

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

by Rev. Kathleen Scott

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I. Cain and Abel

Many of you may know the story of Cain and Abel. In the book of *Genesis* in the Old Testament of the Bible, it is said that

“Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.” And “Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock...And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering. But to Cain and unto his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very angry and his countenance fell. And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou angry? Why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? ...And Cain talked with Abel, his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and slew him. And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel, thy brother? And he said, I know not: am I my brother's keeper?”

A. The famous question: Am I my brother's keeper? The deeper meaning in the story is the nature of our relationships to one another and to the Infinite Beingness that we call “God.”

1. While in our Declaration of Independence, it states that “all men are created equal,” we know that due to conditions of race, creed, gender, sexual orientation, level of financial status, quality of education, parentage, etc., we do not enjoy equality in opportunity, acceptance, status or even basic living conditions.

2. In the story of Cain and Abel, jealousy entered into the picture -- even some religious rivalry. We know in our world, there exists between religions and even denominations within a religion an attitude of, “My god can beat up your god;” “My religion or denomination is truer than yours;” “My spiritual practices are superior to yours.” .When Cain was questioned by God as

to the whereabouts of his brother in the story, Cain gave God a sarcastic answer: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” And down through the ages and in all kinds of conditions and circumstances, this question still dwells in the hearts of humankind.

a. Regarding the homeless/street people, I have a confession to make. When I moved to New York City in the ‘70’s, I was a very tenderhearted middle class woman. I was shocked to see people living in horrible conditions on the street some obviously sick or wounded, and folks just ignoring them, walking around them, making no effort to help. Shortly after moving there, I saw a man, bleeding from the head, lying half on, half off the sidewalk, his head in the street. No one was helping him. I called 911 and stayed with him until an ambulance pulled up. When the driver got out, he said to the man, “Not you again!” And then gave me a disgusted look, and said to me, “Why did you call us?” I was so taken aback by his attitude, his reluctance to help the man.

b. Fast forward eight years later, after living in Manhattan where 80,000 heroin addicts lived on the streets and robbed people to get money for a fix, drunks slept in doorways, people who were mentally ill constantly begged for money and sometimes even physically assaulted one in the subway. I had become hardened. It was a challenge just to get to work without being assaulted by someone. I remember while I was working at the General Theological Seminary as the Registrar/Assistant Director of Admissions, taking a few new students around the neighborhood known as Chelsea, we saw a man sitting on the back of an automobile, unwell, fall off the car into the street. The new students were concerned, and I brushed it off as, “He’s just high on heroin. Ignore him.”

1. I moved to California after eight years in NYC, and such sights were much rarer, especially in Huntington Beach, CA where I lived with my mother. I studied for the ministry and in time, moved here to Visalia. One day, I was approached in a parking lot by a homeless woman, who was very dirty and looked mentally unbalanced. Without even thinking, I thrust my hand out and yelled, “NO!” She looked like I had slapped her in the face. And I felt it, too. I was surprised at myself, how unmerciful I had become, and here I was, a minister! I realized that I did not see that woman as a fellow being, worthy of love, respect, compassion. I later went back to the parking lot and looked all over for her to apologize, but never found her.

2. My former spiritual center, now known as the Center for Spiritual Living, began a program called the “baggie ministry. This was

started as a way to extend help to the homeless. One-quart baggies are filled with food items, water, clean socks, a toothbrush and toothpaste and a note that reads, "Whoever you are, whatever your circumstances, please know that you are loved." There is no information about particular church enclosed, no effort made to convert to any particular religious view. A committee of members assembles 100 baggies, and the congregation is encouraged to take a few in their cars, and give them out as they encounter folks who are in obvious need.

3. I wish I could say that I am the one who thought of this, but I did not. I even found it difficult to do at first. However, I began to participate, and I've given out many of the baggies. The opportunity is to look into the eyes of the person, and see them as a sacred being, expressing compassion, love, and concern for their well-being. I am grateful for the person who started this tradition which has continued to this day. One homeless woman told me when I regularly contributed food and other items to her, "Thank you so much, but what I would really like is a hug." She was filthy, smelly and obviously had lived on the street for a long time, pushing her grocery cart full of odds and ends. I got right out of my car and gave her a big hug. And I was happy to do so. It helped me *and* it helped her. She wept and said people were usually so mean to her. I remembered my New York hardness and was glad it was completely gone.

II. In the New Testament of the Bible, Matthew 25:34, there is a portion of scripture I find very moving when Christ says, "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came unto me." When the disciples asked him when they had done any of those things, the reply was, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me."

A. As a minister, I used to regularly receive letters from prisoners requesting money and other forms of help. As a *female* minister, I was very cautious because of the number of single men in prison who might wish to gather female friends and who are looking for more than spiritual guidance or mere friendship. So, while I would send books, I did not visit. One day I received a letter from a prisoner in Corcoran who said he had read an article I had submitted to Creative Thought magazine entitled, "Is Life Amazing or What?" He said he had been in solitary confinement and had attempted suicide twice, and having read the article, decided not to kill himself.

