



This morning we begin a four-part series of messages titled *Music of the Heart*, in which each message is based on a song. I appreciate all the suggestions that I received after church last Sunday about possible songs for the series. Some of them were good, others a bit questionable, so no, I won't be using *Achy Breaky Heart*. I'm only going to do four messages, but as I have received so many good suggestions I will most likely return to this idea at some time in the future.

All of us have our favorite songs and favorite genres of music, and we probably have a lot of variety in what we like – and what we don't like – so I hope you'll be patient with my musical selections if they are not ones that appeal to you. Being a child of the 60s and 70s, I grew up a rock and roller. I was one of the many, many Baby Boomers who decided to learn to play guitar after seeing the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show. I have played in bands for years and still prefer my music on the loud side of the spectrum.

I am old enough to remember the advent of Christian rock music, and also remember when that genre of music was very controversial. Many churches opposed Christian rock music, books were written in condemnation of it, and many Christian bookstores would not carry those type of records (at that time, Christian bookstores were the only place it was possible to purchase Christian music). I was often criticized for having my foot in both those musical worlds – the Christian and the secular worlds. Some of my church associates were critical of me for playing in rock bands but I always kept my foot in both worlds, and continue to do so. I enjoy playing and listening to rock and roll, but I also love hymns and praise and worship music as well. To this day, I still do not understand why some people think I should have to make a choice between those types of music.

The first "Christian" album I purchased was *Sail On* by The Imperials, in 1978. It was the first of many Christian albums that joined my collection alongside the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Eagles, Pink Floyd and others. As I said last week, I believe all things are sacred, and while we often make a distinction between sacred and secular music, I believe music is in and of itself sacred. There are songs that do not carry a "Christian" label that convey very important truths and spiritual lessons, and that is why I purposefully chose the songs I did for this series.

The song for this morning's message is by The Hollies, and is *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother* (we were careful to select this track from the CD to play before the service began. I wanted to make sure we didn't play the track *Long Cool Woman In A Black Dress*, but if we had, I guess we could have talked about the story of Rahab), and the title of the message is *I Am My Brother (and My Sister's) Keeper*. Our Scripture text is the very familiar story of Cain and Abel, from Genesis 4:2b-12 –

*2 Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.*

*3 In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.*

*4 And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord*

*looked with favor on Abel and his offering,*

*5 but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.*

*6 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?"*

*7 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 rule over it."*

*8 Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.*

*9 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"*

*10 The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.*

*11 Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12 When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."*

There is so much in this passage that we could cover this morning. This is one of the foundational stories of all Scripture, I believe, and it bears testimony to what I often say when we are studying passages from the Old Testament. I know a lot of people believe the Old Testament is not interesting and that some of it seems irrelevant, but nothing could be further from the truth. There are so many profoundly rich stories in the Old Testament, and the story of Cain and Abel is certainly one of them.

When we talk about being our brother's – and our sister's – keeper, there are many things we can, and perhaps should, talk about. Time constraints, however, requires that I focus in more specifically, so this morning I want to concentrate on the core of this story, which is that act of violence that Cain commits against his brother Abel.

I will say three things about this passage this morning, and the first is this –

### *1. Good and Evil War Within Each of Us.*

During Vacation Bible School last week, I took notice of something in the kitchen. Many of you are familiar with my love of chocolate, and it did not escape my notice that a very large, unopened, bag of M&Ms sat on the kitchen counter all week. I waited patiently for someone to open that bag so that I could have some of those M&Ms, but no one did. Finally, on Thursday, I could stand it no longer. As it was the final night of VBS I was certain that bag would be opened, so I walked into the kitchen at regular intervals, in hopes of begin able to reach into that bag and get a handful of candy. It remained unopened. Finally, in an act of desperation, I asked, *so what's the deal with this bag of M&Ms? Are they going to be used?* Sue then informed me she had brought them to be used in a treat but did not need them, but if I wanted to open the bag I was welcome to do so. I did not need a second invitation, and immediately ripped open the bag.

It may be a small analogy, but all week I worried about that bag of candy, and it seemed to exert some kind of control over me. It was only a bag of candy, fortunately, but if a bag of M&Ms can occupy my mind, and if the pull to that bag can be so strong, what am I supposed to do when there is a much larger, more significant struggle that takes place inside of me?

All of us – yes, all of us – have within us a battle between good and evil, darkness and light, and righteousness and unrighteousness. We all sense that struggle, and Paul sums up that struggle in a masterful way as he writes in Romans 7 –

*15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...18...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 21...Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in me,*

*waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.*

Cain and Abel are representative of our own selves – we all have a measure of good and evil within us, a measure of light and dark. Which side is going to win? It is very easy – and very tempting – to externalize evil, as though it is always something outside of us, but it is ever with us and we cannot deceive ourselves into thinking that we do not have the potential for both within us.

## *2. Do the Right Thing Because It Is the Right Thing.*

Righteousness is not a guarantee of blessing and protection. Abel was a righteous man. Genesis tells us that Abel brought the best and the firstborn of his flocks, and look what happened to him. Abel's goodness and righteousness have nothing to do with his fate. Abel did everything right, and yet his life came to a violent end. Plenty of people, throughout history, have suffered in spite of their goodness and righteousness.

