

The Drama of Human Conflict

On Sunday we continued exploring the Genesis creation story, moving into the part of the story where human conflict breaks out.

1. Warm-up question: Jeff told the story of his earliest memory of feeling rage against someone else (his little sister). He described it as a kind of loss of innocence. What's your earliest memory of rage?
2. Welcome to planet earth, where conflict seems to be awaiting us around every corner. It's probably no coincidence that the first story told after the fall of humanity is one of human conflict. Read Genesis 4:1-16.
 - a. The story offers few details, leaving much to the imagination. Cain concludes that God honored Abel's offering, but not his. Use your imagination. What kinds of things lead us to think God is happy or upset with us in our lives today? What might have caused Cain to believe God was upset with him back then?
 - b. Why do you think Cain got so angry?
 - c. In verse 7, God says to Cain, "If you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." What does that mean? What was God saying to Cain?
 - d. Look again at verse 8. There are two possible interpretations. One is that Cain wanted to walk and talk with his brother in an attempt to work through his conflicted feelings. The other is that Cain was already premeditating murder. Which interpretation do you lean toward – and why?
 - e. How do you imagine the conversation in the field unfolding? What might Cain have said? What might Abel have said?
 - f. As the story is told, no human has yet experienced death. Do you think Cain knew he had the power to kill his brother? How do you think he felt when he saw what death is like?
 - g. When in your life did you first experience death? How did it impact you?
 - h. After he commits murder, God punishes Cain, but also protects him from being executed or killed? What should we draw from this? What might the "mark of Cain" (vs. 16) have looked like – or was it visible at all?
3. The story of Cain and Abel is a sign of things to come – a warning that we live in a world where even brother can turn against brother. Centuries later, we're still living that same story, still struggling with the same inner riptides that roiled Cain.

- a. In your life right now, who would you like to kill, figuratively speaking (of course)? What's going on between you and that person?
 - b. Imagine your own interpersonal relationships as a microcosm of international relations. Imagine each person in your circle of acquaintances as being like a separate country in the little world you inhabit. Imagine your mother is Brazil, your brother China, your coworker France, your spouse India, and your child Japan. If your own little world was blown up to a global scale, would it be a world at peace or war? What areas of your world need diplomatic attention?
4. When we're in conflict with someone, our weapon of choice is almost always words. Proverbs 12:18 says, "Rash words are like sword thrusts." Proverbs 18:21 says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." In his book "Love As A Way Of Life," Gary Chapman says our words are like bullets or seeds.
- a. When in your life have you experience words like bullets? What happened? When have you experienced words like seeds? What happened?
 - b. Most of us speak about 16,000 words per day, for a total of 860 million words in a lifetime. Jesus said, "On the day of judgment, you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter." Should we take this literally? Will we literally have to give an account for EVERY careless word?
5. All of this leads to the question of how we can do better when facing conflict with others. Jeff offered six suggestions:

Spiritual Tools for Peacemakers:

1. Pray for those who persecute you. Mt. 5:44.
 2. Bless those who curse you (via gestures of goodwill). Lk. 6:28.
 3. Measure your words; be careful what you say to them and about them.
 4. Give direct dealing a chance. (Speak the truth in love; listen with open heart.)
 5. If need be, disengage and love them from afar – refuse to stir the drama. Rm. 12:18.
 6. Humanize, don't demonize – empathetically imagine what it's like to be them.
- a. Which of these suggestions have you found work well for you?
 - b. Which of these suggestions is most challenging for you?
 - c. Think of the person you identified in response to Question 3.a. above – the person you would currently most like to kill. Take a moment to empathetically imagine: (a) what it feels like to be them; and (b) what kinds of experiences, challenges, and wounds may have made them that way. Describe what you see in your empathetic imagination. Does this make it easier for you to engage them as a peacemaker? Why or why not?