

“Minds (as well as movies) Seem to Need Villains”

Genesis 4:1-5, 8-10

(Even the “first” two brothers can’t get along.—one becomes “the villain.”)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Redlands First United Methodist Church
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When I was 6 years old, I observed a crow swoop down to pick up a small chicken from the farm at the end of the street where we were living in the San Fernando Valley. Way before *Bill Nye, the Science Guy* was popular on TV, there was a program called *You Asked for It* that answered viewers’ questions. I sent in a postcard and asked why the crow picked up the chicken. I never got a response from the TV program. I’m sure they thought it was a dumb question. The answer was obvious. The crow was hungry, *could* get the chicken, and did.

From that time on, the Crow became, for me, a villain. When I saw a crow, I didn’t think fondly of it. However, frankly, I didn’t think of crows very often.

Recently, I accidentally purchased a book about crows. It’s not easy to accidentally buy a book. You see, on the radio I heard an excellent review about a book entitled *Crows: Encounters with the Wise Guys*.¹ The review made the book seem so wonderful that I went to a bookstore to look for it. The store did not have the book, so I ordered it. When I went to pick it up, I realized it was really a book *about crows*. I guess I had thought it offered *philosophical insights* derived from watching crows. I decided to read the book; fortunately, it was short. I learned that crows, my villains, are clever, inventive, family oriented, and *sometimes very caring*. Through reading this book, I came to know a lot about crows. I even came to appreciate them, sort of.

The other day, while standing by a tree, I heard, “caw, caw, caw.” I looked up and realized I was close to a crow. Hmm, I thought, “How do I feel about you? Are you still a villain? Or, now that I know so much about you, do I see you as a wise guy, maybe even a fellow intelligent caring creature on earth?”

I surprised myself. I actually felt sort of *close* to that crow.

Sometimes that surprise shift happens between us and a *person* who has been a villain in our lives. We learn more about the person or for some reason, without that person’s having made any noticeable change, they are transformed, in our mind, from a “villain” to a fellow caring creature for whom we have compassion. What a relief that is for our mind.

Other times villains are stuck more stubbornly in our minds.

We heard the biblical story of the brothers Cain and Abel, the children of Adam and Eve. The details of the family story are a bit sketchy with big historical leaps. However, the sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel names a divide between farmers and urban dwellers--a challenge that continues to today.

Both are religious, and in ancient days worship often took the form of giving something tangible to God. For some reason that we do not know, it was perceived that the *animal sacrifice* of Abel, the younger brother who was an urban dweller was gladly received by God, but that the *produce, the farm products* of the older brother, Cain, the farmer, was rejected.

We don't know how Cain came to feel God's rejection. However it happened, Cain felt, deep inside, rejected by God. We could say that Cain *became consumed by his experience of rejection*. Although Cain experienced God as the one who rejected his gift, in Cain's mind it was his *brother* Abel who became the Villain. Cain became so consumed with his-brother-the-villain, in his mind, that he murdered his real-life brother. Consequently, for many in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Cain, the one who did the murdering became "the villain."²

My guess is that I'm not the only one here who, from time to time, has a villain consuming part of my mind. The villain could be a sibling. The villain could be a relative, a co-worker, a boss, an "x-relative." The villain could be a whole category of people—the unemployed, the employed, the wealthy, the poor. There it is, the villain, in our brains. We can't seem to get rid of the villain. Conversations tend to return to that person—that person who wronged us, or won't do what we want, or sees things differently from us, or whom someone else likes better than us, or who just unfairly is however they are that we don't like.

Have you ever had such a villain sitting in your mind?

The crow became a villain for me, when I was a child. But that wasn't much of a nuisance, because crows just did not consume much of my attention. Some of our villains are not too draining on us.

However, other villains truly pull us down or get us to feel rejected, dejected, as Cain felt. We're more civilized than Cain. We don't go murder the people who have managed to get into our minds as villains.

Usually, what happens is that we punish ourselves. *We suffer from having villains in our minds*. The real person or people who are represented by our internal villain may not even know they are inside our minds, sitting there, making us feel dejected!

Of this year's 10 nominees for Best Picture of the Year, there are a couple that do not really have villains--*The Kings' Speech* and *127 Hours*--for example.

One movie is entirely a revenge film: *True Grit*. It's a story about a 14 year-old girl, Mattie Ross, who is out to seek revenge for her own father's murder by finding and killing the villain. Mattie enlists the help of Rooster Cogburn, played by Jeff Bridges. With Christian hymn music in the background a good percentage of the time, several people die before Mattie finally meets up with the villain. It happens that they come face to face with one another.

