

The Coordinates of Liberation: From Cain and Abel to Ubuntu

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[0 : 00] All right, so fall is traditionally the time when churches reconvene, often with a lot of energy, and again, donuts, all that stuff starts to happen again. And many of us come back from our summer vacations. Many of us have had times where maybe we've spent more time with family than normal. We've gone to the beach, we've had cookouts, we've gone camping. I haven't gone camping, but some of us have gone camping. And now we're back together again. We're many of us moving into steadier rhythms of work and of university classes, or maybe of our children being back in school. We're back in this unique and particular way, and for me, that always fills me with a sense of vibrant Venus. And as in many churches here at the table, we often spend this time, this time of coming back to steadier rhythms, reorienting ourselves toward our deepest values.

Last year, this time, we did a sermon series that rolled out our new values. I think they were just on the screen. We spent several weeks talking about what it is to be a community of radical friendship and revolutionary justice and relentless curiosity, restorative play, and rooted improvisation.

And we continue to use language around what it means, what it means to reflect our desire to be a church that centers the margins in such a way that the experience of marginality collapses completely within our community. To use the metaphor of the great mystic and mentor to Dr. King, Howard Thurman, in this place, we recognize that the majority of the human race stands with their backs against the wall.

And we believe that we always have to preach and teach with reference to that reality. We have to live faithfully in the shadow of those northern churches during the time of slavery and those southern clandestine communities during the same period, who committed their plupits to purposes of freedom, human freedom.

Why? Because Jesus was about the freedom and flourishing of all of creation. Of all of our world. In our values and the language we use, we consistently commit to do theology in that way.

[2 : 47] And then last February, in light of those values and that kind of language we had been using, we started to take some further steps. We spent two Sundays exploring what it means not just to do theology, but also to structure community in ways that are liberating for those with their backs against the wall.

Inspired by the work of Reverend Brandon Rensher and the team of scholars around him, we became attentive to considering the kinds of communities that we should be modeling our values on.

For Pastor Anthony and for me, it has become clear that the mega churches and the money denominations, the churches that have the budgets to publish and to influence, they put some great things out there, but they cannot be our primary guides when we think about what it is to become a liberating church.

We need some models from the margins. We need to study and to take some time to be inside of communities on resistance, that have rituals which allow them to embody a prophetic presence continually.

Now, if you've been around me at all for a bit, you might know some of my history of church going.

[4 : 13] My primary church growing up was this large black Baptist church that became a mega church while my family attended it. As a child, my family also, every first Sunday of the month, we would drive out to the country to where my dad was from, and we would attend his family's black missionary Baptist church.

And as a college student, I spent years in what my brother refers to somewhat effectively, actually, as the tea party church. Some of y'all know about that, you know, we know. And then in grad school, I made Josh Harris's then church my home, and I learned a castating Dubai with a whole group of, you know, people in my generation. And then I became the founding pastor of Resurrection City.

Before I did that, I attended a church that invited me to leave in Southeast, and also a church in Southwest that was deeply libertine, that was black and Baptist and queer affirming.

Many of us in this room have these really interesting histories of church attendance, whether that's like every Sunday, or whether, you know, Easter and Christmas, you have a history around that too. And all of those churches that we attended, consciously or subconsciously, they took their experience, their way of being together after certain models.

One of the things I think was interesting in writing the sermon that I would invite you to is to actually think about the faith communities you've been a part of, the churches you've been a part of, and to think about the models that they had, and how that has influenced your own experience of faith. So a question as we come together that we must never lose sight of is, what are the models of this church? What models do we follow? And in particular, if we say that we want to be a liberating church, what are our models for that specifically?

[6 : 20] When enslaved people escaped and began running toward freedom, they needed coordinates to get to liberation, right? They looked up in the sky and they found coordinates.

And most of us, in most senses, we are not, we're not enslaved, right? We're not enslaved. But we still need these kinds of coordinates in a world that is intent on pursuing power and domination in ways that are completely contrary to the way of Jesus.

