

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Genesis 4:1-16

By faith Abel

Eve finally had a son. Luther, when he translates this, implies Eve thinks this is the Messiah. Far from the case! Later, Eve gives birth to another son, Abel. Cain means, “*brought forth.*” Abel means “*breath,*” or “*meaningless,*” a word Solomon uses several times in Ecclesiastes. Cain is the firstborn son, brought forth from Eve, and, unfortunately, brought forth in the sin into which Adam and Eve had now fallen. And what does his sinful nature produce? Sin. He makes Abel’s life a breath, declares it meaningless, like the unwanted fetus or diseased grandfather, whose so-called quality of life somehow trumps its sanctity. Here we see already the nasty cycle of sin, repeated in so many of our families, as we inherit, not only the family name, but many of the family weaknesses and proclivities to sin.

Cain farmed. Abel tended flocks. The LORD didn’t prefer one above the other, just as He does not prefer the pastor over the plumber or the teacher over the technician. With time, both brought forth offerings from their occupations. The LORD looked with favor on Abel’s, but not on Cain’s. It was a matter of motivation. The Lord loves a cheerful giver, and the only offerings He wants are offerings of faith. Had Cain brought firstfruits of the soil? We’re not told, and it doesn’t matter. His reason for bringing what he brought was not genuine thankfulness, and his motivation was not faith. His reaction says as much.

The LORD looked with favor on Abel’s sacrifice. The Hebrew actually simply says that the LORD looked at it. And He did not look at Cain’s. Just as the prayers of the unbeliever do not reach the Lord’s ears, so offerings of the unbeliever do not reach His eyes. The LORD cannot be bribed. He can only be praised and thanked. Grace cannot be bought. It can only be received and cherished.

This would have been a good time for self-examination for Cain. This would have been a good time for repentance. But instead, Cain persisted in the path to destruction and became angry. It might have been a good idea to ask Abel why God was pleased with his sacrifice; to ask for help in his relationship with God; to seek to learn from his brother who clearly knew God and His will. But, no, Cain’s spiritual sickness couldn’t be his own fault. He had no interest in finding a cure for his spiritual sickness. No, it was Abel’s spiritual health that must be destroyed. And isn’t that what those trapped in sin would most often prefer, that is, to bring others into their mess rather than to seek help in getting out? And for most of us, that is not speculation. When in such situations ourselves, we have reacted in such a way, lashing out at those lovingly correcting us instead of taking their correction to heart.

But our Lord is gracious. “*Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.*” The LORD lovingly calls Cain to faith and the faithfulness it produces. The LORD wants Cain’s love as well as Abel’s. The LORD wants to look upon Cain just as He had looked upon his brother. Remember that. Learn it well. Our response to sin is not to shovel deeper, but to climb out, because the Lord longs to lift us up.

Cain grabbed the shovel, though. He killed his brother. But Cain’s sin did not die by silencing him who reminded Cain of it. No, Cain’s sin multiplied. We see at the end of the chapter that his sin multiplied beyond anything he could have imagined as his ancestral line would not only repeat his

transgression many times over, but boast of it, as just after this we learn Lamech does, boasting, “*I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.*”

Fathers, mothers, this is no subtle hint Moses' sets before us. This is a stern warning. Sin's cycle is vicious, and the more you feed it, the more it destroys. What of your family's heritage will your children pass on?

Cain's reaction wasn't unnatural, however. It is the most natural reaction in the world for fallen human beings. We delight to feel superior to others. We burn when we feel inferior. Maybe I'm the only sinner here—and that is a maybe the size of New York—but I've been riding my bike on calls for the past few weeks. One thing I've learned is that members must be surprised I can walk from the parsonage to the church, because they often seem astounded that I can ride from here to the hospitals. But there is something else I've learned as well. This week, when I was riding to Saginaw Pines, I saw lines backing well onto State Street at a couple of the gas stations. I figured gas had gone up again. I thought to myself, “Ha, I don't have to gas up my ride. I'm all the engine this hog needs. Look at those suckers pumping money into their gas guzzlers.” Needless to say, I didn't feel the same way when I filled up my truck later in the day. But it was nice while it lasted, patting myself on the back for saving the earth and getting exercise while those clods were waiting in line. It's easy to understand why the environmental movement takes on almost religious overtones for some.

But that is how we are as people. We like to look through the window more than in the mirror, at the next guy more than at ourselves. And in so doing, we miss out, because we are called to measure ourselves, not against our neighbor, but against our Lord, and we are called, not to impress our neighbor, but to thank our Lord.

The writer to the Hebrews writes, “*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.*” We can never give each other for God. We can never live well enough for God. We can never impress God. We can never measure up to God. We can never please God. We can never do any of that, that is, unless we are able by faith, and not just any faith, but faith in Christ and Him crucified for sinners.

By faith Abel's sacrifice was pleasing to God, not because it was better than Cain's, not because he was better than Cain—Cain had nothing to do with Abel's standing with God, but because Abel was by faith able to please God, because God saw Him through Christ, the perfect sacrifice and the lens through which the Father sees His baptized children. And faith is exactly what Cain lacked. And so without faith Cain was not Abel, that is, he was not pleasing in the Father's sight, no matter how much he might do or offer. And killing Abel couldn't change that. Only faith could. So be Abel. Look not to the next guy, but to Christ, and know He has done it all for you, and trust that in Him what you do in accordance with the Word is likewise through Him pleasing to your heavenly Father.

This chapter of Genesis ends with hope. Adam and Eve have a new son, Seth. And Seth had a son. Seth established a family line. “*And at that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.*” This is how believers are described in Genesis. The faith was passed on and the promise persisted, and Christ came, and Abel will rise, and you are now able, able by faith to offer all you are and do and have in consecrated service to Him who offered Himself for you and your salvation. But remember: you are only able by faith. And that Faith, the confession of Christ passed down to you by others, is the best thing you can pass down to your children. It's an inheritance they can't blow on things that

spoil, rust, or break down. It's an inheritance that lasts. And the best part is you don't have to work for it. Christ already did that. Amen.