

Cain and Christ

Trinity CRC, August 18, 2019 AM
Baptism of Mackenzie Hale

1 John 3:11-24, LD 40

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Dear friends in Christ,

If murder is simply physically killing someone, I don't know of one person here who is guilty. So why bother to talk about? Pretty well everyone agrees that killing someone is wrong.

Murder in its obvious form looks like those two young men from BC who are now dead themselves. For the better part of the past month, police were looking for those two murderers. It appears these guys had some serious struggles growing up, told family back home that they were heading up north for work, but instead went on a killing-spree before killing themselves. If that's murder, we are not guilty.

Murder looks like the mass shootings in the US that we hear about all too often. Someone shoots at innocent people in a shopping centre because he hates migrants who are coming illegally into his country. He might even hate non-white people and he's trying to protect his land from being overrun by "others." Such people are motivated to actual murder by racist thoughts brewing in their minds, by growing hatred or rage, sometimes even by a desire for what they think is justice. If that's murder, we're also not guilty.

To use our Bible reading, murder looks like Cain. In Genesis 4, we read about the first two brothers born into this world. Cain is the oldest and Abel is second son of Adam and Eve. Cain is a crop farmer and Abel farms animals. Around harvest time, Cain brings an offering from his crop to the Lord and Abel brings an offering from his flocks. God sees the heart of both of these brothers and, the Bible says, God approved of Abel's offering but not Cain's. Cain then becomes very upset and we read this:

Gen 4:6 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ 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."

God is not particularly thrilled with what makes Cain tick. And he offers Cain a word of correction and encouragement. But rather than look at his own heart to see where he is wrong, Cain gets jealous and angry with Abel. That anger stews and brews in his heart and it gets so bad that he decides he can't stand Abel. So Cain takes Abel out in the field and kills him there. Maybe he hit him on the head with a rock. We aren't told. But I suspect he took Abel completely by surprise, ridding himself of the brother he had grown to hate. But, in the process, he created a whole new set of issues.

Again, we could look at that story and say, “I’m not guilty of murder. The sixth commandment has no application for me. Let’s move on.”

Not so fast. Yes, murder looks like two deranged young men from BC. It looks like a racist shooter in a US shopping centre. And it looks like angry Cain smashing his unsuspecting brother on the skull with a rock. Murder has a lot of different faces. It can look like a government promoting and funding abortion that takes life in a very sanitary and even a legal way. It can look like a doctor providing medically assisted death. But, again, that wouldn’t touch too many of us.

It gets closer to home, though, when murder involves shooting from the lip rather than slinging a gun from your hip. The truth is that sometimes murder looks like a president disparaging migrants with words. Sometimes it looks like a Prime Minister belittling a justice minister or people who disagree with him. But that’s not us either.

However, sometimes murder looks like an angry father threatening his family with violence or a mother telling her daughter she’s a major disappointment and will never amount to anything. Sometimes murder looks like a young daughter steaming with hatred for mom or dad because “they never let me do anything fun!” It looks like a troubled son who tells his mom, “I never want to see you again. You’re dead to me!”

But it also looks like you and me sharing important “details”—gossip—with friends about the girl in your class or the guy in the cubicle beside you at work. It also looks like character assassination we can easily do in online chats or texts or emails. We call it online bullying. Murder is even raising our middle finger toward other drivers when they cut us off in traffic, drive too slow or wait too long to go after the light turns green. Sometimes murder looks like us hiding behind our words but refusing to help the poor, saying, “I worked hard and took care of myself, so those people can do the same. I’m not giving a cent to help them!”

You see, look at our Bible reading again. It makes clear that Cain killed Abel because he was jealous that his own actions were evil while Abel’s were deemed righteous. He let that brew in his heart, creating evil thoughts which led to murder. So John writes in v.15,

1 Jn 3:15 Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer...

The words we read from the Heidelberg Catechism build on this verse and the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and many other verses. It says that murder includes a lot more than physically killing someone:

I am not to belittle, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor—not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds—and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge.

The next Answer builds on the first saying,

By forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder: envy, hatred, anger, vindictiveness. In God's sight all such are disguised forms of murder.

There we have it. When we get to the root of murder, we see that we're all guilty. We're all like Cain who got jealous and angry and then killed his brother. We have the seeds of actual murder in our hearts every day. The Apostle John in our Bible reading basically says that when we don't love our neighbour as we ought to, we're guilty of murder.