Now, hush harbors, so I said this in February, those are my models. Those are one of the models, I think, that can be most helpful in our context to think about what we want to do as a liberating church. Hush harbors are these, were these communities of enslaved people that would go out into the woods, they would escape the plantation for a little while, and they would worship among themselves. They would escape the master's days. They were these secret illegal meetings out in the wilderness. I'm not going to read all that, but this is, this is from the Reverend Brandon Rensher, so I'm just quoting a little bit of it. But yeah, there were these communities of like political and personal transformation that blended their own cultures with what they knew to be true about Jesus. They were decolonizing communities. And I think that that has to be our model, that we have to become this church model more deeply in those kinds of communities, hush harbor communities. I think from communities such as that, we can take our coordinates. Starting this year, we talked about during Black History Month, we kind of did a part one of the series. We talked about the coordinate of stealing away and basically leaving the plantation structurally and psychologically. And then the next week, we had this panel that's still like one of my favorite things we've done this year, this panel of folks who talked about the coordinate of Sankofa, what it means to go back and get what you need so that you can move forward into the future.

What does it mean to be a church that is consistently doing that? And I'm excited because several people from that panel are actually going to be preaching in the next few weeks. So that's going to be exciting. So today what I want to do is talk about another mark, and that mark is Ubuntu. I think this is a great place to start in the fall. Ubuntu is this word from the Bantu language, the Bantu family of languages, that expresses this philosophy that's indigenous to Southern Africa.

[9 : 11] It's a philosophy about what it means to embody the good life. And it's fundamentally a philosophy about what it means to be human. The great Archbishop Desmond Tutu summed up the translation of Ubuntu as a person is a person through other persons. A person is a person through other persons.

The converse of that idea is that denial of interdependence dehumanizes us. Another way people express this idea kind of more simply is I am because we are. I think that's kind of the translation many of us might know. So this idea that just as the first human was made on the sixth day, after all these other elements that could support their life were in place, after that, after those elements came to be, they were able to live fully.

But everything, there's a sense that everything in the cosmos is connected. A life of Ubuntu is characterized by practical care and kindness and the sharing of resources and forgiveness and hospitality and the celebration of difference.

Another thing Archbishop Tutu said, two other things he said, Ubuntu is to say, to be is to participate, to participate in community. And he also said of this, that when we want to praise someone for displaying the highest level of humanness, we say, this one is a person. In other words, that this one has fulfilled their truest vocation to be a person, to become more fully human. While independence and and, and, and, and independence and striving have traditionally been the way of the Western law and unfortunately the Western church. Embracing Ubuntu is this important way to become a more liberating church.

All right, so that's some of the background on Ubuntu. And now I want to get into what never fails to astonish me is that so much of the wisdom that shows up in prophetic liberative communities, Boston is also reflected in the Bible.

[11 : 36] So we are going to turn to Genesis to explore this idea of Ubuntu and to explore some nuances of it. So let's go to Genesis 4, 1 through 16. It's on the screen, I think.

Yeah. Now, the man knew his wife, Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, I have produced a man with the help of the Lord. Next she bore his brother, Abel.

Now, Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground. And Abel, for his part, brought of the firstlings of his flock their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering, he had no regard. So Cain was very angry and his countenance fell.

The Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? If you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door.

Its desire is for you and you must master it. Cain said to his brother Abel, Let us go out to the field. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

[13 : 03] Then the Lord said to Cain, Where is your brother Abel? I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper? And the Lord said, What have you done?

Listen, your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength. You will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

Today you have driven me away from the soil and I shall be hidden from your face. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth and anyone who meets me may fill me. Then the Lord said to him, Not so. Whoever kills Cain will suffer a seven-fold vengeance.

And the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Cain. So you've got this story about two brothers. They're on probably a family farm. The oldest brother is doing what he should be doing. He's following his father's vocation of tilling the soil. He would have been the one to get the majority of the inheritance. And then you've got the oldest son, the youngest son also doing what he's expected to do. He's caring for the sheep. Think of King David, right? The youngest is out in the field, caring for the animals. And then completely unprompted, they decide to give this offering to God, maybe out of love or obligation, but God actually doesn't ask for it. They just decide to go give it. And the younger son, his offering, Abel's offering is accepted. The older son's is rejected. There is nothing in this story that tells us why not this.

[15 : 09] Like people have tried to think about this from all these different angles. There's nothing in the story that tells us why there's a preference. You can guess and only guess. But what I do know is that every time I get to that point in the story, there's a part of me that cheers and a part of me that cringes. Because on the one hand, and I'm totally speculating here, I love that over and over in Genesis and elsewhere in the Bible, God choosing the one that God is not supposed to choose. The younger brother, right? Whoever is the least, the last and the least likely. God chooses the marginalized. And I love that.

