

It's interesting how the different readings get put together for the Sundays of the Church Year. Sometimes, the matches are pretty obvious. For example, both the Gospel and the Epistle reading today have a lot to say about grace. But then you get one thrown in that's less obvious.

What does the story of Cain and Abel have to do with grace? How did it get picked to go with the other two lessons? Though it might seem like a mismatch, as we consider that story a little closer, we find a helpful illustration both of God's grace and something very opposed to it: human pride.

Cain's story is one that shows us that pride, and it's a very tragic story, all things considered. Part of the tragedy is that it starts with high hopes, hopes born out of faith in God's grace. When Adam and Eve fell into sin and brought death into the world, God graciously promised that He would come as the seed of the woman and reconcile man to Himself. Even though Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden, in faith, they put their hopes in this promise of God.

When they have their first son, they are so certain of this promise that they think that he very well could be the promised deliverer. Eve names him Cain, which means something like "gotten," as in, "We have gotten the man promised from the Lord." They're so sure that Cain is the one that when another son is given to them, he's named Abel, which is "a breath," something temporary; it's the same word in Ecclesiastes that's rendered "meaningless" or "vanity."

The boys grow up, with Cain following his father Adam as a farmer, one who works the ground, while Abel becomes a shepherd, caring for the animals. Both were good professions, exercising the dominion which God had graciously allowed man to retain after the Fall. And in time, both bring a sacrifice to the Lord, giving back to Him a portion of what He had graciously entrusted to them.

Yet it's in this sacrifice, a response to the Lord's grace, that we begin to see the problems arise. We read, "And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard." Why is this? Why would God accept one and not the other?

Thankfully, God tells us why in His word. In Hebrews 11 we read, "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts." Abel's gift was offered in faith, and therefore pleasing to God. We can deduce, then, that Cain's gift wasn't offered in faith.

Also, we read in the book of Hosea these words, which are quoted by Jesus elsewhere: "For I desire steadfast love (or mercy) and not sacrifice." It seems, then, that Abel was trusting in God's mercy, and that his offering was a response to that mercy, whereas Cain was trusting in the act of sacrifice itself, that God would have to accept it because it was a sacrifice.

Abel reflects the tax collector from our Gospel reading, relying on God's mercy, while Cain reflects the Pharisee, thinking that all that he's done will earn God's favor. While Abel is looking by faith to God's grace and mercy, Cain is pridefully trusting in his own works.

How does the Lord God respond to Cain's pride, his trusting in his own efforts? Does He immediately blast Cain, condemning him then and there? No! God responds in grace, calling on Cain to repent and be reconciled to Himself and to Abel. He asks, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?" Of course, God doesn't ask this because He doesn't actually know. He's the God who knows all things, including the hearts of all men. No, He asks Cain this in order to get Cain to think, to reflect, and through doing that to repent.

The Lord says to Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" In other words, when you act in faith, which is what makes something good in God's eyes, your action will be pleasing to the Lord. It's like when a little child gives his father a coloring book page, and maybe the colors don't match and very rarely did he stay in the lines, but because it was colored and given in love, the father treasures it as a precious work of art.

The Lord also says to Cain, "And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door." If you aren't guided by faith, then your actions will come from your own heart. And Cain's heart, and the heart of every person born after him, has been corrupted by sin. Sinful inclinations and desires are always present – "crouching at the door" – as the Lord said. We must rely on the Lord and His strength to overcome these inclinations. If we pridefully think we'll be able to rule over them by our own determination and will, we'll find out we're horribly over-matched.

That's what Cain tragically shows us. Shortly after the Lord gives Cain a warning, graciously calling him to repent, Cain calls his brother out into the field. He doesn't do this to apologize, or to ask for Abel's guidance in offering an offering pleasing to the Lord. No, Cain rises up against his innocent brother and murders him.

Here we see one of the awful effects of pride. Pride desires to be the first, the best, the foremost. And when it can't be, it rages at those around, especially those who have done better. Cain's pride cannot stand that his sacrifice wasn't accepted while his brother's was, and so he hates his brother – despite the fact that his brother hasn't actually done anything to him.

Notice how this reflects the actions of the devil himself. The devil pridefully wanted to be the best, to be in the place of God rather than being content with his created station as an angel. Yet he could not be God, nor would he even be the greatest of the created beings – that honor was given to man. Man was created in the image of God, not angels. And so Satan's pride caused him to rage against man, desiring his destruction just as Cain desired Abel's.

After the horrible deed is done, the Lord comes again to Cain. And again, what does the Lord do? He questions Cain. "Where is Abel your brother?" Consider just how great the mercy and grace of God are, the love that He is showing to Cain. God knew full well what Cain did – Abel's blood was crying to Him from the ground – and still, He is there offering forgiveness, if only Cain will repent.

The Lord cannot ignore the sin, the first murder of man by man. But He is willing, even then, to take it upon Himself and pay the price for it. He still loves Cain and, in thousands of years, will be shedding His own precious, innocent blood to atone for the blood of Abel, shed in a murderous rage. The grace of the Lord is still there for Cain.

Yet Cain rejects it. What is his response to the all-knowing God? “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” The hardness of heart here, fueled by pride, is awful beyond understanding. Not only did Cain kill his brother, perhaps in a moment of sinful passion and rage, but even now, with those passions cooled, there is no remorse. There is no contrition, no sorrow over sin. There is only evil.

“I do not know.” Cain lies to the God who knows everything. Does he seriously think that God will believe him? Pride has hardened Cain to the point of doing absolutely ridiculous things – trying to deceive the Almighty – rather than humble himself and admit the truth.

And it isn’t only against God that Cain has hardened himself. He’s hardened himself against his fellow man, even his own brother. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” It’s an absolutely loveless statement. Cain is the most important person in his own eyes. Others aren’t his responsibility, his problem. Notice how Cain’s words here are the exact opposite of the Law of God. That Law commands us to love God with all we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Pride has led Cain in the exact opposite direction.

As the God who is just, the Lord then declares punishment upon Cain, and in His perfect justice, the punishment reflects the crime. Cain has poisoned the ground with his brother’s blood, therefore, the ground will no longer yield to him its strength. Cain had held up the fruits of the ground as his in a selfish sacrifice to God, now even that would be taken from him.

Yet God tempers his judgment with mercy, granting Cain protection from being murdered himself. Still, he desires Cain to return. But Cain tragically hardens his heart for the final time. He rejects the grace of God. We read, “Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord.” Obviously, Cain couldn’t physically go somewhere that God was not; the Lord is the Lord who fills heaven and earth. No, this line tells us that Cain rejected the Lord, pushing away His goodness, refusing to return to Him. Cain shunned the Lord’s grace and mercy, and in so doing damned himself.

Let Cain’s tragic story be a warning for us this morning. Giving in to pride, to anger, might feel good to our flesh. The temptation is certainly a strong one to give in to such passions, to get even when wronged and then to get defensive when caught. But the thing is, giving in to such sins, or any sin, never makes things better – always worse. If we try to resist such sins through our own efforts, they will rule over us, as they did with Cain.

Yet our Lord never leaves us to fight such sins on our own. He is the God of grace and mercy, the God who shows on the cross the fullest extent of what it means to be a brother’s keeper. As He repeatedly called Cain to repent, desiring to bring him back to His side, God continually calls to all men, all sinners. Whatever sins we might commit, however often we might commit them, Christ is always there with His nail-scarred hands, reaching out to us in love, waiting to pick us up when we call out to Him.

When we cry out with the tax collector, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner,” we know that His answer is always yes, because He is the God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

In the name of Jesus, amen.