

# My Brother's Keeper, Pt. 1

Genesis 25:19–28; 27:30–45

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Our worship series this summer is called “Seeking Peace Together.”

As I mentioned last Sunday, for the next six Sundays, we’re going to be in the Old Testament.

We’re going to be rummaging around in some old, possibly unfamiliar stories, pondering how God might speak peace into our lives and into our church and into our world through them.

For the next two Sundays, we’re going to be focusing on the story of Jacob and Esau, their conflict, and their eventual reconciliation (sort of).

This was one Sunday in our worship resources, but the suggested texts were too many and the story too rich to confine it to one sermon. So, I’ve decided to stretch it out into two. I’ve entitled these two sermons, “My Brother’s Keeper, Pt. 1 and Pt. 2.”

As I said, the texts suggested for these Sundays were long. It would have taken fifteen minutes just to read them all, so I’ve had to condense them into a few portions of the story for our readings today.

If you want the whole sweeping narrative, it’s found in Genesis 25-35.

I want to begin even earlier in the story. I want to begin in Genesis 4 with another pair of brothers. Cain and Abel, the sons of Eve.

We know the story, right? Cain and Abel each bring an offering to the Lord, Cain’s is rejected while Abel’s accepted (we’re not told why). Cain reacts angrily. His face is downcast.

And then the Lord says to Cain,

‘Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it’ (Gen 4:6-7).

Well, Cain does *not* master the sin that lurks at his door. Anger quickly gives way to violence. Cain murders his brother.

The Lord inquires into the whereabouts of Abel and Cain famously (and deceitfully) responds, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’

*Am I my brother’s keeper?* That question has echoed down the ages. Cain’s implied answer is, “no.” I have no responsibility to my brother. I do what I want.

The Lord’s question implies the opposite. You *are* your brother’s keeper. You have a responsibility to protect, to care for, to be invested in this relationship. Your interest extends beyond yourself.

Well, enmity between brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and husbands and wives and friends and enemies has also echoed down through the ages.

It shows up again in the story of Jacob and Esau.

I’m going to give a broad outline of the story which will hopefully fill in some of the gaps between our two readings this morning.

Our first reading told the story of the birth of fraternal twins—Jacob and Esau—to Isaac and Rebekah and took us up until the point where Jacob was swindling his fairly gullible sounding brother out of his birthright.

The second reading picked up the story partway through the story of Jacob (with the help of his mother, who preferred him to Esau) hustling Esau and their blind father (who preferred Esau) out of a final blessing before he dies.

Esau arrives in his father’s tent, out of breath from hunting, with some supper for dear old dad. He’s looking for a blessing, but he won’t find one, at least not the one he wants.

Why? Well, I’ll summarize the part that we left out for brevity.

Isaac is old and blind and nearing death. He sends Esau out on a hunting expedition so that they can have a meal together and Isaac can bless his firstborn (Esau came out first, Jacob came out grasping, and never really stopped).

Rebekah is eavesdropping on this conversation, and she hatches a plan to trick her husband into giving his blessing to her preferred son, Jacob.

She tells Jacob to go out and kill some goats, prepare them the way dad likes them. She dresses him up in Esau's clothes, using a bit of goat hair to make smooth-skinned Jacob more closely resemble his hairier twin.

And together they go and trick Isaac into offering his blessing to Jacob instead of Esau.

That's where our second reading picked up this morning. Esau comes back and is furious to discover what his brother has done.

*Isn't he rightly named!* Esau exclaims. For Jacob (From the Hebrew Ya'aqov) means "to supplant" or "to overreach" or "to grasp."

Esau, like Cain, is filled with rage over his brother. Sin crouches at his door and he doesn't look remotely interested in mastering it.

Once dad dies, Esau resolves to go the way of Cain. Far from being his brother's keeper, he will be his killer.

Rebekah gets wind of Esau's plan and tells Jacob to hit the road. Go to my brother Laban in Harran. Stay there until Esau's fury subsides.

(Little does Jacob know that he will be gone for two decades! More on this next week.)

That's where our story ends today. With one brother almost literally at the other's throat.

Genesis 25:22 said that the boys were jostling in Rebekah's womb. Well, it seems this was a hard habit to break.

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So, what does an ancient story about fractious twins have to do with us? What does it have to do with seeking peace.

Well, the seeking peace part will come more explicitly next week when we fast forward a few decades and see how the brothers are doing with the passage of time.

But I want to talk about the first question. What does this story have to do with us? Everything, I think.

Simply put, this story tells the story of the human condition.

Several years ago, I attended a few Truth and Reconciliation Events across Canada. These were important places for indigenous people to tell their own stories, to narrate the painful and traumatic history of residential schools and colonialism and how the effects of this persist today.

I remember often being struck by those two simple words. "Truth." And "reconciliation." You can't have one without the other.

We can't just blithely say, "Well, let's move on." Genuine reconciliation requires the telling of uncomfortable truths.

What is true for the darker parts of Canada's history is true of the human condition more generally.

We need to be honest about who we are if we are ever going to be reconciled with our fellow human beings or with God.

We need to acknowledge that, in important ways, the story of Jacob and Esau and Cain and Abel and Adam Eve is the story of all of humanity.

It can be tempting to do one of two things when we read stories of human beings behaving badly in the bible.

We can try to sanitize the story and make the characters flat and one-dimensional. We can assume that everyone in the bible is some kind of hero for us to try to follow, and that every story is there for a moral lesson.

