



IT'S ALL RELATIVE

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Before both of my sons ever ride in my car at the same time, they always call shotgun. This is a very important ritual. If you don't know what calling shotgun is, it's claiming the right to sit in the front passenger seat, the most privileged place to sit in any car. You stake your claim by being the first person to shout the word "Shotgun!" before you get in the car. It gets so competitive in our family that we've had to define the rules carefully. For example, you can't call shotgun ahead of time for the trip back home from somewhere. But if you're making multiple stops and the first ride is less than a couple minutes, shotgun rights continue for the next leg of the trip. And if there's ever a dispute, the driver makes the final decision. No questions.

That's calling shotgun. One day, two other boys were calling shotgun in the parking lot. Kevin was 12 and Ryan was 10. They got in a big argument over who called it first. It was going on and on. Their mom was getting very frustrated. Finally she said, "You know boys, if Jesus were here, he would say, "Let my brother take the front seat. I can sit in the back." The boys got quiet right away. Then Kevin said, "Okay Ryan. You be Jesus."

There's something about brotherhood that involves struggle. My younger brother and I are good friends now, but when I was growing up, I read the verse in Proverbs that says "A brother is born for adversity," and I just assumed that the author meant a brother is born to CAUSE adversity – not help you through it.

Sibling rivalry has a long history, going back all the way to those very first siblings. Let's look at their story.

Genesis 4

Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering,

but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

But the LORD said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

A few months ago, Karin struck up a conversation in the grocery store with a woman from Russia. This woman just opened up and started telling her story. Her husband had owned his own business and had done extremely well. The family had a beautiful home and nice cars. Then almost overnight it all changed. Her husband was diagnosed with cancer and all their money evaporated in medical bills. They lost their house. He couldn't work and was not getting any better. Suddenly, this woman found herself scrambling to put food on the table in a cramped apartment with her children, having to pick up the pieces of her life that had just been shattered. Which is why she needed to talk to a complete stranger at the grocery store.

Stories like that are miniature replays of Adam and Eve. Last week we left them just as they were being evicted from the Garden of Eden. Life as they knew it had just blown apart, thanks to the introduction of sin. Now they are trying to pick up the pieces and move on. They hadn't just lost a nice house – they had lost Paradise. A much harder existence is now ahead of them, one that's going to involve hostility and pain. And it's in this new world that they start a family.

The first family ever, and within one chapter, it's already dysfunctional. There's something sad and yet strangely comforting in that. We're not the only ones who are messed up! The problems go back to the beginning.

I think it's no coincidence that the first casualty of sin we see is the family. Devastation rears its ugly head in the context of relationships.

Back in chapter 2 of Genesis, God had said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." We're built to be in relationship. Yet now we see that having other people around is no picnic either.

For several weeks now, we've been talking about "the big picture," and one very important aspect of that picture is community. God designed us to be interdependent. It's hard to function without human interaction. Studies show that most people suffer mentally when they're isolated from other people for long periods of time.

And yet all too often, when we do interact, it's bumpy and difficult. Communication breaks down. Tempers flare. Misunderstandings pop up left and right.

That's the human condition. Relationships are vital, but troubled. If that's true in general, it's even more true for the church. The New Testament stresses over and over how important the connection between Christians is. And yet, just like in the rest of the world, relationships within the church can be tough to manage.

It's always been that way. The Apostle Paul had to step in and negotiate a truce between two women in the Philippian church:

Philippians 4:2-3

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

The argument has long been forgotten, but the tension between those women has been preserved forever. Apparently, the family of God is not immune from sibling rivalry.

So as we look at Cain and Abel's story this morning, I'd like us to do that with an eye toward relationships between our brothers and sisters in Christ. What can we see in Cain's attitude and actions that might hit home for us?

We don't know much about the childhood of these brothers. We do know that Eve was so happy when Cain was born. No doubt she had been fearful of giving birth for the first time in light of the curse God had pronounced, so when it was over and she was still alive she said:

With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.

Can't you hear the relief and pride in her voice? The name Cain is a play on the word for "brought forth." It's a name that suggests achievement. Have you seen the ads with all the horse riders looking like they're going on a fox hunt, and then it turns out they're chasing a lunch pail? It's an ad for ebay that ends with the tagline "Shop victoriously," with a woman proudly holding her Evil Knievel lunch box.