That's the interesting thing about the Bible. God wants us to see how far from perfect we are. Thankfully, we aren't shooting each other with guns but almost every day we have some sort of thought—if not action—that puts others down or thinks they are not good enough. Be honest about it. The Lord doesn't draw this to our attention so we'll get discouraged about ourselves or hate ourselves. Not even so we'll try harder to be more loving. No, just so we'll be honest about our need for help from Jesus.

We Need Christ's Power in Us to Love

Here's the crazy (good) thing about the Bible. Here's what's amazing about God's love for you and me. Here's what we call the Gospel—the Good News of Jesus. We read in v.16,

1 Jn 3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

In order to help us overcome the sometimes hateful and murderous desires of our hearts, Jesus gave up his life. He willingly died to help us deal with our destructive—yes, murderous—thoughts, words and actions.

If the Bible is new to you, let me explain briefly. God created the world good. Adam and Eve, the first people, sinned. They decided that doing life their own way instead of God's way would be better. They quickly found out that they were wrong. It was their firstborn son Cain who killed their other son Abel. Nothing would drive home how serious sin is more than feeling the death of your child. And on top of it, the death of your child at the hands of your other child. Tragic. According to the Bible, sin results in death which the first family experience firsthand of when Abel was killed.

Ultimately, sin is separation from God. So God could have just given up on mankind when sin started. He could have decided to do all sort of different things. Maybe just start over. But instead he said, "I'll fix this for you. I've got a plan to get this world back on track and better than ever." And that plan centred on God the Father sending Jesus his Son to become our Saviour. To save us, Jesus paid for our sins on cross, restoring us to God, forgiving our sins like murder, whether in the

mind, words or actions. Jesus undid the death-penalty for sin and gives us new life with God. And our new life in Jesus comes with his new power in us. Power to help us overcome the hatred, jealousy, anger and more that lies at the root of murder.

Let me share with you the story of a man I met years ago when I was a college student—Rev. John Perkins. According to Philip Yancey in his book "Soul Survivor", John Perkins, a black minister in the US South "lived through the worst nightmares of the civil rights movement" starting back in the 1960s (Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor*, 31).

Perkins worked hard for equality and for the good of his African-American sisters and brothers. He started a church, then a Bible Institute, a radio program, followed by a health clinic, a co-op, a vocational training center, a recreational center for youth, as well a tutoring, after-school, and housing program. But when he started a voter registration campaign and led an economic boycott to protest police brutality in downtown Mendenhall, Mississippi, he crossed a line. He was accosted by over a dozen white policemen and beaten so severely that doctors had to remove 2/3 of his stomach and it took him 18 months to recover.

Perkins later reflected, "That time was without a doubt my deepest crisis of faith. It was time for me to decide if I really did believe what I had so often professed, that only in the love of Christ, not in power of violence, is there any hope for me or the world. I began to see how hate could destroy me. In the end I had to agree with Dr. (Martin Luther) King that God wanted us to return good for evil. 'Love your enemy', Jesus said. And I determined to do it. It's a profound and mysterious truth, Jesus' concept of love overpowering hate. I may not see it in my lifetime. But I know it's true. Because on that bed, full of bruises and stitches, God made it true to me. I got a transfusion of hope. I couldn't give up. We were just getting underway in Mendenhall" (p 35)

Perkins illustrates for us how Christ's power changed his heart from hate to love. In that sense, Jesus healed his murderous heart and filled it with love. Jesus empowered him to love even those who hurt him and stood against his desire for justice and equality for all people. Perkins realized—as we must—that hate kills us from the inside. The love of Jesus, however, changes our heart so that we have his power in us to love people we would otherwise hate. His power in us transforms our thoughts, words and actions so that more and more we are captivated by God's grace to us and extend grace and love to others.

Years after he was beaten, Perkins found himself back in Mississippi, where he spear-headed a movement for racial reconciliation, often appearing with "Thomas Tarrants, a KKK operative who served time for murder, got converted in prison, and now pastors a multiracial church in Washington, D.C."

You see, friends, it's one thing to be delivered from murderous thoughts, words and especially actions. But don't let the saving power of Jesus stop there in your life. Take it step farther, like John Perkins did, and reach out with love and grace in the power of Jesus to those who you might be killing in your thoughts. Who is that you hate? Who do you belittle? Who do you envy? Could that be the person Jesus is calling you to love? Let our powerful and loving Lord Jesus help you to love your neighbour like he loves us and them.