1. The article was about me and a man I had known a long time. At the time we first knew each other, he was an alcoholic and I was a very angry person living a rather dissolute life. Years passed, and the man got involved with AA and got onto a very serious spiritual path. I began to get involved with a particular spiritual teaching and my life underwent a dramatic transformation. I eventually trained for and entered the ministry and submitted regular written meditative prayers to a religious publication. I bumped into the formerly alcoholic gentleman at a concert one day and he called out to me, “Hi there, *Reverend*.” I was shocked. I said, “How did you know I was a minister?” He said, “I read your prayers.” Both our lives had dramatically changed. A year later, I became the minister here in Visalia at the Spiritual Awareness Center, and that gentleman was a member of the church. He asked me to perform a wedding for him and his fiancé, which I did. And as I was standing before them during the ceremony, I had a thought, “Wow! How did we get here?”

2. The article in the Creative Thought magazine that the prisoner had read was about the changed conditions of the alcoholic man and myself, and that no matter how terrible one finds one’s current circumstances or state of mind, life can change dramatically for the better – and not to give up. I was very pleased that the article had had that effect on the suicidal prisoner. I mailed him books and sent letters encouraging him, and pretty soon he made a request for me to visit him in prison. He said he had not had a visitor in 7 years. I was very reluctant. I don’t like prisons. I didn’t know what his crimes were, but I did know he was serving a life sentence. However, I felt very strongly that I was to do this thing I most strongly did not want to do! I did force myself to visit the man. I was so nervous. So was he. He was so nervous that when he came to the table we were assigned to sit at, he placed his glasses on the chair and sat down on them! We both burst out laughing. “A little nervous?” I said. “Yes!” he said. “And so am I!” I said. In that moment, I saw not a prisoner, but a fellow human being. I have been visiting that man for over 12 years, sending books and encouraging letters, and praying with and for him. When we get together, we play cards, Scrabble, dominoes. And for that time, he gets to feel like a “normal” human being.

3. In a book I’ve been reading entitled, “Just Mercy,” about a black lawyer who began to visit and help death row inmates, there is a line about a man named Henry, “He gave me an astonishing measure of his humanity. In that moment, Henry altered something in my understanding of human potential, redemption and hopefulness.” (p. 12). That has been my experience with this particular man that I have visited with for so long. While in prison, he has lost a

stepfather, a son and a grandson. He has married. I have been in touch with his mother, his wife, and even the prison chaplain who requested my help with him during his times of grief. This man has grown strong in faith and in determination to live a good life, even while in prison, and is now participating as a mentor in the prison system.

4. In addition to the stories of Bryan Stevenson's interactions with death row prisoners, he also reports some very troubling statistics:

a. Prison population has increased from 300,000 in the early 1970's to 2.3 million people today.

b. 1 in 15 born in 2000 will go to jail or prison; 1 in 3 black male babies born in this century is expected to be incarcerated.

c. This is the only country in the world that condemns children to life imprisonment without parole.

d. More than one-half million in state or federal prison are there for drug offenses today, up from 41,000 in 1980.

5. "We've institutionalized policies that reduce people to their worst acts and permanently label them 'criminal,' 'murderer,' 'rapist,' thief,' 'drug dealer,' 'felon' – identities they cannot change, regardless of the circumstances of their crimes or any improvements they might make in their lives." (p. 15). One of the most powerful observations made in the book is that, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." (p. 17-18).

III. We have seen how many of our fellow Americans are still in the grip of racial prejudice, fear, ignorance, misogyny, homophobia. Especially during this election cycle, these states of mind have reared their ugly heads. And the problem of the shooting of young black men by police officers has given rise to the "Black Lives Matter" movement. And, of course, the "All Lives Matter" response. And while it is true that all lives matter, we know that some appear to matter more than others in our country. I remember when President Obama was being interviewed by a news person who asked him if he was shocked by the racism that had asserted itself since his election, and he wryly replied, "No. I was black before I was president." I have four black people in my family and I dated a black man for

many years. I cannot tell you how many times they have been pulled over by police for “driving while black.”

A. We must educate ourselves and confront within ourselves and in our culture attitudes, fears, ignorance, prejudice, feelings of superiority and entitlement, and work, first to heal ourselves, and then to find opportunities to be instruments of peace in our troubled world. The prayer of St. Francis of Assisi has been a prayer that I have memorized and used in meditation for many years:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is sadness, joy.

Grant, O Divine Master, that I may not
So much seek to be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
It is in dying to self that we are born
to eternal life.”

When I first began to use this famous prayer in meditation, I thought it pertained to my ministry to others; I discovered that I needed to sow love, pardon, faith, hope, light and joy in my own heart first, to heal fear and ignorance within me before I could be of any assistance to others struggling with those states.

So, the answer to the question posed by Cain to God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” is yes! I encourage us all today to do what we can to heal ourselves and then reach out in compassion to those in our world who are suffering, and to say, as Thich Nhat Hanh, a great Buddhist teacher, has recommended, “I am here for you.” We can do more when we are willing: doors will open, opportunities to be a healing presence in our world will show up.