

**February 11, 2018**

**TEXT: Genesis 4:8–16**

**TITLE: We Are Our Brothers', Our Sister's Keeper**

*By the Rev. Jimmie Hawkins, director of the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness*

I pray that you consider with me the sermon title, “We are our Brother’s, our Sister’s Keeper.”

I bring you greetings from your Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C. Greetings from my wife Sheinita, daughter Kaela and son James. I have been in Pittsburgh since Thursday and blessed to meet with students and staff at Pittsburgh Seminary. I was blessed to participant in worship at the Presbytery, met with members of the Black Caucus and today am privileged to preach at East Liberty Presbyterian Church. There is something providential about being in worship as an appropriate ending to this trip, but also as a way of beginning this new week. To worship the God we love in spirit and in truth. I want to thank your ministers for their gracious invitation. I was greeted by your pastor, the Rev. Randall Bush, and your associate pastors, the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy and the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf, have been wonderful.

Pittsburgh finds itself in somewhat of a renaissance. *Lonely Planet* and *Time.com*’s “Money” blog have listed two neighborhoods among the top ten coolest in the United States. Pittsburgh is among the 20 finalists for Amazon’s much-coveted HQ2 site. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* ruthlessly proposed that Pittsburgh would be a much better headquarters by pointing out the detriments of the other cities:

- Philadelphia as having East Coast weather and swaths of abject poverty;
- Houston is now under water;
- St. Louis is battered by racial strife;
- Chicago, with its sky-high homicide rate; and
- Detroit, with a labor pool nowhere near as deep and educated as Western Pennsylvania’s.
- It celebrated Pittsburgh’s good housing, that Amazon, Uber and Google already have operations here, Pittsburgh’s diverse population, low crime rate, land availability and reasonably good race relations.

What are “*reasonably good race relations*” and is that something worth noting? Well, we kind of get along.

African Americans from Pittsburgh have a long and distinctive history with contributions to the cultural, political, and social evolution of the United States. From jazz legends Mary Lou Williams, Earl Garner, Grover Mitchell, and Earl Fatha Hines to playwright August Wilson, from labor protests in the 1950s to the Black Power movement of the late 1960s, Pittsburgh has been a force for change in American race and class relations. It produced black communities in Homestead, Braddock, Duquesne, McKees Rocks, Clairton, and other towns and cities along the Monongahela, Allegheny, and Ohio Rivers. Pittsburgh’s Peabody High School is now Obama High School. (book: *Race and Resistance*)

But there appears to be additional perspectives. In 2015, *Forbes* magazine placed Pittsburgh 48th for how blacks fared economically, tied with San Francisco and ahead of only Cincinnati; Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Milwaukee. Pittsburgh has had success in replacing the steel industry with jobs in education, health care and technology, yet to the exclusion of black residents. While both black and white income are relatively low, there is a sharp disparity. In 2015, Black household income stood at 46% that of whites, compared to 61.2% for blacks nationally. In 1990, the area's black income was nearly 53% that of whites. Unusually large disparities also have existed for home ownership and poverty. According to the Brookings Institution's 18 month-study between 2010 and 2015 the median wage for African Americans in Pittsburgh dropped nearly 20% while every other race saw an increase. Poverty for African Americans increased by 25.9%, while it decreased for whites and Hispanics, the latter dropping 19%. This happened not just in the East End neighborhoods but across the entire Pittsburgh metropolitan region. Especially in the outer-ring communities and municipalities that have yet to benefit from the presence of the new Google/Uber-based economy. East Liberty's residents have yet to be sustained by the opening of a Target, let alone Amazon.

Said one East ender, "I get really (angry) when I see them try to jump through hoops...when we have worse \*\*\* water than Flint. I don't see Amazon contributing, and I definitely don't see the city seeing to it that they contribute. These are the stories they don't want to talk about, like, we get so focused and excited about all these new developments, but what about the people?" (Citylab.

<https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/10/filmmaker-shows-unlivable-pittsburgh/542901/>)

What about the people?

Is this not our calling: To be concerned about people? We live as a society which has lost its way. A country wherein businesses are defined as people, and a person's worth is determined by their racial identity and economic worth. We have a president who has disparaged Mexicans as rapists, Muslims as terrorists, Africans as excrement, and Norwegians as valuable. We have a congress which has given corporations a billion dollar tax cut with plans to pay for it by cutting Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

The question for today is: Are we our brother's and sister's keepers?

This question became infamous when Cain was confronted by God after he had secretly murdered his brother Abel. Or so he thought. God asked him: "Where is your brother, Abel?" to which Cain gave the cryptic answer, "I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?"

Cain was angry. Not a righteous anger at injustice, but a deep rooted, negative, destructive wrath. Angry at God for refusing his offering. Angry at his brother for being such a goody two-shoes. Angry at the world. And he did not know what to do with it, how to contain it—or more importantly, how to release it in a productive manner. Cain is

unable to express the true source of his anger and so he takes it out on his younger brother, Abel.

All of us get angry, angry at the way our children behave, angry at our political leaders when they appear impotent and uncaring. We even get angry at God for the pain, violence and death all around us. But at the base of it, we are angry at ourselves for the mistakes we have made, the opportunities lost, and in our service to God, our limitations and inability to make a greater difference in this world.

Anger seems to be the abiding temperament in this country today. The 2016 election has been dubbed the “angry election”. Google “anger in America” and you will see: “The Angry American: How Voter Rage is Changing the Nation; America has Always Been Angry and Violent (New Republic); America's Anger Is Out of Control.

