

The first question a human poses in all our scriptures is perhaps the most compelling: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” One could argue that in part the Book of Genesis is an exploration of the answer to Cain’s question. One could argue as strongly that the 38 Old Testament and 27 New Testament books that follow do the same. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Since early June our Old Testament lessons have come from the book of Genesis. Slowly but surely we have walked through this incredible book. And at the heart of the stories in Genesis is sibling conflict. It might be worthwhile looking back at some of these stories before proceeding with Joseph and his gang. The first brotherly interaction comes with Cain and Abel, where we find no real interpersonal strife; God just favors Abel’s offering to Cain’s. Which doesn’t work out well for Abel. “The earth cries out with your brother’s blood,” God says to Cain. And so it goes from thenceforth.

There is then the conflict that arises with the birth of Abraham and Sarah’s son, Isaac. God promises that from Abraham and Sarah a great nation will come, and God’s blessings will be with this people. Sarah perceives that Abraham’s “other, older son” Ishmael is a threat, even though Ishmael is the son of the servant Hagar. Sarah is afraid that instead Ishmael will receive God’s blessing. And so she has Hagar and Ishmael banished to the desert to die. But instead God blesses Isaac – in the line of patriarchs of the Jewish people – and Ishmael – in the line of patriarchs of the people who later become the nation of Islam. We know well the battle that continues to rage between these two brotherly nations.

Then there is the relationship between the sisters Leah and Rachel, both of whom marry Jacob, Isaac’s son. Through a complicated interplay of jealousy and favoritism worthy of “All My Children” Jacob ends up with four wives and twelve sons. While all of this sounds like just so much drama the conflict between the sisters is indeed intense, quite real, and unresolved.

And in the midst of Leah and Rachel’s fighting there is the ongoing conflict between the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau. Jacob “tricks” Esau out of his birthright – i.e., inheritance – in exchange for a bowl of soup. It seems Esau was a few sheep short of a flock, if you know what I mean. And to make matters worse Jacob then tricks his father into give him the blessing that was intended for the elder son, Esau. Esau has lost everything. Jacob has to take his birthrighted and blessed self and literally run for his life from the wrath of Esau.

Our reading this morning picks up with the next generation, introducing the very lengthy saga of Joseph and his brothers. Perhaps more than any other this story explores brotherly jealousy and discord. But now the conflict is exponentially more complicated, as there are twelve brothers in the mix. And the tempest created by these twelve revolves around one of the least, Joseph. Although he was the eleventh son born to Jacob, Joseph was the first-born of Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel. And so Joseph was the apple of Jacob’s eye, the recipient of a special coat that set him apart, the one with that special gift from God of “dreamer and dream interpreter.” As it turns out Joseph was not very smooth with this gift, and it did not make Joseph the apple of his brothers’ eyes. Anne LaMott notes, “as is true with most children’s gifts, the gifts we receive from God require some assembly.” Well, Joseph rather callously shares his dreams with his brothers, dreams that suggest that he will be their master, and they will bow down to him. And so these brothers plot to do away with Joseph as we heard in the reading. It is helpful to note several points. First, the brothers’ initial desire is to follow Cain’s lead and simply murder their younger brother. Second, it is the eldest brother Reuben, the one most threatened by Joseph, the one with the most to gain if Joseph suddenly disappears, who mitigates the plot by suggesting that Joseph not be killed but simply thrown into a pit. Reuben hopes to sneak back and rescue Joseph (perhaps to establish himself as the rightful apple of Jacob’s eye). Third, it is the brother Judah –

who is the namesake of the later southern kingdom of Israel, the kingdom that later becomes infamous for its greed and neglect of the poor – who suggests they profit monetarily by selling Joseph into slavery. Judah rather cynically says, “After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” And so they sell away their flesh and blood for 20 pieces of silver. Finally, it is worth noting that Joseph’s salvation is mediated through the Ishmaelites – descendants of Isaac’s half-brother Ishmael – who transport Joseph to Egypt where as we know Joseph eventually flourishes. It seems that the brotherly conflict two generations earlier has a very important function much later in the ongoing story of the descendants of Abraham.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” This incredible book of Genesis circles around and around that question, lifting up for us the ramifications of answering, “No” or “Yes” to Cain’s haunting question. We may well ask, “Why so much attention to the sibling conflicts?” We have to remember that Genesis is primarily concerned with relationships, both our relationship with God as well as with one another. Perhaps in a sense the sibling relationship is the closest person-to-person relationships we have. There is not the power differential that exists between parent and child. There is not the “other-ness” that is present in even the closest of marriages. For brothers or for sisters all things are to be equal: same gender, same parents, same “blood”, same upbringing. In this book of Genesis where the part frequently represents a greater whole, perhaps the brotherly and sisterly interactions are meant to represent the human relationships we all share with each other. If indeed that is the case we may come away feeling that our human relationships are in sorry shape indeed.

