Beyond Envy, Rivalry and Violence: A Tale of Two Brothers.

We’re a little nervous these days. Beyond usual fears about public enemy #1 (in my childhood USSR, now global terrorism) is the social fabric that keeps violence at bay in process of fraying? That’s the question. Everyday meanness on social media, the coarseness of political discourse, skirmishes at political rallies, spasms of gun violence in most developed nation on earth...what’s going on?

Seems like a good time to consider together what Bible (written in a time of great social upheaval and violence) says about the roots of violence...and ultimately the path beyond it.

Last week: everything begins w/ imitative & rivalrous desire. Toddler A in a room w/ a neglected toy in corner. Toddler B enters and runs to the toy. Suddenly two toddlers want same toy. Toddler A imitates the desire of Toddler B for the toy: rivalrous desire.

In Gens 3, a talking snake, representing imitative-rivalrous desire, insinuates itself between the woman and God she now wants what she didn’t before, to be like God knowing good and evil.

Imitative desire in Gen3 leads to rivalry between brothers in Gen4. And spiraling violence is unleashed.

Genesis 4: 1-23

Bible includes straight history but early Genesis is filled with mythic narratives. Stories that in form & function are like archaic myths about founding of cities/nations. Like Rome’s founding myth. Twin brothers—Romulus & Remus— become rivals: Romulus kills Remus (for good reason, according to the myth) and that’s why the Pope lives in a city called Rome, not Reme.

When Bible includes mythic writing, it’s often a twist on a prevailing pagan myth. The Bible myths are myth-busting myths.

Cain & Abel is telling us that rivalrous desire is behind all the violence in the world.

First, let’s consider the effects of rivalrous desire: cascading violence. Then we can look at the cause and cure.

Having murdered his brother, Cain fears retribution. In ancient world, there was no system of justice besides “an eye for an eye.” Don’t kill me or my people will kill your people was the motto.
Cain cries out to God, who puts a mark on Cain’s forehead. This serves as a **warning** to anyone who might avenge Abel’s death by killing Cain, that that violence only spirals upward.

God doesn’t threaten to do seven-fold avenging. It’s a warning — violence begets escalating violence—meant to give avenger pause.

Violence is a contagion like the plague and it spirals upward, like the human **arms race**: we went from name calling to sticks and stones to bow and arrows to guns to canons to nuclear warheads.

Cain’s great-great-great-great-great-grandson, Lamech (lame-ick) boasts: “**If killing Cain unleashed a seven-fold revenge, just injuring me will fill the morgues with 70 + 7.**”

(During primaries, Trump threatened other Republican candidates in this same way: if you come after me, I’ll come after you double.)

BTW, notice how Lamech treats women. He “takes two wives,” like fruit off a tree. He makes his boast to them: “*Ada and Zillah, hear my voice: you wives of mine, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged seven-fold, truly Lamech seventy plus seven!*” He’s threatening the women: *Don’t you dare cross me!*

By ch. 6 we have these mythic creatures called “sons of God” or “Nephilim” (angels) or “warriors of old” taking whatever women they want to breed with. Machismo is **bad** for women.

Even today in our so-called egalitarian society, the vast majority of violent crimes are committed against women, including right here in our upscale-progressive UM, where 1 in 4 are sexually assaulted

How did this flood of violence get triggered? Rivalrous desire.

Cain sees Abel offering a sacrifice to seek God’s favor. Cain offers what he has, a grain offering. He’s imitating Abel, wanting what Abel wants. For reasons that are not explained, Cain thinks Abel’s sacrifice works better than his.

This makes him angry and downcast. **We get it.** Among pastors, if the church down the way is growing like gangbusters and you’re not, news of the other guy’s success can register on your funk-meter. Competitive worship like Cain-Abel.
Imitative-rivalrous desire is where it all begins. Your company posts a new position. You overhear your colleague telling her friend on the phone, “I’d love to have that job!” and magically, you want it too. So, secretly, you also apply. And she gets it. You’re like, “Oh right. New corporate policy on gender equality.”