We may puzzle over the fact that Jacob *seems* like kind of a scoundrel, and the whole family *seems* kind of messed up, but we must be missing something because Jacob becomes Israel and Israel is a pretty important part of our story, and *it's in the bible*, so he must be good.

Many do this.

Or we can write it off and put it in the category of “a primitive story with weird, unenlightened characters in bible times” or “strange stuff that took place before Jesus arrived on the scene” and assume it has nothing to do with us.

Many do this as well. Both are errors.

The story of Scripture is *our* story. It holds up a mirror to the human condition. And the individual stories in Scripture tell *our* stories, too.

We are not so very different from Jacob and Esau or Cain and Abel or even Adam and Eve.

We hold grudges, like Esau. We lie or tell the truth in self-serving ways, like Jacob. We play favourites, like Rebekah and Isaac.

We harbor resentment and bitterness, even though we know we shouldn't.

We use other people to get what we want and hit the road when our actions come home to roost.

We take the fruit in the garden. Faced with the choice between God or self, we choose self with alarming frequency.

We point our fingers at Eve or Adam or the serpent or anyone else when we're caught red-handed.

We shirk responsibility for our actions and ignore those that God has called us to care for. We cynically ask, like Cain, “Am I my brother's keeper?”

This is not a flattering picture that I am painting here. And of course, I am not suggesting that we all do all these things all the time or to the same degree.

But I think if we're honest, we must acknowledge that the seeds of all these things reside in every human heart. Including our own.

I think each one of us has some relationship in our lives that has suffered or is suffering or will suffer because of one or more of these profoundly human tendencies.

This is simply who we are. It is not flattering, but it is true.

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I was in my twenties when I first read Japanese Catholic Shūsaku Endō's novel *Silence*. The story is set in the context of the 17<sup>th</sup> century persecution of Japanese Christians (a few years ago it was turned into a film starring Liam Neeson and Andrew Garfield).

It asks hard questions about the nature of martyrdom and faith and fidelity and suffering, and, as the title suggests, the silence of God.

There is a character in the story whose name is Kichijiro. He's kind of a wild-eyed drunk who kind of skulks around the borders of the story.

Kichijiro is a Japanese Christian who accompanies Frs. Rodrigues and Garupe (Portuguese Catholic priests) from Macao to Japan, who leads them to the Christian community in Japan that is struggling in the shadows.

Kichijiro is also well practiced in apostasy, having denied Christ in front of the authorities numerous times to save his own skin.

He is a conflicted character. He has suffered deeply, watching his entire family be tortured and killed by the Inquisitor. But he is also being quick to betray his fellow Christians.

Kichijiro is the Judas of the story. His life is marked by shame.

He is viewed with disdain by his fellow Christians for his many treacheries. He is treated with suspicion by Fr. Rodrigues, to whom he continues to return seeking confession and absolution for his sins.

He is hounded by guilt and desperate for forgiveness, yet he cannot change his ways.

There is one scene that I struck me the first time I read *Silence*, and which has remained with me ever since.

It's one of the numerous times Kichijiro is asking for absolution. Fr. Rodrigues is surveying the miserable figure before him with a mixture of pity and contempt.

And then he has this moment where he remembers that "Christ did not die for the good and beautiful. It is easy enough to die for the good and beautiful; the hard thing is to die for the miserable and corrupt."

This doesn't mean that Jesus doesn't love beautiful people (by whoever's definition of the term). It is simply a way of expressing the truth that Jesus died for the unrighteous.

He died for the cheaters and hustlers like Jacob, for gullible thugs like Esau, for favourite-players like Rebekah and Isaac, for violent men like Cain, for sinners like Eve and Adam.

For sinners like you and sinners like me. For the whole human race.

As it says in Romans 5:6-8:

<sup>6</sup>You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

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We've talked about Cain and Abel and Jacob and Esau. Let's end with another pair of brothers.

I've spoken often about my abiding love for the story of the lost sons in Luke 15:11-32. Like many, it's probably my favourite of Jesus' stories.

The younger son sets off with his father's money full of disdain and desire. He's done with this stupid place and this stupid family. He's elated to be rid of the oppressive shackles of a father who doesn't understand him and a life he never wanted.

The older son grumbles in the shadows, rehearsing his list of grievances against his miserable ingrate of a brother, against his weak and pathetic father, against the burden of duty that he daily struggles under, against a screwed-up world where merit is ignored and incompetence is justified, where virtue goes unrewarded, and vice has a party.

The father stands at the gate sick with worry and regret. *Why couldn't I get through to him? What did I do wrong? What else could I have tried? What did he need that I couldn't see? How could he treat me like this?*

The story is soaked in disappointment and conflict at every turn. It is a story of a family who, in their own ways and to varying degrees, cannot give each other what they need. It is a story of breakdown and failure—a story that tells so many of our stories in so many ways.

Until the end.

Until a crushing defeat is met with a tear-stained embrace.

Until agonized humiliation encounters “all is forgiven.”

Until “what about me?” meets “all I have is yours.”

Until the many ways we fall short come up against irrational and unmerited mercy.

Until our countless disappointments shrink in the face of a fierce and relentless love.

Jacob and Esau tell the truth about who we are. And it's not a pretty truth.

But according to Jesus, the father who stands at the gate tells the truth about who God.

And the hope of the gospel—the good news that brings salvation and life—is that the truth about God is stronger and truer and deeper and wider than the truth about us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