And maybe that could be going on in the story, that there's this kind of divine precedence for the youngest son that is not fair, but that is scandalous in terms of its glaze.

Now, on the other hand, there's a sense that comes up in me around savage inequality. Because both of their sons give their best. There's no indication that that doesn't happen. And for me, when I was doing some Lecchio da Vida on this passage for this sermon, this is the part that struck me the most.

Because I'm somebody, like probably a lot of you in this room, that have been in spaces where you're not favored for any rational reason or any reason that you can figure out. So it's almost like in this passage, God is the stand-in for the shadows of our reality.

The places where we lack control. The places that feel like chaos to us. And whatever the case, I do think pretty much all of the early stories of Genesis, definitely this story, does invite us to ask questions about God. But the heart of the story is about what Cain does in response.

[17:03] He becomes dejected. And then, despite God's attempts to encourage him, he kills his brother. Cain denies what he's done. And then he's cursed from the ground.

And his sentence is to be a wanderer. To lose connection, actually, with creation, with nature. And a beautiful part of this story that I don't think gets enough play is that, in the end of it, God still ensures that Cain is protected.

That the violence keeps spiraling. That the first murderer is actually protected from being murdered. Okay, so now it might be clear at this point, like, there's at least one really clear connection to Ubuntu.

This idea that Cain should have been, or should have thought of himself as his brother's keeper. But he seems disconnected from that reality, from his interdependence with the world around him. But I think that there are a couple other things in this story that kind of nuance the idea of Ubuntu. So that's where I want to spend the remainder of my time. I'm going to just pull out a couple of lines, say a few things about them.

[18:23] So first the story starts with this sentence. Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.

The word for that word, the word produced, is actually essentially the same as the word for Cain. The idea is about production. What it means to acquire.

The key part of this story is that most scholars believe that it was written during a time of excessive accumulation at the expense of the majority of the population.

And it was written at a time that in many ways isn't that disreputable from our own. The story of Cain and Abel lives inside of this critique of extreme consumption, acquisition, and numbness to the pain of others.

And it lives inside of this basic question. Can we faithfully respond to a God who produces the world and then gives it as a gift to us?

[19:30] Or will anxiety to offer enough, to produce enough, to acquire enough, drive us to the point where we are willing to consume even our brother, even our siblings and our neighbors?

I find it interesting that I grew up in churches where the names of God were really huge parts of praise and worship. And I was always taught that the name that you get later in Genesis for God, El Shaddai, means like the all-sufficient one.

But I actually realize now that there is this longer Jewish tradition that urges us to think of that name as the one who is able to say enough.

The one who is able to say, okay, I've created, now it's time to stop. And that part of being created in the image of God is to follow in that way of being able to say, okay, enough.

It's time to stop. I don't have to keep anxiously producing. The story of Cain and Abel asks us to trust that God's care for us is enough and that we can offer enough based on God's grace without striking out on our own.

[20:47] The opposite of Ubuntu lies in this kind of anxiety to produce. And in order to become a church that practices Ubuntu, we have to forsake the logic of unlimited growth, that bigger is always better because bigger is what we think will secure us.

Like the God we serve, we have to know when to say enough. To trust like marginalized people have done for centuries, that everything we need by the spirit is in the room.

We won't have to go strive, colonize, or dominate others. We have enough in this room. So Cain's name tells us something.

And then a few sentences later, we see that Cain is dejected. And God says to him, 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. In revisiting the story, I realized that this is really the verse to meditate on.

[22:02] If you want to take this into your week, thinking about this sermon, this is the verse to like sit with. Because we can't take for granted that there is a real if in this story.

Cain has this genuine choice. He can pick for himself and he can do something different tomorrow. And God is encouraging him like, hey, what's going on? Talk to me about this.

He has authentic agency. And yet, while nothing is predetermined for Cain, sin does have this real presence. Cain's temptation is described unquenchable.

It's an unquenchable beast. It's described as this like predatory animal that is waiting to ambush Cain. But Cain can master it.

Precisely because he is not a beast who follows his every desire. He is a person who has a vocation to say enough.

[23 : 05] And to let his desire to lash out, to get revenge, his scapegoat, he can let all of that go. He can determine limits and exercise restraint.

