

“Raising Cain”
Scripture: 1 John 3:11-24
William C. Pender
OAKLAND AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 2/12/06

Conversation and conversion come from the same Latin root word. Conversation tends to be non-structured meandering...conversion is purposeful change. Conversation is generally free-flowing...conversion is more pointed. And yet how often it is that the conversation leads to the conversion. In a moment of honesty, a church member once shared a dislike for serving on a committee. The reason: the conversation always changed her mind; she frankly did not want to change her mind.

Now here's how a conversation goes. Let's say you are meeting a friend for lunch. You are just sitting down, being delayed in getting there due to road construction:

Are you ready to eat?
How about that road construction outside!
Road construction like that can cause an accident.
June Smith had an accident and she's in the hospital
Uncle Bill is in the hospital and he just hates the food.
Hospital food can be so bad.
Are you ready to eat?

That's how a conversation goes; meandering here and there. There is description for this meandering. Catch-words: road construction suggest accidents...accidents suggest hospitals...hospitals suggest patients who are staying there...staying there suggests food...and we are back to being ready to order our food.

Our text today from 1 John is meandering, catch-word conversation. The immediate prior verse spoke of hating one's brother or sister, according to the NRSV. Literally, the text reads: “hating a brother.” The opposite of hate a brother is love...but hating a brother brings up another brother: Cain.

1 John 3:7-11-18

¹¹ For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹² We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³ Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. ¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Hate brother...love a brother ...remember Cain...Cain murdered his brother...hate is a form of murder...love is a form of life...remember Jesus' love...he laid down his life for us...be ready to lay your lives down for others...laying down our lives is sharing your our worldly goods...love one another

in truth and action. This text reads like a meandering conversation.

Hating a brother...catch-phrase one. Who hated his brother? Why, of course, Cain. Remember the story: Cain was the first-born of Adam and Eve. The next sibling is Abel, his brother. Both brothers grow to maturity and work the land. Both present their offering to the Lord: Abel's offering is accepted; Cain's offering is not. We are not told why Cain's offering was not acceptable. There is no obvious difference between the two offerings.

All we find out is that Cain is jealous of his brother for his "success." Not to succeed and have someone else succeed: here are the seeds for violence. I remember my father telling of attending a high school where everyone had to participate in the sports program. He ran track. He was not a particularly good athlete, so he never scored any points for the team during track meets. However, in his senior year, he was closing in on the finish line and had the chance to place: come in third, which would give points to his team and would be a first for him. However, as he approached the finish line, another runner caught up with him. And without even thinking, he threw a little hip action into the runner and knocked him off the track. He placed third...but was promptly disqualified! Not to succeed and have someone else succeed: here are the seeds for violence. And in the case of Cain and Abel, Cain kills his brother.

In those early chapters of Genesis we find out that human beings cannot live with God—we choose to go our own way. We live outside the Garden of Eden. That's the story of Adam and Eve. The next generation cannot live with each other. Cain kills his own brother.

The details are sparse of this particular story, but their names tell something. Cain's name means to create or to acquire. And according to the stories that follow, Cain and Cain's family line create cities, music, tools, and weapons and acquire property and wives. Abel's name means breath or vapor. And, of course, there is no family line of Abel. He just passes away.

The first generation cannot live close to God...the second generation cannot live close to each other. The first generation breaks with God...the second generation breaks with each other. And the way of the world is the way of Cain: make it for yourself or go get it. We are a world that appreciates "go-getters."

Cain hated his brother...now says the writer of 1 John, the world hates you in the church (Catch-word phrase 2). Why? Because here we experience Abel-like acceptance. God accepts us, though at times it is difficult to see why. I am not so sure that the American church today experiences the hate of the world. What we probably experience more is the indifference of the world. What happens in the church is not particularly relevant to anything else in people's lives. Sporting events, recreation schedules, retail hours, bar hours—that's what happens on Sunday. But it is so much more than what happens on Sunday: the fastest growing religious group in America is those who have no particular religious persuasion at all. So, less hate, more indifference.

If Cain hated his brother...then who loved his brother? Another catch-word connection. Cain took the life of his brother...then there is the one who laid down his life for his brothers and sisters. "**We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.**" Here is Jesus Christ, the one who summarized the will of God in two simple commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. We do not want to love

God...we want to be God. We do not want to love our neighbors...we want to get something from them. Indeed, sometimes when we say we want the best for a loved one, even that can be a way to take care of ourselves.

The contrast set up here is Cain-like and Christ-like. Cain-like is death and a death-like existence. Christ-like is life and a life-like existence. Our text says: **“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.”** The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not simply an historical event that happened ages ago. His resurrection means that there is life in living Christ-like. In the second century of the church, an early church leader spoke of the persecution of the church—not so much the official oppression but the ostracism that the church experienced. However, Tertullian noted that the pagan persecution of the church came with this grudging admission about the church: “See, how they love each other.” That’s the ongoing mark of the church.

And remember Cain? After killing his brother, Cain and God have that conversation about being “a brother-keeper” rather than brother-killer. Cain is banished from the family. Cain is sure that everyone will be out to kill him. And he receives a mark from God—to protect him from being killed. Sounds like a resurrection mark of sorts—no one will kill him. Oh, but consider the price of that mark: Cain will always be worried that someone will act as he has...he will live with the thought that someone might be trying to kill him. Every day he will be concerned that someone will act like he has acted. Isn’t that “abiding in death?”

All is well and good, but few of us are really going to kill another person, though it has happened and will happen again. Oh, not murder. And few of us are asked to lay down our lives for another, though perhaps we have put ourselves at risk. But then the conversation meanders again.

No, I do not lay down my life, but I do lay down my credit card, my check book, my wallet. Here’s the next catch-word: **“How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”** We have shifted from Cain to Christ to heroic giving of our lives...to what to do with our worldly goods. What do our worldly goods have to do with our life?

Some of you may recall that the comedian Jack Benny created the image of a person who was very attached his “stuff”—he was not just thrifty, he was a tightwad. Benny regularly did a vaudeville skit where a robber accosts him. The robber holds a gun to Jack Benny’s back and says: “Your money or your life.” There is a long pause, with Benny clearly in deep thought. So, the robber jabs him with pistol and says, “I said, ‘Your money or your life.’” Benny says with exasperation, “I thinking about it.” Although a caricature, part of the power of the skit is the realization that our life can be tied to our stuff: our money...our possessions...our stuff can seem like the same thing as our life.

Money equals our life...our life equals our money. And lest you think we are going to make a stewardship plea here for Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church, you are mistaken. Though I would love to see a stewardship campaign that was entitled “Raising Cain.” It would not be about raising money...this congregation is wealthy beyond measure compared to so many people in the world. No, it would be about “raising Cain”—raising our sights above jealousy, above grasping, above being on the make, onto acquiring. “Raising Cain” would be rip-roaring fun in laying down our lives: our time,

talent, and resources.

Here's what it comes down to: we can talk about brotherly love...we can speak about charity...but it only becomes life-giving as we practice it. So our text today declares: **“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”**

The conversation continues...but has the conversion begun? Raising Cain...not in the sense of making trouble...but truly raising Cain. That depends on the ways we follow him who knew where life is to be found: love in truth and in action.