

**Modern Family**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**September 16, 2018**

*Genesis 4:1-16, Leviticus 19:15-18*

A few months ago, we cut our cable TV service. It was mostly my decision, we don't really watch a lot of network shows and it feels like a waste of money to pay for something we don't use. But now that football season has begun, I may be overruled! (someone invite Clark over PLEASE!)

Back when I had cable, I enjoyed watching the sitcom "Modern Family" on ABC on Wednesday night. The story revolves around three families: There's an older man married to a beautiful trophy wife from Columbia raising her son and a new baby in his retirement.

His daughter is married to a struggling real estate broker and they have two young adult daughters and one teen son, so they are in that phase of launching their baby birds from the nest.

His son is married to a man and they are parenting a precocious adopted child. The show presents just about every sort of misunderstanding and sibling rivalry there is. It's very funny. The adults, the parents, are usually clueless. And yet, despite it all, everyone somehow hangs in there for each other. There is always something graceful and loving about the resolution of every episode.

Maybe that's because none of the siblings have killed each other yet!

Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve – the ancient, "first family" and really, all the families of Genesis, have this mini-series feel about them. They display every sort of mischief, mistake, stupidity, blame, and dysfunction. At times they are pretty funny and other times quite sad. We recognize ourselves in them – even across the millennia.

Maybe we can take some solace in the fact that dysfunctional families, horrible situations and horrific deeds don't seem to block the biblical narrative.

Cain, the first child of human parents, is guilty of several offences: hatred of kin; vengeance and grudge-bearing; and attempting to benefit from the shedding of blood.

But I believe the Creator comes out in an even worse light, having conveniently ignored the rule set forth in our reading from Leviticus: *"You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial..."* Did Cain know in advance the kind of sacrifice God expected of him? It's not in the text, so we don't know. Which is why it seems like Cain is set for failure and punished quite harshly when he blows it.

We don't know why Abel's sacrifice was more acceptable to God and Cain's was not. If this story's purpose is to tell us about who our Creator is, we can only conclude that God is despotic, capricious and judgmentally cruel; a Being that is to be feared rather than loved.

And that's why I think this story is not primarily about God, but about what it means to be human in a world filled with jealousy, anger, murder and violence.

It certainly has something to say to us about origins: how people ended up living in tribal groupings, each with its own faith, culture and customs. As such, it's a myth. Not a historical account. There is no explaining the inconsistencies, such as where Cain and his sons found their wives without resorting to dating their sisters!

When you think about it, this moment of rejected offering is a perfect opportunity for Cain to grow up. God tells him: *"Look, it's a beautiful basket of apples and gourds, but your heart isn't into it, I can tell. I'm giving your brother an A, and I'm flunking you in Worship 101. But here's the good news: you can retake the course. I'll give you another chance."*

Cain has a choice: he can listen to God, learn, change, and grow up, or he can throw a pity party and stay in his anger. He chooses the pity party.

And while God's behavior may not be what we expect of the deity, it is all too familiar in human relationships. Someone has been unfairly treated and feels hurt and rejected. Longing for acceptance, they behave badly and pretend not to care. Further punishment only compounds the resentment and stores up problems for the future. It's a heavy load.

I've thought about it for some time now and realize that I don't really get this story - too many questions and not enough answers.

But I feel this story. I know this story. And so do you.

Why are there some children who seem to be sprinkled with the pixie dust of success in which everything goes right for them, and some children who can't get seem to get out of their own way?

Why do the good ones die young?

And why do I feel as if I am still wandering in the land of Nod?

Do you know where Nod is? Nod is all the times and places where we can't find God or ourselves. Nod is the place that seems beyond hope or beyond redemption. It's where we feel weak, lost, and helpless. When your marriage seems hopeless, when your children ignore you, when your parents abuse you, when your life is falling apart—that's the land of Nod.

Nod is often our reality. And the question before you and I is the same one that was before Cain: how are we going to live in this reality? Jealousy, anger, hate (both self-hate and hate that is directed to others), are all very real sometimes. Do you let them become the "*sin that is lurking at the door?*" Or do you master them and move ahead?

I know people who waste their lives sitting in remorse, thinking that someone else got the credit, the praise, the love. It can be devastating - I don't want to belittle that - but what are you going to do... have your own spirit shrivel up and live a life of bitter solitude?

Most of us don't physically kill our sister or brother or parent or child, but we've experienced that something precious between us has died: there's a family argument, and years go by without a phone call. Maybe we don't even remember what the cause of the original brokenness was.

Cain had the choice, the freedom of mastering his feelings. It was only one offering after all.

That line about being my brother's keeper haunts me. It reflects this universal tension between individualism and community.

For Cain, this question of responsibility is a deflection of his guilt. I often wonder, whether I, too, am deflecting. Whether I am attempting to absolve myself of responsibility for others because the answer is clear: love makes me my brother's keeper and my silence will not save me.

I imagine Cain wants the answer to be 'no'. But the only moral answer is 'yes'. We are all mutually responsible for one another.

So yes, Cain, you are your brother's keeper, your sister's keeper, your neighbor's keeper, the stranger's keeper, the enemy's keeper – no matter what has happened to you.

And for the rest of us who are trying to follow Jesus and know the answer to that question is yes, how can we stand by and not cry out when the needs of the most vulnerable in our society are used like cards to be played in negotiations?

The consequences will come: Cain will become a marked fugitive and a wanderer. He will settle in the land of Nod – which is Hebrew for wandering. He believes God's face is now turned from him. And yet, just like last week when Adam and Eve were punished but clothed, ejected but not rejected, so too this week. Cain is marked, identified and protected. Just like you and I are in our baptisms – identified and protected, marked as beloved even as we wander East of Eden.

And yet again the divine pattern emerges:

In God's apparent capriciousness is God's certain promise;

In God's seeming fickleness is God's fidelity.

I know that doesn't make sense – but God is bigger than our sense and if we could figure it all out – well, then God wouldn't be God.

Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve: a family broken and separated but still part of the drama of grace.

I believe that God is calling the family back; perhaps not by DNA but by water and the spirit. A family called to care for each and every misfit brother and sister; a dysfunctional, crazy, loveable, diverse family invited to the table of grace.

So we remember the break-up and we choose to celebrate the coming together, where brother and sister are welcomed; heaven and earth touch: the family restored, a people cleansed and called and sent.

And we choose to live as those who are marked and protected, beloved and empowered, free to choose to do well and to feel again the divine love that is ours in Jesus Christ, our brother in this wonderful Modern Family!  
Amen.