

Pastor T.C. Arnold
11th Sunday after Trinity
Genesis 4:1-15
August 19th, 2012

We are now eleven Sundays into the Trinity season of the Church-year. The Trinity season is long – it lasts all the way up through November. This season encompasses the “non-festival” half of the Church-year and many times the lessons, like the Gospel reading for today, as well as the Old Testament text, are set before the Church for the sake of teaching. Today’s Gospel you just heard is about a Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Temple. Jesus is teaching something important – which actually is central to this morning’s sermon on the Genesis reading. Last Sunday we heard about Jesus teaching in the Temple after He got upset and scattered all those who were buying and selling goods. Two Sundays ago Jesus taught a lesson with the parable of the dishonest manager.

These non-festival days, some might call them regular days, are good places to learn about the way God would have us to act. He teaches us lessons. However, we can also learn how God acted. Next Sunday we will have a special “teaching” Service at both our 8 A.M. and 10:45 A.M. Services. We will be teaching about the six different seasons that make up the Church-year. We will learn how God acts for His Church, for you, by taking each of these Seasons and learning more about them. Really what the Church Year does is tell the story of our Savior Jesus. This is why these seasons actually tell us how God acts – most specifically – how He ACTED for the sake of you. We are handing out little invitation cards after the Service as a reminder. They can also be a way to invite someone you know who might get better acquainted with how God acts for them by coming to next week’s Service. Remember, the church is about “teaching” and we even teach our young people at our weekday school which meets tonight for orientation and our Sunday school as well.

Now in the Old Testament text for today we are indeed taught a lesson. And to better understand what we are taught, it’s beneficial to know the background. You see, Cain and Abel are, of course, brothers born from their parents – the first of all our parents – Adam and Eve. We are talking about the beginning of time yet this is a world that has already been plagued by the fall in the Garden of Eden. Sin and all its dreadfulness was a part of their lives from birth. Now, Cain worked the ground – he was a farmer. That is a good and honorable vocation to the Lord. Abel was a keeper of sheep – a shepherd – and that too is a good and honorable vocation in the eyes of the Lord.

Here’s where things go a bit haywire. Please realize that there was nothing wrong with what Cain offered to the Lord. His offering was a fruit of his labor. It was no better or no worse than Abel’s offering. But the text says, “*The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.*” The problem wasn’t what Cain offered. Rather, it was how he offered it. In Genesis 4 we aren’t told “how” Cain offered his sacrifice to the Lord. But in Hebrews 11:4 we are told how Abel offered his – and thus we can deduce what Cain didn’t do. It says, “*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous...*” Abel’s offering came by faith in the Lord. Cain’s did not. Perhaps he thought it something he had to do because that’s what mom or dad told him to do. Perhaps Cain thought he better give something to God because that’s what his younger brother was doing. Whichever way, we are told of Abel’s faith in offering, and we understand Cain’s “lack of” faith through God not being so pleased with Cain and his offering.

Now we see it. Cain was not “about the Lord and His work” with his offering. He didn’t give his offering by faith. His self-centeredness cried forth even further when he took God’s gift of life into his own possession and decided to take the life of his brother Abel. Cain’s selfishness, his “me at the center of the universe” is hard to miss in this lesson taught by our Lord today.

Take the lesson of Cain for you. By God's grace you are Abel. By the faith God gives to you, and you live in daily, you are Abel. But you must know, and must accept the fact, that you are Cain as well.

You are selfish Cain. You are selfish Cain and your favorite team is team, "Me." You live and act as if you are the most important. Not every minute of the day, mind you, but you are still a star player on team "Me." We all are. Cain got carried away. He was so jealous, so self-righteous, so "me-centered," that he had no regard for the life of his own brother or the fact that Cain is not the giver or taker of life in the first place. Cain plays God. Cain captains team, "Me" and on that day that team had a victory because Abel was dead and now everything is about Cain.

Learn a lesson from Cain – what not to do. Take care of yourself, beloved in the Lord. There is nothing sinful about those words. But when it comes at the expense of God and your neighbor, when your neighbor gets hurt and your Lord is ignored, when "Me" is the most important person, even above God by the way you act, by what you say, by what you are not doing that you should be doing, you captain this terribly populated team. Get off team, "Me". Selfishness is a pandemic in our society and our society promotes it. Learn to recognize how it is hurting your neighbor, your church, and your Lord. See in the Lord's Word how He gives us the opportunity to serve others and to be in the midst of what our Lord gives us for the strength of our day today and strength for our neighbor. Don't be apart from those things. Be a part of the Lord's work – your work that involves more than you as captain of your own "Me" team.

Back in the Old Testament text the Lord says to Cain, "*Where is Abel your brother* (as if He didn't know)?" Cain responded, "*I don't know (lie); am I my brother's keeper?*" What do you think that answer to that question is? YES! The proper answer to this question puts us on a different team than team, "Me." We are our brother's keeper for the sake of our brother. Know who you are and know who the Lord expects you to be. But we are not alone in this. We have a Savior – the Lord Himself – who was the ultimate, "brother keeper" for us.

Here's something else God teaches us in this lesson. He tells Cain that Abel's blood is crying to Him from the ground. You see blood is life. The life-blood of Abel was crying out to God. When Jesus shed His blood, on the cross, and all the way to the ground, it was a life-blood that cried out to the Lord as well. It was crying out your name. It was calling you by name and calling you holy and forgiven and loved. This life-blood makes you alive in Christ and you didn't have to spill it. The Lord, who loves you, who is your keeper, did this for you. He took your place in death so that you may have life.

In the Gospel reading, you do realize, the Pharisee is teaching you something. He is teaching you what team "Me" is all about. He is teaching you selfishness and self-righteousness. That, of course, is the lesson our Lord wants you to hear, but not follow. The sinful Tax Collector is to be who you are – an undeserving receiver of God's grace. Cain, like the Pharisee, was finding righteousness in himself – by taking God's work of life and death upon himself. He's an example of yet another captain of team, "Me."

But not Abel, not the Tax Collector, and especially not Jesus the precious Savior. Jesus is on team you – all of you. By grace through faith – our Lord gives you what you need each of your days – in your greatest times of need. In your joys and sorrows, our Lord's blood of life is for your strength and life. The least selfish of all – The Savior – gives all of Himself for you. Amen. The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.