Eve has that sense of victory in naming Cain. He stands for accomplishment against the odds. He's the firstborn and he has that "can do" spirit from the time he's born. It's his position in life.

Eve is so proud and excited. Then look what happens next:

Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

That's it for Abel? No hoopla this time around? Maybe it's because I'm a second child, but I seem to detect a slightly less triumphant tone. Even the Bible here frames him in relationship to the firstborn. Eve didn't just have a second son – she had Cain's brother. And the name Abel is nowhere near as confident as Cain. It literally means unsatisfying or unsubstantial, like a puff of smoke.

Now I don't want to make more of this than the Bible, because in the very next sentence, the brothers are already grown up. But given the little bit we're told and what we know to be true in general about birth order and family dynamics, I think it's fair to say that the concept of Cain as the celebrated firstborn and Abel as the tagalong had to have affected the way they saw the world and the way they treated each other.

So it was no doubt unsettling for Cain when his little brother's offering was accepted and his was not. Didn't God know who was the oldest and strongest and therefore the best?

Scripture doesn't tell us why God didn't like Cain's offering. Some people have speculated that it was because Abel's was meat and his was just fruits and vegetables, but there's no reason to think that was it. It seems the offering itself was a secondary issue to what was going on in Cain's heart, and that's what God was rejecting. But Cain found it unthinkable that God would choose his brother and not him.

I had a bit of an ego in college, and as I've said before, I competed on the speech team. Now typically, I competed in a category called drama interpretation, where you go in to a room with six other competitors and take turns reading sections of different plays for judges, who would then rank you based on your performance. Without fail, I knew I was the best one in the round. No question, and I was being strictly unbiased. The judges, on the other hand, rarely agreed with my view of reality, and I didn't usually place first. But I always managed to walk away chalking it up to the judges not really getting it. Few people can truly recognize genius. It wasn't until years later when I saw a video of myself performing that I went, "Oh...oh...nooooooo...That's what I was proud of??"

At the speech tournaments, I couldn't fathom how I didn't win, because I was stuck with an idea of myself that didn't line up with reality. And Cain is caught in a similar spot. He just can't conceive of a world where his good-for-nothing brother would be accepted and he wouldn't. He gets angry. It feels unfair. He's the strong one. Why wouldn't God want to back a winner?

Cain's experience highlights two important truths about God's family for us. First, **it's not a comparison**. When I compare other people to myself, I'm going to put them in one of two boxes: Better than me, or worse than me. Whether we're talking about their golf game or their income or their list of known sins, we size them up in relationship to ourselves and make a judgment about them. And then we make a judgment about ourselves that is often equally wrong.

Remember Jesus' parable about the two men praying?

Luke 18:10-14

"Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: 'Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people — robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.'

"Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, 'God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.'"

Jesus commented, "This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

When we're in comparison mode, we give ourselves credit for good things that happen to us, and we blame others when we don't get what we're sure we've earned. That's what Cain found himself doing.

It's almost instinctive to think that way about other people. Why do we do that? For one thing, **we want to feel better about ourselves**. We had our men's X-box tournament last weekend, and I am not a gamer. I can't drive with a little joystick. My car was fishtailing all over the course. I saw Troy and Justin and Mitch and all these guys who are in a totally different league from me. This time I knew I was NOT going to place first. So what did I do? I made sure I got on the same team as Wayne Lindell, because I knew he and I were more on equal footing. It didn't help much.

We want to feel better about ourselves, so we look around for who we think might be a little inferior to us in one way or another. If there's somebody we can look down on, we think perhaps it elevates us a little bit. Of course we'd never phrase it that way, but that's the rock bottom truth of it.

Another reason we tend to compare is because **we want to avoid our own stuff**. It's easy to point out how far other people need to go to improve. The longer I talk about another person's problem, the less I have to face my own. Years ago I had a friend who was going through a major moral failure in his life, and when his wife confronted him on how he needed to change, he pointed out that she drank soda and that's bad for you, so she was the one who needed to change. It sounds pathetic when you hear it, but that was his way of evading the real issue. We do that all the time.

So we compare people to ourselves, then put them in boxes. The trouble is, we then assume God refers to our boxes in the way he looks at them. That's why it would make no sense to Cain if his younger, weaker brother found God's favor when he didn't.

