Septuagesima Sunday
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IN NOMINE JESU

Genesis 4: 1-8 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering He had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your contenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.

THE CAIN WITHIN US

The sound and healthy world of creation now lies behind man. The cherubim with the flaming, slashing sword sees to it that there is no returning. The logic of events which follow from one great, initial wrong decision goes on persistently working itself out. From the plucking of the forbidden fruit there now develops Cain's fratricide, and already the first stones of the tower of Babel are being gathered together. Here is the beginning of what we call world history. It is the space into which we are thrown; the space in which Cain lifts his ax and Abel falls lifeless to the ground; the space in which men fight to the death for a place under the sun, in which the stronger triumph and right is threatened by power; the space in which the battle between belief and unbelief is fought out and in which as Goethe put it the miracle men of history rise to conquer half the globe and then fall back again into the depths from which they came. The history of the world is the space in which Cain's ax finally becomes guns and bombs, hydrogen explosions and space rockets.

If you read the story of Cain and Abel only halfway through, you are in for a great shock. For, without any reason be~~gin~~ing given, we are suddenly and abruptly told that the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering He had no regard. There must be some reason, some motive for God's strange approval of Abel and rejection of Cain! Both came from the same parents - they had the same heredity. Both pursued a solid, steady vocation: the one was a farmer, the other a shepherd. Both approached an altar and performed a religious act of worship. One may also assume - though this is not explicitly stated - that each of them brought the choicest offerings, Abel the best sheep of his flock and

Cain the richest fruit of his harvest. Yet one is accepted and the other rejected Abel departs with a blessing. But Cain's countenance falls and he begins to brood and sulk. Was there some reason why Cain did not suit God? The question haunts us, for it is the same question we are always asking about ourselves.

There are people who are good and decent in their way, but they have no luck. In examinations they get the very questions for which they have not prepared. When they drive a car they are always hitting the red lights - or they are accident prone: they can innocently part their car in a parking lot and invariably the fenders get crinkled. Or as young people are heard to complain, of all the nice girls they meet, they always get stuck with plain Jane. They are always out of luck. Could this be the type that does not suit God? And then there are other people for whom everything runs smoothly. Their children get A's in school; they never have to go to the dentist; and all they have to do is smile and everything falls into their laps. Apparently they are the good Lord's Sunday-children who suit Him very well. Is this what the Bible has to say about God? Do the manger in Bethlehem and the Lord's Prayer and the Cross on Golgotha have nothing more to proclaim that this one hard, distressing fact that God can do what He wills, that He chooses Abel as His favorite and has a grudge against Cain? [illegible] possible. Perhaps some light is shed on this strange mystery in the fact that the names Cain and Abel have meanings which are revealing. Cain means I have gotten a man. Thus Eve, the proud mother, suggests that this son will bear the dignity of being the first-born, the favorite, the essence of power and strength. Abel, on the other hand, means something like nothingness, frailty. The younger brother is thus overshadowed by the elder from the very beginning. He is destined to play second fiddle. He is representative of those who get the short end of the stick.

So from the beginning Cain grew up with the suggestion that first rights in everything were his due. The will to power and the egotistical self-assertion which were in his blood ~~and ours too~~ appear to him to be perfectly legitimate. For him Abel is by no means his neighbor, not even a brother, but simply exists to be used: I, Cain, am the star, the privileged one; but Abel is simply an extra on the stage. Abel is of interest to me only in so far as he serves my career, as

long as I can make a profit out of him. Apart from this - that is, as a 'man,' a 'person,' he is nonexistent.

Apparently Cain himself did not realize what was happening inside of him At first the two still went together to their altars. Even Cain was not a godless man - he went through the performance of his religious rites. But what does that count for? Were not the scribes and Pharisees in the temple too? May it not be that many a regular churchgoer, who says Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us when he utters the Lord's Prayer, really does not want his sins forgiven, because he has no desire whatsoever to recognize his sins? May it not be that he is by no means prepared to forgive the person who has injured or cheated him - that on the contrary he is actually pouring more oil on the flames of his hatred?