And at the heart of Ubuntu is this idea that every person is created in the image of God. If you study Ubuntu, there's actually this strain of thought that is about how humans are different from beasts.

In the same way that you see in the story. That in everyday actions, we can choose to become persons of passionate concern. That in your care, your decisions to share resources and our decisions to practice care for others, to forgive, to show hospitality, we become authentically human.

But an important question, a practical question, I think, to always ask ourselves, is where are the battle lines of our temptation? Where are the battle lines of temptation drawn in our lives?

Where have we fallen into habits that move against our humanity and interdependence with others? And we have to ask that same question as a church.

[24 : 29] When we are tempted away from radical interconnectedness and the people in the room, where are we tempted away from that? Where are we tempted away from radical interconnectedness as a church with the people in the city?

Hard question. All right, finally, the most famous line in the story tells us something else critical about Ubuntu. Cain murders his brother and God says to him, where is your brother?

And Cain says, I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper? Cain does what most of us do every single day.

He chooses the denial. Underneath these words is actually an accusation of God. That God's job was to be Abel's keeper.

Not if. Cain distances himself completely from the empowerment that just happened a few verses earlier, that you are authentically human, that you, what you do matters. And instead, he puts all the responsibility out there on God.

[25 : 38] He's unwilling to know when it comes to his brother. He is only willing to pretend. And that can so often be us.

When it comes to the hard things of the world that we don't want to know. Earlier this year, I saw this cartoon about the election.

And the final panel of it said something like, this year, you can choose to stay informed or to stay sane. But you can't have both.

Yeah. And honestly, that pretty much is how I feel most of the time. I'm a person who doesn't have a ton of energy. I get overwhelmed by reading the news too closely. And I often feel like that, even outside of the election year.

And yet, this mark of Ubuntu calls us to be committed to continuing to know and keep our neighbor. It calls us to proximity and to conversation and to vulnerability.

[26 : 41] It calls us to pay attention. Often at the heart of so much in the life of faith. To pay attention. And maybe that's not. Let's be honest about this.

To every piece of news or everything your neighbor down the street says. I think there can be healthy rhythms of engagement and disengagement. But I think that practice, that commitment to paying attention, can help us to not lead checked out lives.

When I think about Ubuntu, there's this one story I want to share that I think, it always comes up for me in my heart. It's in this book called The Myth of the American Dream.

And it's D.L. Mayfield, the author, talking about her relationship with the neighbor. And this is what she says. Several years into our friendship now, Miriam treats me like a younger sister.

Her neighbor treats her like a younger sister. Recently, she noticed the new-to-us car my husband had purchased. A tiny, shiny vehicle with good gas mileage and a cheap price tag.

[27 : 49] My husband was so proud of this car. It was a sign of frugality. Miriam saw it differently. She had multiple children and no driver's license.

Going to the grocery store for her was an immense undertaking, especially since we live in what is technically a food desert. Ever since she left her home country, she had been denied the simple pleasure of grocery shopping, of touching the food with her own hands.

Now her husband got together with the other man and shopped once a week using long lists she wrote as a guide for what the family would eat. Miriam took one look at our little car and said, What? Did you not think of us when you brought this car? Miriam shook her head. For someone with a big heart, you sure do like small cars.

And I love that story because I think it highlights what knowing and keeping the brother really is. It makes clear what's at the heart of Ubuntu.

[29 : 00] It's not assumption about sort of an abstract common good, but it's action based on specific conversation and rudeness in the lives of our neighbors.

Now we continue to live in a world of anxiety and disconnection that leads to violence.

Just this week, Ashinor Egy was killed at a pro-Palestinian protest in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, adding to all of the atrocities being committed in that conflict.

A conflict between brothers. This week, four people were killed in Georgia in yet another school shooting. The reality of our world is so far from this practice.

And yet the miracle of the story of Cain and Abel is that even after Cain gives into his anxiety through the pursuit of violence, the story isn't over.

[30 : 10] And that's true for us too by the grace of God. Today is a day that we can choose to do well.

In our own corner of the world, we can become more human and recommit to practices of self-restraint for the good of the community of creation. We can recommit to practices of knowing and keeping our siblings.

And together we can become a more liberating church, identifying with all those who daily live with their backs against the wall.

Story is not over. Amen. Amen.