One of the most aggravating truths of life is that God doesn't look at other people the way I do. He loves without qualification. He sees each of us as having worth. Rather than giving God my boxes to put people in, I need to get rid of my boxes and see the way he sees.

I really like what Paul told the Galatians:

Galatians 6:4-5

Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.

The family of God is not about comparison. Secondly, **it's not about competition**.

Cain was acting as if his own acceptance was ruined by Abel, as if God had chosen between the two. But God set him straight:

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?"

There was no limit to how many sacrifices God could approve. Abel's offering had nothing to do with Cain's. Cain was making it into a competition when there was plenty of love to go around.

Sometimes we get jealous of another person's success, as if they've used up part of a very precious supply that means there is less for us. In God's economy, that's not how it works. He has an infinite supply of blessing and mercy.

But to say that the family of God isn't about competition is actually taking the idea one step further. Not only are we not to be bothered when our brother or sister does well – their success is our success.

American Idol has started up again, and a few weeks ago, the judges had just given the thumbs up to one of the contestants, telling them they were going to the next round of the competition. The singer went running out of the room, and you could hear the cheers and clapping of their family and friends outside. Simon turned to the other judges and said, "I just don't understand how people are genuinely happy for someone else's success."

It might not make any sense to Simon, but it makes great sense in Christianity. We're all connected. The Bible uses that metaphor of a body to describe the church.

1 Corinthians 12:26-27

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

That's profound when you pause to think about it. Our lives are far more intertwined than we realize. We're connected to each other's well being.

Stephen Sondheim once wrote, "People make mistakes thinking they're alone." That is at the root of so many errors that we make. When I get jealous of someone, I'm forgetting that in Christ, their happiness is my happiness. When I don't want to burden someone with my problems, I'm forgetting that in Christ, the church's function is to help one another. When I refuse to resolve a conflict with somebody, I'm forgetting that in Christ, that rift affects the whole body.

I have sat in churches with people who would come week after week but sit in opposite corners so they wouldn't have to cross paths with someone they were fighting with, and it went on for years as if it didn't impact anything or anyone else.

That's not an option. Jesus told his disciples:

Matthew 5:23-24

This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

This is at the crux of what was going on with Cain. The Bible doesn't tell us why God didn't accept his sacrifice. We don't know and it doesn't matter. The sacrifice wasn't the real issue. His reaction to not being accepted was. Cain was trying to pin the blame on Abel, when it was his own relationship with God that was out of line. 1 John lays it out in black and white:

1 John 3:12

Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.

Cain's own attitude was wrong, but he took it out on his brother.

Here's the heart of the matter: **Our relationships with people reflect our relationship with God.**

We talk about spirituality in individual terms most of the time. I evaluate my own growth by how much time I'm spending with God or how often I've gone to church that month.

Chuck Coslon wrote, "Modern Christians...see the Christian faith primarily, if not exclusively, as the gospel of "Jesus and me." Christianity is simply a personal relationship with Jesus. Accept Christ into your life and you will be saved. This is true as far as it goes, but it falls woefully short."

What he means is that our spiritual walk is not separate from life within the community. I can't say I'm on good terms with God when I'm not speaking to my spouse. I can't claim to be respecting God when I'm not respecting my parents. I can't cry out to God for help or forgiveness or compassion if I'm holding back help or forgiveness or compassion from my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus didn't just take my sins away on the cross – he took my neighbor's sins as well. . If I hang on to a grudge or bitterness over that sin, what am I believing about the cross as it relates to that other person? To throw my punishment at them is in effect to throw punishment at Jesus, because he is the one bearing their load now.

You may have been badly wounded and unfairly treated. You may be fully justified in holding on to your anger toward the guilty party. But God says, "I'll deal with them separately. This isn't about them. This is about you and me. Your treatment of them reflects what you think about me."

Look again at what God told Cain.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

It sounds so easy. Do what's right. But sin is sitting right there, ready to pounce at the first opportunity, and so often it's in our relationships where it finds its doorway into our lives. Right after this conversation, we're told that Cain went and attacked his brother. He ignored God's advice and went ahead with his plan to eliminate his brother. And what he did drove him even further from what he had wanted in the first place. Instead of reaching acceptance, he alienated himself further from God than before.

