July 13, 2014

“Questions God Asks of Us: Where Is Your Brother?”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Genesis 4:8-9
Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out to the field.’ And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’

1 Corinthians 12:12-26
For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

For many of you, summer is a time of family vacations and family reunions. I’m always especially interested to hear from those of you who hold reunions and do it up big. Gathering all the parents, grandparents, kids, grandkids, aunts and uncles, first cousins, second cousins, first cousins twice removed, and so forth—some families rent a big place and plan days of festivities. Some print special family reunion t-shirts and photo books for this very special annual in-gathering.

In these days of Facebook and on-line search tools, some families seem to get bigger each year as long-lost relatives are found. People discover not only ancestors but long-lost cousins. Sometimes the findings upset the apple cart, as it were. I know stories of families who’ve found, say, a Prof. Harold Hill-type travelling salesman sort of uncle who had two families in different cities. Uh-oh. Or families have discovered a distant relative of a different race. These kinds of discoveries can really open up one’s sense of family and one’s sense of oneself, as can remembering our place in the biggest family tree of all—the whole human race.

At Annual Conference this year, the guest bishop from the Methodist Church in Kenya spoke. Bishop Zablon Nathamburi has a great sense of humor as well as a deep commitment to the church and to the unity of the church. He seemed to take special delight in reminding us that he comes from a place in the world, Kenya, where our common ancestor resided. According to paleontologists, this ancestor once roamed the plains of the Great Rift Valley, and lived on the shores of Lake Victoria. Kenya, he said, is therefore regarded as the true cradle of humankind. And we are all related in the branches of the wide savannah tree spreading its branches across the African sky.

What a family we are! Each member created in the image of God. Each special and unique. Every member united with every other member everywhere in bonds of love, bonds of mutual obligation and accountability, familial bonds that carry precious gifts and deep responsibility. Our family includes not only those who show up on our personal family tree, but each and every other child of God.

No wonder the Apostle Paul used family imagery throughout his letters to the early churches as a way of helping them connect and helping them understand just how we are bound together. As David Penson read for us earlier, Paul urges the members to have the same care for one another, for if one member suffers, all suffer together, and if one member is honored, all rejoice!

As our summer sermon series, Questions God Asks Us, continues, we’re still in the Book of Genesis, which tells us that these questions are pretty darn basic to who we are. Today we hear how, in the beginning, in Chapter 4, tension quickly arose between Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve. Anger got the best of Cain and he killed his own brother. Immediately God asks him: “Where is your brother Abel?” Just as his parents tried to hide from God in the bushes, Cain tries to hide, too. “I do not know,” he baldly lies. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

So is Cain simply the biggest jerk and idiot God ever created? Or might this story be showing us something about how we all imagine that we can pretend that we have no responsibility for others, that it’s none of our business, that their suffering is through no fault of our own, that our actions have nothing to do with what has fallen upon them? What brother? I don’t know. Who am I, my brother’s keeper?
Where is your brother?, God asks again.

I’ve wondered about why God puts the question this way. With the dead Abel lying right there dead on the ground, it seems an odd question at first. God might have asked: “What happened to Abel?” Or “What have you done, Cain?” Or even “Why did you kill him?” But instead God asks where? “Where is your brother?”

If you were here last week, or know last week’s question, you should be able to figure out part of the answer. Last week God asked Adam and Eve: “Where are you?” This was not a question about physical positioning. It was an existential question—where is your heart? Where is your soul? Where is your relationship with Me?

So today when God asks Where” again. “Where is your brother?” God is again not asking a literal question. God knew perfectly well that Abel was lying right there on the ground dead. God’s question again goes to the very core of who we are. It goes straight to our heart and soul. By asking the question in this way, God opens the question to all of us and makes the issue much bigger than the facts in this specific case. Where is your brother? Where is your sister? God’s question opens wide the lens of our hearts, of our connectedness, and of our responsibility.

Where takes us as far and wide as our hearts will stretch. Is our brother the little boy living across the street in Family Place? Is our sister the elderly woman up the street now afraid to be living alone? Is our brother the rancher up in the Central Valley whose crops have dried up and whose herds have perished in this drought? Is our sister the little girl in the detention center in Port Hueneme who fled her home in Honduras for fear of murder and rape? Is our brother the man in Tennessee without the means to put a roof over his family’s head? Is our sister the mother in Haiti who longs for a bed-net to protect her precious children from malaria? Is our brother the Muslim at the Islamic Center, fasting through Ramadan, and inviting us to share the evening Iftar meal?

“Where is your brother, your sister?” God asks the question of all of us and we are all called to search our hearts to go deeper in what these bonds of relatedness, these family bonds, mean for the priorities we set and the choices we make. I am grateful to wrestle with those questions in this congregation, in this family of faith, because we are consistently a community that takes those questions seriously, willing, eager to go wherever the where question takes us.

Every person matters. You matter. And so—we give to the Imagine No Malaria campaign. We go to New Orleans and to Haiti to build churches. We go to the Islamic Center. And our youth go to Tennessee. To serve. To build. To be the hope for the brothers and sisters who await them there.

This year, they’re going to Fentress County, a part of Tennessee where the average per capita income is about $17,000. A quarter of the people there, our family, live below the poverty line. And because we understand that they are family, the United Methodist Church has been working in this part of the country through the Appalachia Service Project for almost 45 years now. This year this congregation alone is sending 18 youth and 8 adults who will work on providing safe and dry housing.

Where is your brother? Where is your sister? In Tennessee, our team is saying.

As Pastor Robert says in today’s Focus On: “Each year the youth experience what it means to be part of the larger church in action in the world. It is hard not to be energized by the Holy Spirit’s work within our Youth Service Project Team. That energy and life-giving love are infectious, deeply impacting our life as a congregation. Our Youth Service Project team goes forth on behalf of this entire church family to love and serve with open hearts and hands.”

Amen to that. And thanks be to God for these youth and adults who, by their example and their witness, help us all this morning to hear again God’s question: “where is your brother?” May we not rest easy with our answers. May we not stop at the first thing that comes to mind but instead let our minds and hearts travel wide to embrace the full scope of this world-wide family tree.

Why don’t we accompany our youth down the harder path, to those places where we discover family we maybe never knew we had? To where? Everywhere where there is a child of God in trouble or in need. Where? Anywhere God’s love takes us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Note:

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