This country is enduring the impact of out-of-control anger. An anger that is not rational, reasonable, or sensible. And like Cain, our anger is out of proportion to our situation and misdirected.

But this story reveals to us a way out. Anger must be expressed in a positive and productive manner. If Cain had openly and realistically revealed the source of his anger everything would have been different. And let us not miss the fact that God is not passive for God goes to Cain and warns him not to let his anger overcome him. God gave him an opportunity to express how he felt when God asked, “Why are you angry?”

The love of God is such that God acts in a proactive manner to prevent us from doing something rash, horrible and consequential. God reveals Godself as a God of prevention. God will come to us in the middle of the night. God will offer opportunities for help from family and friends. But we must open ourselves to the presence of God and allow God into our life when we are most vulnerable to pain, anger and despair. God seeks to interfere to prevent destructive actions before they are undertaken. But we must breathe, be attentive to God’s voice, listen and act accordingly. For that moment will arise when God seeks to keep us from sin.

But Cain does not listen. Cain does not reveal the true source of his anger. He lures his brother into the open and kills him. And answers God with the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Well Cain, yes, you are and we are. The Bible resoundingly answers, “Yes”. We are our Brother’s keeper as hospitality is demanded throughout its pages. Abraham takes in the three travelers on the road and feeds them (Genesis 18). Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan who helped the injured Jew despite the fact that they despised each other.

I John 3:17 reads, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”

Philippians 2:4 reads, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

James 2:5–17 reads, “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?...What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

This is the faith that we follow. This is the Lord who leads us.

There is the story of the two brothers who were very wealthy and who did nothing to help anyone else. One died and his brother approached the minister and said, “I want you to say during the funeral that my brother was a saint and I will give the church a million dollars.” The minister agreed and said during the funeral, “This man was a horrible person, but compared to his brother, he was a saint.”

We must care about what happens to all in Pittsburgh; to those who are being priced out of their neighborhoods by gentrification. For what some describe as progress, others describe as loss. We must ensure that when billion-dollar corporations come to town, that they provide more jobs than they displace. Living spaces that are affordable, livable, and peaceful.

And before I leave you today, there is one more element in this passage that bears mentioning: The final encounter between God and Cain, wherein God serves as judge to Cain’s callous action. God condemns Cain to a life of struggle and toil to produce food from the ground, to be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.

And for me, Cain’s response is unbelievable. He complains that his punishment is far too great for him to bear. Here he is, a murderer of his own brother and he raises the objection that someone will murder him. But what God does is even more unimaginable, God grants him grace. God issues a protective order around Cain and threatens to do sevenfold to anyone who dares to touch him.

This is the God that we serve. A God who is preemptive and tries to keep us from sin. But also a God who protects us in the midst of the consequences of our sin.

Therefore, our call is to be preemptive and protective. To look down the road with a vision for ensuring that if Amazon comes to Pittsburgh, you will ensure that it is a partner for all of the residents of this city and beyond. We are called to protect the

interests of our neighbors as defined by Jesus. That all benefit from the resources made available.

On the night of June 28, 2015, in South Cumminsville in Cincinnati, Ohio, Suliman Abdul-Mutakallim was shot in the back of his head as he walked home carrying food for himself and his wife. The 39-year-old Navy veteran was robbed of the food and the less than \$60 he possessed. His mother Rukiye, a native of North Carolina and a devout Muslim, was at the court hearing more than two years later for then 14-year-old Javon Coutler. She walked up to Javon, who'd just admitted involvement in her son's death, and hugged him. She also embraced his mother. She pledged to do everything possible to make him a better man. She revealed that the three murderers have been infected by a disease, but that they are young and can be cured. "Those young men—we need to fight for them because they are going to come back out, and they will be older. But if they have no light, then this same disease is going to repeat itself and they are going to take another person's child's life and eventually their own. And every mother's heart must feel this. We have to fight for them to see that there is a better life, and then they have to fight to get to where that better life is."

We are in a struggle to bring forth the light of God expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus, our Lord.

In September 2014, President Barack Obama issued a directive to cities, counties, and communities across the nation, to become "My Brother's Keeper Communities". He challenged elected officials to work with local partners to forge long-term and strategic programs to improve the livelihood and development of all young people, with a strong focus on young men and boys of color. He said, "That's what 'My Brother's Keeper' is all about, helping more of our young people stay on track. Providing the support they need to think more broadly about their future. Building on what works—when it works, in those critical life-changing moments."

The City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County officials, and community leaders, have embraced the President's call to action and dedicated themselves to create a more equitable community where all residents are able to benefit from the growth and improvements made over the last decade. The MBK Pittsburgh-Allegheny County have given support to the "*Homewood Birth-to-College Expanded Learning Pipeline*" model, which addresses opportunity gaps for boys and young men of color.

"Brother" means all young men of color are my brothers. "Keeper" means that we:  
a. inspire minds, b. access resources, c. model success, d. facilitate opportunities, e. recognize all have value by affirming that their life experiences are powerful and productive, and essential to crafting solutions to which they are accountable.

We must live by the words sang by Mahalia Jackson and lifted up the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

*"If I can help somebody as I pass along,  
I can cheer somebody with a word or song,*

*If I can show somebody he is travelling wrong,  
Then my living will not be in vain.  
If I can do my duty as a Christian ought,  
If I can bring salvation to a world overwrought,  
If I can spread the message as the master taught,  
My living will have not be in vain."*

When you follow Jesus, your living will not be in vain. When you love your neighbor as you love yourself, your living will not be in vain.

Go forth as your sister and your brother's keeper.