The killing of Abel is certainly a powerful repudiation of the prosperity gospel, which teaches that God will guarantee only wealth and blessing to his followers. The prosperity gospel is a distortion of not only reality, but also of truth, as the killing of Abel is a reminder that simply because one is faithful to God and lives a righteous life, life will not be full of blessing and free from suffering and difficulty. Throughout the Bible runs the theme that the good sometimes suffer while the evil sometimes prosper. In John 9 we read the story of Jesus healing a man born blind – *As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.* Suffering happens. Struggles happen. It matters not how righteous and how good a person might be, at some point in life struggles and difficulties come. Job is one of the most powerful examples of this truth. Job, a good and righteous man, had done nothing wrong, and yet great suffering came into his life. Job's friends believe that his suffering must have been caused by sin, so they try to convince Job to confess his sin and seek God's mercy and forgiveness. Job, however, would not do so. Job protested his innocence.

This plainly refutes the claim of the prosperity gospel, yet many people continue to perpetuate the falsehood of that distortion of truth and reality. We are not always rewarded for our goodness, and we should not be surprised when we encounter struggles in life. In fact, we should remember that, sometimes, doing the right thing may actually cause difficulty for us. Refusing to participate in a questionable business deal, for example, might bring about negative repercussions for the person who will only practice the best of ethics.

Difficulties, struggles, and suffering come to all people. No one is immune. It matters not how good and how righteous a person might be, the reality is that life, at times, becomes very difficult for all people. This truth is precisely why we must work for justice. Many good people have suffered in spite of having done no wrong. Some people are victimized by the reality of unjust and unfair systems, and we must work to disassemble those forces that cause difficulty and suffering for people.

We do the right thing because it is the right thing, regardless of the consequences. Righteousness, though not a guarantee of protection, is its own reward. We aren't to seek after goodness, holiness, and righteousness for what they do for us, but because it is right to do so.

## *3. We Are Called to Live in Peace With One Another.*

How is it that humanity seems to so easily engage in violence, real and portrayed? I watch fewer movies and less and less TV, mostly because of the amount of violence that permeates so much entertainment. Hollywood, obviously, loves violence. Most big blockbusters are little more than a constant bludgeoning of endless, mind-numbing violence. Take out the scenes of violence and a movie would quickly be reduced to very little dialogue.

Sadly, the violence in our entertainment is a reflection of the violence that fills the world of reality.

Real life is full of violence, and always has been. From the beginning violence has been part of the fabric of humanity. Read history and you will find countless examples. The ancient world was a brutal place in which to live, but even in supposedly enlightened, modern era there is plenty of brutality that remains. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, in fact, probably saw more large-scale violence than any other era in history.

Of the many fascinating elements of the story of Cain and Abel is the reality that the first murder comes from a conflict between two men who were worshipping God. That is a sad fact, isn't it? Now, I do not buy into the narrative that religion causes violence, but I do believe that people often use religion to justify their violence. Religion is sometimes misinterpreted, misused, and misapplied in order to bolster and justify the actions of some people. And, considering that so many people in the world are religious, many things will have religious overtones. It is important to remember, however, most things are ever as simple as some people want to believe, and that includes the question of what causes violence.

One of the most interesting parts of this passage is the fact that Cain was the one who committed the act of violence, and yet God protects him. Abel is the innocent, and he suffers; Cain is the guilty party, and he is protected. God places a mark upon Cain, which not only identifies him for the act of violence he has committed, but also serves as a mark of protection. It was, I believe, as if God was saying, *that's enough! Violence never solves violence. And while some might believe there is justification for retribution, there will be none.* God's action is a powerful refutation of what we often call justice, which is too often only retribution or revenge under a more acceptable name.

In the violent world in which we live, I would hope we could all agree that we should not be making jokes about inflicting violence upon others. It doesn't matter your political or religious beliefs and affiliations, no one needs to joke about violence against others. And, I will add, this is not a new development. Though we have heard much about these distasteful remarks in the past few months, there have been many examples in recent years, and it is time to say *enough!* Surely we can express our disagreements in a way that is civil and decent.

The words of Cain, *am I my brother's keeper*, were said, most likely, with some sense of disdain. Cain knew very well where his brother was, as he had killed Abel in a rage because of his jealousy towards God's favor of Abel. Cain believed he had no responsibility toward his brother, but he did. Certainly, we would say that we have a responsibility to care for our families, but the implication of the story of Cain and Abel is one that reminds us that we are all brothers and sisters. In the kingdom of God, while we have our own individual families, there is the idea that we are part of one larger family because we are all children of our heavenly Father, which binds us together in a spirit of unity that asks us to care for one another. That unity sees beyond any kind of human-erected boundaries and borders that seek to limit our responsibility to care for others.

Cain's question, *am I my brother's keeper*, is a question that continues to resonate across the ages. We are, after all, our brother's – and our sister's – keeper.