

6.18.2023 Trinity 2 (1 John 3:13-24)

The third chapter of Genesis describes the first sinful act of disobedience against God - the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Immediately after this event, the fourth chapter of Genesis tells the story of their sons, Cain and Abel, and in that story we recognize just how quickly the first sin against God in the Garden so infected human nature that we find their son Cain standing in sinful opposition not only against God, but against his brother as well.

In the fourth chapter of Genesis we read that *“Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.” Cain spoke to Abel his brother. 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 Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:2-9)*

*Am I my brother’s keeper?* Cain murdered his brother, and his defiant reply to God’s question further reveals the speed with which sin, and its devastating effects, contaminated the world. Just one generation earlier, when his parents were confronted by God, who asked, *“Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”* (Genesis 3:11), at that time Adam and Eve hid in shame, made excuses, and tried to shift the blame, and while they certainly responded imperfectly, at least their words and actions communicate a sense of remorse and regret. Their son Cain, on the other hand, is callous and indifferent toward the fact that he murdered his own brother as he stands defiantly before Almighty God, and in Cain we see that those whose hearts turn away from God, those who separate themselves from the only Source of Love, will have no love to offer to another.

St. John, in his first letter, uses Cain as an example of who not to be. In the

verse that leads up to our Epistle this morning he wrote, “*Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did Cain slay him? Because his own deeds were evil, while those of his brother were righteous. So do not be surprised, brothers, if the world hates you*” (1 John 3:12-13). St. John carries the story of Cain and Abel forward to our day by telling us that Cain hated Abel for the same reason that the world hates the authentic Christian, because, in the words of St. John, those who *belong to the evil one* hate those who belong to God. “*The wicked despise the godly*” (Proverbs 29:27) like darkness hates light, like sin hates righteousness, like death hates life. Do not be surprised if the world hates you, it’s been this way from the beginning.

The comparison that St. John draws between the way Cain hated his brother Abel, and how the world hates the people of God, echoes the words of our Lord, who pointed out the fact that the world hated Him before it hated those who follow Him. Jesus said, “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...*” (John 15:18-20).

Two thousand years ago, the world persecuted and hated and crucified your Master, your Lord and God, so do not be surprised if the world hates you for choosing to follow Him today. Instead, as odd as it may sound, rejoice, for such hatred is evidence that *you are not of the world*, but have been chosen out of the world. Abel’s deeds were *righteous*, he was *not of the world*, and his tragic murder at the hands of his own hateful brother is proof that fact. Our Savior Christ, both God and man, was in the world, but He was *not of the world*, and if you picture Him praying from the Cross for those who were crucifying Him, you see evidence of that truth. St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was *not of the world*, and if you imagine him following the example of our Lord by praying for those who picked up stones to kill him, you discover a reason to believe what is certainly true: When the world hates you there is cause to rejoice, for such hatred is evidence that you do not belong to the world, you belong to God.

Jesus told His disciples, “*You will be hated by everyone because of My name*” (Matthew 10:22 BSB), “*because you are My followers*” (NLT), and St. John pointed out, it’s not only the world’s hatred which serves as a sign that we are in fact following Christ, that we do belong to God, but an even more certain sign is the love we express toward one another. John wrote, “*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love one another*” (1 John 3:14 NRSV). Love is the first *fruit of the Holy Spirit* (Galatians 5:22-23), and when the sacrificial love of God, a love that is broken and poured out, is the fruit of our daily lives, it is a certain sign that we are *not of the world*, that we have been *born again* (John 3:3), that we are no longer slaves to the sin that so quickly contaminated the world. Our love for one another stands in direct opposition to the hatred that led Cain to murder Abel, and such love is the infallible evidence, it is how *we know that we have passed from death to life*.

Love is the certain sign that this life-giving, life-saving change has taken place in us, and therefore St. John wants us to understand, and to be able to identify, exactly what love is, and he shares this knowledge with us not through a philosophical definition, but instead by pointing to the highest expression love. In other words, instead of telling us what love is, he points to the One who shows us what love is. John wrote, “*By this we know what love is: Jesus laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers*” (1 John 3:16). Unlike Cain, who hated and murdered his brother, we, who *have passed from death to life*, are called to follow the example of our Lord, and to *lay down our lives* in love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

From the time of Cain and Abel there have been two kinds of people: those who take life, and those who lay down their life. Those who defiantly ask, “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” (Genesis 4:9), and those who are their brother’s keeper. Those who reject God, and those who accept His gracious invitation to: “*Come; for all things are now ready*” (Luke 14:17). In the Gospel, many who were invited rejected the invitation to “*Come.*” They made excuses, “*I have bought a piece of ground... I have bought five yoke of oxen... I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come*” (Luke 14:18-20), and every excuse revealed the disposition of their heart. Like Cain, their hearts had turned away from God. Like Cain, they were not only in the world, they were

of the world. Like Cain, there was no sign of remorse or regret, instead only callous indifference is found in the answer: *“I cannot come.”*

There are two kinds of people. By the grace of God, may we be numbered among those who, in great humility and with a thankful heart, hear and receive our Lord’s invitation: *“Come, follow Me...”* (Matthew 4:19), *“Come unto Me...”* (Matthew 11:28), *“Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me”* (Matthew 25:34-36). May our love for God, and our love for one another, be the certain sign, the infallible evidence, the way *“we know that we have passed from death to life.”*