

June 19, 2021

Every now and then, God reaches down to meet us mortals with a question through scripture. The Divine mind of God does not echo the human mind, but rather challenges it, probes it, and interrupts it!

In our text God is having a conversation with Cain. As a backdrop to the story, Cain has killed his brother- Abel. Cain and Abel are the first sons of Adam and Eve. Cain, the first born, was a farmer, and his brother Abel was a shepherd. The brothers made sacrifices to God each of his own produces. Each man had his own distinctive qualities.

But a rivalry came between the brothers. For some reason Abel's efforts received the smile of heaven, and Cain's did not. Cain's envy of his brother burned in his heart. As time went on, Cain became mad, and envious and jealous. One day Cain's anger got the best of him, and he killed his brother. **Perhaps someone should have informed Cain that different does not mean deficient.**

God looked down and inquired of Cain, where is your brother? Cain's response to God was defensive at best, "how should I know, Am I my brother's keeper?"

Cain was not fuzzy-headed or confused by what he did! It was Cain's policy to look for #1. It was Cain's policy to do to others before they do to you.

God's question, where is your sister or brother? is a question that deals with the very basic of human relationships. It is a question that is directed to each of us at a personal level, but it is a question that has communal and universal implications.

It is a question that interrupts our present. It is a question that probes into what we consider, our private lives! It is a question that reminds us of the fact that we are not islands, but that we are inherently interconnected with one another. It is a question that even if we would like to avoid it, we cannot because this question comes from the very mouth of God, our Creator, who created you and me- our creator who creates every human being. And to be created and birthed by God means you are a blessing from God.

A confluence of national politics, grief and the rage following the murders and deaths of too many Black Americans by police has brought the **holiday of Juneteenth which is** celebrated annually on June 19- to new prominence across the country. We are in a time of racial reckoning.

Juneteenth is tied to the story of enslaved Black people in Galveston, Texas, learning that they had been emancipated, close to 2 ½ two years after the Emancipation Proclamation had formally been put into place.

It commemorates the end of racial chattel slavery across the United States- but it is also tied to that event, when you have people who were still living in bondage, even as the Emancipation Proclamation had technically emancipated them some 2 1/2 years prior.

It is an important day because it tells and retells the story of Black people's ongoing struggle for freedom in a nation that is invested in forgetting the past and refuses to acknowledge the deep pain of trauma, torture, separation, dehumanization that runs through our national narrative. It is a day that joins truth, healing and hope together.

As God's beloved community, Juneteenth Day gives us one more chance to stand up and be counted to declare God's dream for the liberation of all people. The value of every human being in God's eye and the equality Jesus bring to us all. It is an opportunity to shift the narrative. Juneteenth is an important day of celebration because it marks an important milestone in a much broader vision and aim for human liberation.

God ask each of us, where is your sister? Where is your brother? If we can answer this question rightly, your humanity and my humanity would come into the fullness of our inheritance as children of God. Our common life together would cause us to imagine and actively live out God's dream for justice and racial healing. Yes, we would embrace the fact that we are our sister's and brother's keeper. God made it so.

Where is your sister? Where is your brother?

If we answer this question rightly, we need to unlearn our fears of others, our sisters, and brothers. There are no strangers

If we answer this question rightly, we need to acknowledge that the journey will be uncomfortable and despairing at times. We must learn to do uncomfortable things.

If we answer this question rightly, we must be willing to listen to the stories of those hurting, suffering. We need to be willing to listen with an open minds and non-judgmental hearts. And embrace of racial justice requires historical truth-telling and active listening.

If we answer this question rightly, we must stand for and with our sisters and brothers who is back are against the wall. While many of us have been taught to stay away from problems, we need to get up close to people and situations to unlearn what we think we know and learn what we need to know.

If we answer this question rightly, we must let our hearts be broken. Brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy and care for one another.

In closing I want to share a story about Avery Jenkins. Avery was a young man who wrote to Brian Stevenson asking for help. The letter suggested that Avery was suffering from mental illness. In the letter Brian learned of Avery's crime of brutally murdering an older man put him on death row. However, in reviewing Avery's files Brian Stevenson never saw any reference to Avery's disability. Brian decides to visit

Brian pulls into the parking lot, and he noticed a pick-up truck with disturbing images of a confederate flag, a gun rack, and bumper sticker that read, **"If I'd known it was**

going to be like this, if have picked my own dam cotton.” The truck belonged to one of the Prison Guards that would give Brian an aggressive strip search.

As the guard unlocked the huge, padlocked door to the visitation areas, the Guard grabbed Brian’s arm and said, ‘hey man did you happened to see a truck out in the visitation lot with lots of bumper stickers and a confer date flag? It belongs to me.

Avery ‘s back story is this. Avery is serious impaired, with intellectual challenged that suggested brain damage and schizophrenia. At age 10 he started to live in foster homes situations that were abusive at best, leaving at the age of 17 because he was deemed incapable of management as was left homeless. All of this was missing from Avery’s court files.

Each time Brian met with Avery, he asked Brian, did you bring me a chocolate shake. Well, Brian, won a new trial for Avery and got him off death row and was sent into a facility where he could receive mental health treatment.

On his final visit to see Avery after the trail, Brian entered the prison, but the Prison guard’s tone and demeanor had changed. The strip search was no longer necessary, and he was greeted with a hello.

The Guard said, “ I appreciated what you’re doing. It was difficult former to be in the courtroom to hear what y’all was talking about. I came up in foster care. Man, I did not think anybody had it as bad as me. It brought back memories as I heard what you were saying about Avery. It made me realize that there were other people who had it as bad as I did.”

Oh, wait, I have got to tell you something else. I did something I probably was not supposed to do, but I wanted you to know about it. On the trip back to prison, after that last day, I took Avery to Wendy’s, and I brought him a chocolate milkshake.

To be without mercy in our hearts is to be without an honest awareness of our own humanity. Our brokenness is a source of our common humanity, which is the based for our shared search for meaning, healing and justice.

Where is your brother? Where is your sister?

“The movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of men and women often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, they are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires.” — **Howard Thurman**