then he said, "I had no need to fear. Because what I discovered was I had just as much love for the second one, and then the third and the fourth. I loved each of them fully, each of them in their own way. There was love enough to go around. The more kids I had, the more love I had to share."

You see, Cain didn't get that about God. He saw God's love as limited - "if he loved Abel that much he couldn't possibly love me so much." Oh how sad it is, that Cain didn't understand the nature of God's love - that there is enough for all of His creation.

Jealousy is still a powerful force at work in our world today. Our society naturally pits us against each other. Who's the most beautiful, who makes the most money, drives the fanciest cars, has the best job, goes to the best school, wears the best clothes? Society makes it dangerously easy for us to compare ourselves with others, and to find ourselves being jealous that others have something that we wish we had, or think we deserve.

We dare not buy into that kind of thinking, and we don't have to, because we are beloved, blessed, uniquely created and uniquely gifted children of a God of endless, boundless love. We have no need to fear, and we have no need to compare, because we are just who God wants us to be.

You know, I think Cain might have gotten that in the end, because look how the story ends. God watches over Cain and protects him from harm. In spite of everything - in spite of his jealousy, in spite of how he treated his brother, in spite of his wandering far from home, if you will - God still loved him and cared for him in the end. God's love never went away. He was able to begin again after that horrible time in his life. I think he got it, and I hope he never forgot it.

Let me close with a modern day story of never forgetting love. I'm sure many of you remember the great Olympic diver, Greg Louganis. One day, a reporter asked him how he coped with the pressure and stress of international diving competition. He replied that he climbed to the board, took a deep breath, and thought, "Even if I blow this dive, my mother will still love me." And then he strove for excellence. (On-line, sermonillustrations.com, "Self-Esteem")

You know, it wouldn't be a bad way for us to live our lives, and to combat jealousy, by the way, were we to face each day with that attitude - "even if I blow this day, this moment, my Father in heaven will still love me" - and then strive for excellence.

Friends, we have no need to be jealous, ever. For no one can take away the fact that we are precious in God's sight and God's love is abundant and sufficient and poured out on every single one of His children always and forever. Rest in that knowledge, and go forth with that peace. May it be so.

Amen.