This is a sad tale that doesn't end happily. One brother is dead and the other is banished. The family is forever fractured. It would not be a hopeful or helpful one if it weren't for one thing. This is God's story – not Cain and Abel's. Over and over again, Genesis

reminds us that it is first and foremost telling us about God. And what we can see of his character in this story is nothing short of amazing.

He's the God of second chances.

When Cain first presented his offering that wasn't accepted, God didn't get mad and punish him for doing it wrong. He gave him another chance. He encouraged him to change and try again, and he offered him the hope of finding the ultimate acceptance he wanted so badly.

At the same time, **He's the God of truth telling.**

The grace God showed to Cain didn't prevent him from calling sin sin. He told it like it was and said Cain needed to do the right thing. When Cain was trying to wriggle off the hook, God was the one asking, "What have you done?" A second chance didn't mean ignoring the problem. Getting to honesty is crucial in relationships.

The story also says that **He's the God of the voiceless.**

After Abel died, he couldn't defend himself against his brother. But God could. His love for Cain didn't keep him from holding Cain accountable for his action. Abel's death bothered God. He said Abel's blood cried to him from the ground. Abel is the first victim of injustice and God takes up his cause for him.

When God encourages us to forgive, he is not saying the hurts we have felt aren't important. He's saying they're too important for us to handle on our own and to let him be the God of justice that he promises to be.

Fourth, **He's the God of second second chances.**

Or maybe we should say third and fourth and fifth chances. Cain has just committed a hideously self-centered crime. God punishes him accordingly, but even so, he spares his life. He could have ended everything for him right then and there, but he mercifully lets him go on to have a family of his own and a productive life.

Finally, **He's the God of our back.**

Cain was nearly in a panic, convinced that someone would seek retribution and kill him for what he did. But God promised him protection. He put his mark on him and made it clear that in spite of his guilt, he would not abandon him.

In the middle of this story that looks like it's all about everything NOT to do in relationships, God's models everything TO do. Giving second chances. Speaking truth when it's needed. Standing up for the voiceless. Giving more second chances. And looking for ways to protect one another instead of attacking. Practicing those principles

not only brings healing to relationships – it also speaks volumes to the rest of the world about the kind of God we believe in.

Back in the second century, a young actor in the theater became a Christian. Given the nature of the theater world at that time, it was inconceivable for a Christian to stay in the trade. It was far too corrupt and immoral. So this young man knew he would have to give it up. But he had no other means of making a livelihood. His thought was that instead he would teach theater students who weren't Christians, and that way he wouldn't technically be compromising his own morals.

He told his church elders about his plan and they saw red flags everywhere. They said, "If it's wrong to be in the theater, it's wrong to teach people to be in the theater." That logic seemed clear, but since it was an unusual situation and he had no other work he could get, they decided to ask Cyprian, a bishop in the church at Carthage.

After hearing all the facts, Cyprian said to the elders, "You're right. What's wrong to do is also morally wrong to teach." The church had to hold the new convert accountable to this.

"But," added Cyprian, "if the young man cannot find other employment, it is the church's duty to care for him. And if your church is financially unable to do this, he can move over to us in Carthage, and we'll provide whatever he needs for food and clothing."

That's understanding what it means to be connected to each other in the church. That's reaching the ultimate goal of being the body of Christ – to picture as well as we can what God is like. Truth telling and having someone's back at the same time.

In all this story, I find it hugely encouraging that the God of Abel is also the God of Cain. That means he's the God of me, either way. He looks out for the victim and at the same time reaches out to the oppressor. We've all been in both roles in relationships – the hurting and the hurtful. And it is God who is at work in both cases, bring comfort or challenge as needed.

Normally, as we come to communion, I encourage you to think about your own life as it relates to Christ's sacrifice. I want to expand on that just a bit this morning and ask you to think of your relationships in light of the cross.

1. Is there a hurt I'm having trouble forgiving? Let God take the load of their sin.
2. Is there a hurt I'm having trouble confessing? God is asking, "What have you done?"
3. What are my relationships saying about my relationship with God?

Christ can bring us back together, and when he does, our relationships become a compelling statement to the rest of the world that there is a God who hears the victim, who forgives the offenders and who gives second chances and hope for relationships.