Why? Why cannot brother get along with brother, sister get along with sister, I get along with my neighbor? The reason for this sorry state – Genesis tells us – is that the source of human conflict on the brotherly and sisterly level is the desire to obtain a limited commodity: favor, blessing, love. In each of these stories in Genesis the siblings seek to obtain the status of “special,” “beloved,” “favored one,” at the expense of his brother or sister. And what is at stake in each of these stories – what is the primary theme of Genesis – is the covenant of intimate relationship with God. The question for each generation is “Who will bear God’s covenant?” Each of these siblings is ultimately vying for God’s blessing, God’s special relationship, God’s belovedness. Their tradition decrees that such favor is reserved for the eldest child alone. (By the way, such favoritism is of humans – nowhere in Genesis does God dictate whom should be blessed). And so, predictably, in each situation they make the same mistake: they perceive that God’s love and grace are finite. Each cannot conceive of the possibility that all might be blessed. And in each case all parties are shown to be beloved of God. Ishmael is saved from death in the desert, and a great nation comes through him. Esau becomes a very prosperous man in Canaan, and in the end reconciles with Jacob. Both Leah and Rachel bear sons that are instrumental in the establishment of Israel. And the twelve sons of Jacob become the shared bearers of God’s covenant of intimate relationship, and together become progenitors of a great nation. None of them are abandoned by God – not even Cain – but none, in the midst of their conflict, are aware of that possibility. The authors of Genesis seem to suggest that this is indeed the human condition. We are finite beings, projecting upon God limitation and finitude. But nothing could be further from the truth.

As brothers and sisters in Christ each and every one of us are blessed and beloved. Friends, our world needs this good news. Our lives need this good news. So many of God’s children live in conflict within and without of their families. And at the heart of these conflicts is the perceived limitation of a commodity deemed necessary for life. “I cannot live as I am meant to unless I am promoted up the company ladder.” “I cannot live unless I have the money needed

to acquire the status symbols necessary to single me out as elite.” “I cannot live if mother seems to loves him more than me.” Each commodity becomes a god, and if indeed esteem, security, or love becomes limited or given conditionally we can be assured that they are not of God. Indeed, if Genesis teaches us anything it is that the seeking of status above ones brothers and sisters leads to an existence that more closely resembles death than life.

I was with a group of 3½ year-olds several years ago at St. Thomas. I was trying to teach them this lesson using wicks and candles. Taking a simple wick, I said that to live without God is like being a waxless wick; I lit the wick and it sputtered a little and burned itself out quickly. I next told them that to live with God is to be surrounded by God’s love – and I showed them a standard 1-inch taper. I lit it, and it burned steadily and gave off a good amount of light. Then I showed the kids a big 4-inch candle. I said some people believe that the light of God’s love is not enough – they need more around them – that if they acquire more and more they will burn brighter. I asked them if they thought the thicker candle would burn brighter, and they all nodded enthusiastically yes. They were amazed that the 4-inch candle burned exactly the same as the one-inch taper. The addition of more stuff did not seem to change the love of God at all. As we talked about God’s love being like a flame, which is shared without ever diminishing, that brightens the world each time it is shared, and so forth and so on, all of a sudden a little boy raised his hand and said, “Mr. Bill, I don’t think we should be the big candle anyway. Look.” And we all looked. Indeed the thick candle had put itself out. It seems that as we talked the melted wax pooled around the wick, and eventually the flame drowned in its own stuff.

God’s love is infinite, and meant to be for all God’s children. Our world does not seem to know this, or at least doesn’t trust this reality of God’s sure love and grace. Our world instead says, “Hedge your bet. Take what you can get and forget your brother. Forget your sister. It’s them or me.” Genesis teaches us otherwise. There is no limit to God’s blessings. There is no limit to God’s grace. There is no limit to God’s love.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Oh, yes. Yes. Yes.