Cain considers it quite natural that God should recognize him, that God should confirm him in his role as the stronger one, the more privileged one. He thinks, perhaps, that it must be so that God is on the side of the heaviest artillery, the biggest cars, and social superiority. And likewise it is no problem to him that God's scale of values should also assign Abel to the category of an also ran. For just as Cain expects that Abel will dance to his tune, so he also expects the same of God. God is supposed to dance when Cain pipes. For somehow God has become for Cain a kind of celestial errand boy who must do exactly what Cain desires and what Cain demands. But as soon as God does something that does not fit into his system, that is not right according to his standard of values - when God reacts differently from what Cain expects and considers right - when the smoke of Abel's sacrifice rises up to heaven and Cain's offering is not accepted -- then God becomes an Arch-Enemy and Cain's heart is filled with hatred. And in the very next moment this hidden drama between Cain and God spills over into the realm of human relationships. Renunciation of God brings with it renunciation of the brother. He who hates God also hates his neighbor.

Thus Cain becomes consumed and tormented by a burning envy and jealousy. It grows within his bosom like a creeping cancer until he is blind to everything else. All he can see is what his brother has and what he does not have. God

intervenes and warns him that sin is lying in wait at his door and desiring to get at him. But how can Cain ever hear this warning when he has long since shaken off the Warner? Then follows his invitation to Abel: Come, let us go out to the field and have a talk with each other. The deadly ax is raised and comes down upon Abel But this is not the end of it. Cain's solo hatred soon becomes a whole chorus of hate and Cain's murder is followed by war and rumors of war and every brutal and subtle form of murder that history has developed. The one perilous spark that flared up in Cain's heart soon became a blazing, raging fire on a thousand battlefields. We look with horror and fright upon our world today, as we feel the rope of world tension being pulled tighter and tighter around us.

The story of Cain and Abel calls us to order, because it says to us: Don't keep looking spellbound into the atomic holocaust that threatens your earth, but look at the little sparks from which they come; look at the Cain within you. Return again to the altar and present your sacrifice in a way different from the way Cain did. All honor to your diplomatic endeavors and your peace organizations, but all this is only symptom therapy - external patchwork if you refuse to go to the source of the disease, if you do not lay yourselves upon this sacrificial altar so that God may be able to make something new of you. Everything depends on your relationship to God, upon your being at peace with Him. Everything else is out of order as long as this one thing is not in order.

This is really the whole point of the Gospel proclamation. It is a constant source of amazement to me that Jesus Christ never set forth a reform program for the abolition of slavery, for anew system of law and society, and a new and better world order. All that Jesus said was that we have a Father who is seeking us, a Father who grieves over the last thief and the last hangman beneath the Cross a Father who plants a spark of true love in the corrupt heart of the woman who was a sinner. And then He lets us see our neighbor anew beneath the eyes and with the eyes of this our Father. He lets us see anew the blind man there at the corner, the prostitute in her self-despising, the rich young ruler with his inner emptiness the old woman in her loneliness. He always shows us only the human being next to us. He makes us responsible only for a tiny part of the world's great burden.

And even He Himself, this Jesus, whose arms embrace the world and to whom has been committed all power in heaven and on earth, He too has time to be present for the one individual who needs Him today, even though this one individual be only a poor wretch, a nobody in the eyes of the rest of the world.

When I hear this message of my neighbor, when I am touched by my Lord's concern for every single human being, when I live in Christ and He lives in me -- then at one small place I shall traverse the misery and discord of the world. Christians are not reformers, but they walk through life with their fellow men. The meek and the loving shall inherit the earth, because they walk through it and suffer with it. Jesus Christ would redeem the Cain within us and only so does He redeem the world. Love conquers all, because it meets the world's misery at a single point, at the point where my neighbor stands - that neighbor whom I find so hard to love and who perhaps also makes things hard for me. But God Himself put him right where he is. I can overlook him and I can hurry past him, but then I shall run straight into the arms of God. And if I do that, what will God be for me? What will I answer Him when He says, Where is Abel your brother? Amen.