You start sending out micro-aggressions her way. You’re not even aware of it. She starts unconsciously imitating your aggressions and staff meetings get a little tense, and more people enter the prickly fray. Imitative-rivalrous desire’ is nothing to mess with.

The myth of Rome’s founding celebrates the triumph of Romulus over Remus. He deserved to be killed. But in Bible’s myth-busting founding myth, Cain’s triumph over Abel is not celebrated. Rivalrous desire is bad news. It unleashes the violence around us.

IBR: whereas ancient myths assumed guilt of victims (Remus was guilty, Oedipus was guilty, etc.) the Bible declares the innocence of victims. Jesus is the innocent victim par excellence. He represents all scape-goated victims for all time.

Those who get the meaning of Jesus (different than waving the Jesus flag) see through attempts to scapegoat people---today, Muslims, LGBT (transgender especially right now) black people trying to steal my white privilege, or those political conservatives that we should keep out of our elite university faculty. But I digress, back to rivalrous desire.

**Genesis becomes a series of rivalries with bad mojo** between Cain-Abel, Sarah-Hagar, Isaac-Ishmael, Esau-Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. Always leading to violence. If we’re trying to understand roots of violence, look no further than our in-house rivalries.

No surprise: Jesus comes to a people awash in rivalries: the Pharisees vs. the Sadducees, the Zealots vs. the Priests, the Gentile Romans vs. the Jews.

Two brothers fighting over their inheritance try to get a ruling from him. He says, *you’re barking up the wrong tree.*

Two disciples arguing over who gets to be his Chief of Staff when he wins the election and Jesus says, *Dudes! Check the latest polls! I’m not winning this election. My right hand man will have holes in his hands, the way this thing is going.*

The new way of Jesus is all about nipping rivalrous desire in bud. Remember God asks Cain, “Where’s your brother?” Cain says, *“Am I my brothers keepers?”* Yes says Jesus.
God’s not interested in our sacrifices (whether sheep from our flocks or zucchini from our gardens) He wants hesed: love & mercy

From my brother, Brian Wilson....

I was sittin' in a crummy movie, With my hands on my chin
All the violence that occurs, Seems like we never win

Love and mercy, that's what you need tonight
So love and mercy to you and your friends tonight

“Love your brother” + “love your enemy.” That’s the way of Jesus.

Our brother, someone close, in process of becoming our enemy, is our rival. Love your brother + love your enemy = love your rival.

The way of Jesus is loving the rival, not beating the rival.

- Love your enemies, do good to those that persecute you.
- Love your rivals, do good to your rivals.
- Stop judging-critiquing-finding the worst in your rivals.
- Don’t pickle your anger in the brine of contempt, name calling,
- If you’re angry with your rival, go to him and try to work it out.

Exchange between Jesus & disciples over question of forgiveness: How many times do I need to forgive my brother? Seven times? Ha! Says Jesus, try 7 X 70!

Echoes of Cain & Abel, right? God marks Cain to protect him from a 7-fold vengeance. Cain’s great-great-great-great-great-grandson (7 generations) Lamick, threatens a 70 + 7 vengeance.

Jesus requires a forgiveness that is 70 X 7.
Escalating violence can only be defeated by escalating mercy.

The love that wins is costly love.

QUIET REFLECTION
For our time of quiet reflection (couple minutes) lets go back to the moment when Cain & Abel are just brothers. Use your imagination to rewrite the end of their story.

Each developing their own interests and skills—Abel as a breeder and keeper of flocks, Cain as a farmer....They are young so they are concerned about mastery, getting good at something, achieving some success.

Don’t think about your own rivalries directly. Picture theirs. Fill in the details of what might have been going on with and between those two brothers. Imagine that one of them gets a nudge from Jesus when the bad vibes are trying to take hold. In other words, try to write a different story with a different ending.