

Brother Keeper

Sunday Pentecost 14, Year A

Ezekiel 33: 7 – 9; Romans 13: 1 – 10; Matthew 18: 1 – 20

September 6, 2020

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Naturally, being the first book of the Bible, Genesis has a lot to say to us. It begins the story of God's relationship with humanity. In the opening chapters we hear about the Creation and the Fall. We hear as Satan leads our first parents into rebellion against God, bringing us to the reason we are all in the broken mess we are in. Our first parents disobeyed God, and tempted by the devil, end up following that ancient serpent, bring sin, death and pain to humanity and all creation.

Which leads us to another famous question; found in the very next chapter, when sin and death make their first public appearance. It's the story of the brothers Cain and Abel. Because of sin, Cain's heart had already begun to harden against God. He gives an offering to God. But, he offers it without faith, and his offering is rejected. His brother Abel, on the other hand, also gives an offering to God. But, Abel gives his offering in faith, and it is accepted by God (Heb. 11:4). Cain, now angry and jealous, kills his brother, Abel.

When God shows up to hold Cain accountable, Cain asks another infamous, heart wrenching question, "*...am I my brother's keeper?*" (Gen. 4:9b).

"Am I my brother's keeper?" What a terrifyingly revealing question. With that question, Cain reveals his heart. He exposes what is deeply seated within our hearts, too. He reveals the damage that sin has done. He exposes the pandemic that has plagued humanity since the beginning; *incurvatis en se* (man curved in upon himself).

It is easy for us to look out for number one. It is that deep seated sinful selfishness that is built into us. I don't like pain, so I avoid pain. I protect me. I don't like being hungry, so I feed

me. I don't like mean people, so I avoid them. I don't like people different than me, so I mock them. I don't like homosexuals, so I glare at them. I don't like that other political party, or their candidate, so I say hateful things. I love power and control, so I manipulate. I don't like death, so I avoid funerals. I love to live in luxury, so I cheat and coerce. I don't like poverty, so I avoid poor people. I don't like hypocrites, so I don't go to church.

I mean, after all, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Or, am I only responsible for myself?

These things are not new. It is not just American culture that thrusts these things onto us. It isn't being a Boomer or a Millennial. It isn't being white or black. It isn't rich or poor. No, greed is just as much a problem among people who have as it is with those who have not. It is a humanity problem. It is within each of us. Don't believe me? Look at those who actually, physically, hung out with the Son of God; the disciples.

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Mt. 18:1).

"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

A couple of weeks ago, we could have easily said, Simon Peter. After all, Simon had made that wonderful profession of who Jesus was, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" And, Jesus gave him the name, Peter; which means 'rock,' because it was on Peter's profession that the Church would stand.

But, then last week, we had Simon Peter totally mess up by trying to stop the will of God by telling Jesus that the crucifixion and resurrection wasn't going to happen, because Peter was going to protect Him. Jesus then gave Peter another name; Satan.

So, maybe Simon Peter isn't the top dog after all.

So, the disciples want to know who it is that is second in charge. Who is it that will be numero uno in God's kingdom? Of course, if we were to ask ourselves that question, we would never say it should be us. We are too pious for that. We know we are sinners and we even confess that we deserve God's temporal and eternal punishment. We would rather be a door keeper in the house of our God than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.

We would never admit that we actually do think we are pretty okay. I mean, I'm no Catholic Saint, but I am not as bad as most of the people in this room. I may not be perfect, but I'm more perfecter than him. And, she doesn't even come close to my integrity, morality, and goody two shoe-i-ness.

Yet, look at how Jesus answers the disciples question. He doesn't start naming off nominees like at the Academy Awards. Instead, He totally pulls the red carpet out from under them.

Here He is, in the middle of these grown men. Tough men. Rough men. Fisher men. Smart men. Devout men. His inner circle, and He brings in a child.

I know some of us here have seen Star Wars. Do you remember what a young Jedi initiate is called? (padawan) Do you know what the Greek word for child is? (παιδίον)

And Jesus says to these Jedi...er...disciples, *"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like (παιδίον), you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this (παιδίον) is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

A (παιδίον), a child, they were not idolized as much as they are today. Our entire culture hovers around the idea of youth. Music and movies, church and culture, all cater to the next generation. There is a drive to be cool and hip. So much so, that now we have a plethora of pastors in skinny jeans and fewer in clerical collars.

But, in the past, it were the elders who were looked to for guidance. Rabbi's who were learned. Scribes who had been around the block. The patriarch of the family was sought for wisdom. The matriarch was sought for counsel.

Children were, padawans. They were learners, not teachers. They were foolish. They were not, as our culture seems to assume, innocent. Just look at the foolish things children do.

But, a young child has one thing that many of us adults forget about ourselves. They have faith. They look up to those around them. A son will imitate his father. A daughter will imitate her mother.

If it is important to dad, then it is important. Period. I remember when I was younger and my dad would come home from work. I could tell it was him simply by the sound of his movements. I could here the thud of his work boots as they crossed the kitchen tile. I knew the timing of each foot step. And...many times...I tried to imitate it. That is how a man walks, I thought. My legs were not as long. My footsteps never as powerful. But, I tried.

Saturdays were cartoons and football. That is what would be on the TV. Why? Dad wouldn't miss Bugs Bunny or his college teams.

We grown ups like to pretend we have 'it'. Whatever 'it' is...wisdom, experience, knowledge, self reliance, independence, freedom...

Jesus sets a young child among us. He points to him. He says to be like that child. That child is not perfect. He makes dumb mistakes. That child is not innocent. He has pulled off some good ones. That child is not wise. He lacks experience.

But, looking at those men around him, he would try to imitate them. He would try to be like them.

You, my friend, are your brother's keeper. Be worth imitating. Do not let those who are around you be led into temptation and evil because of your action, or inaction.

“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Mt. 18:5-6).

Instead, we should be examples of faith and forgiveness; not selfishness, self assurance and pride.

We should have a heart for those who are like that (παιδίον)...those who need help and direction. Those who do not know what forgiveness looks like, and when they see it, they will imitate it.

You are your brother's keeper. You are responsible for his well being. Imagine if we actually lived this way. No one would have to wonder if anyone cared about them. Because, every Christian would care about them. Not just in words or ideas, but really, actually care about them, as if they were our (παιδίον), our lost sheep, or our lost brother.

We can make all kinds of excuses and reasons not love, not to care... But, this is what Jesus is telling the disciples, “You are your brother's keeper.” Look out for him. Give him and others in our broken world something worth imitating. Show them love. Show them truth. Show them peace. Show them forgiveness. Show them Jesus. That is how you become great in heaven.

Now may the peace that passes all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.