You'd think that a movie with the title, *The Fighter*, would make a villain of an opponent fighter, but that's not the case. In this film, the *mother* of the fighter seems to love her son, but even more she wants him to be "all that he can be," even if that means fighting much stronger opponents. Not surprisingly, this aggressive mother becomes a villain in the mind of the fighter's girl friend (played by Amy Adams). The girlfriend is willing for him to fight, but wants him to be more cautious. Naturally the girlfriend is a villain in the mind of the mom (and the fighter's many sisters). In this case, the fighter, Micky Ward, helps to heal both his mother and girlfriend by honestly announcing *he needs them both*. I think that each woman eventually sees the big picture and manages to *have some compassion* for the other.

In *Black Swan*, the marvelous dancer lets herself become almost paranoid as she perceives another dancer to be her villain. In the movie, *The Kids are All Right*, there is infidelity and jealousy, but as the movie ends I sensed that the adults were *all right*,

having expanded their view of each other to reach even greater compassion. Although we saw *Inception*, I did not understand anything that was happening, but I'd say that there are plenty of villains.

I have not seen *Toy Story 3*; however I have never seen a Disney film that does not have a villain because it is assumed that villains are necessary in order to have a suspenseful and entertaining plot. I consulted with a few people who did see this animated film, and I've learned that the villain is Sid, the Teddy Bear. He experienced trauma early in his life--that's what made him mean. But, by the end of the film this Teddy Bear becomes more gracious and accepting.

Do our human minds have to have villains, too? Do these villains in our minds keep us from being bored? Do villains in our minds help us to get up in the morning? To have a reason to do what we do?

That was a very real political and practical question a couple decades ago, after the Cold War with Russia ended. For years the U.S. had a clear villain--Russia. Now, the villain had disappeared. Politicians, social commentators, and people in religious communities asked: "Can we in the U.S.A. live *without a villain*? *Can we live without an enemy*?"

A modern Greek poet, named Cavafy, wrote a poem, "Expecting the Barbarians," about an imaginary country in which the people anticipated their villains to arrive any moment. The people of this imaginary country waited and waited. When they realized that their villains were not coming—ever, the people—stunned—pondered quite honestly, "**What shall become of us without any barbarians? Those people were a kind of solution.**"³

Villains in movie plots and enemies in politics are sometimes a kind of solution. That is a very hard truth to face. Are any of the villains in our minds there because they are "useful" for us? Do they give us something with which to occupy ourselves? Do these villains help us to feel superior over someone else? Are they are a mental plot device for us, giving a kind of meaning? **Do villains, in our minds, help to define things: "He's good; he isn't"; "She's nice; she isn't"?**

The crow was an occasional villain for me. After I read facts about crows, I discovered the crow had changed its status—in my mind. A couple times in my life a *human being* who had managed to climb into my mind as a villain changed their status in my mind. I admit, I worked very hard to understand, prayed a lot about what to do, and it all worked, though it took time—my heart softened. The people just stopped being a villain for me. What a relief, for me.

Sometimes a villain changes. In real life, the bad guy sees the light and changes their behavior. Then it's important that our inner villain is updated and taken off the villain seat.

Perhaps it's true, our minds sometimes put someone into the villain seat as a sort of explanation of things; the villains are a sort of solution. Our own **prayer and longing to have compassion** does sometimes get a villain from our mind. But when that just has not worked, we can *accept* the villain-in-our-mind, but choose to push the "minimize" icon in our mind in order to shrink the villain until it is *itsy bitsy*, barely there at all. Then, we can intentionally pour energies into getting on with life, richly, creatively, wholeheartedly. We can find a purpose or project **big enough** for us to immerse ourselves in. We can value who we are and celebrate that. We might practice music or create things--

poetry or foods. One great way to keep the villain very tiny on our mental screen is to pour ourselves into **making life better for others!**

There are some very good movies, such as *The King's Speech*, which show people who have difficult challenges, but do not require any *person* to become stereotyped as a villain. In fact, the people all have compassion for each other, even through the difficulties. That is, I think, our goal in real life--to not *need* a villain in our mind. However, if one gets stuck there for a while, let's not panic or hate ourselves for our inability to love; let's **just get on with a life of compassion as much as we can** and calmly observe whether the next time we see that so-called villain, he or she has become less threatening, more like a humble human being with flaws, just like all of us.

¹ Candace Savage, *Crows: Encounters with the Wise Guys*. Vancouver/Toronto/Berkeley: Douglas & McIntyre Publishing Group, 2005.

² In this story, God tries to reassure Cain. God even gives Cain a protective mark, the "Mark of Cain," which was not a stigma, but a sign of protection—so no one would hurt him.

Even with this extra divine care Cain, apparently out of his feeling of rejection, killed his younger brother Abel. ...

³ "Expecting the Barbarians"

What are we waiting for, assembled in the public square?
The barbarians are to arrive today.
Why such inaction in the Senate?
Why do the Senators sit and pass no laws?

Because the barbarians are to arrive today.
What further laws can the Senators Pass?
When the barbarians come they will make the laws. . .

Why don't the worthy orators come as usual
to make their speeches, to have their say?

Because the barbarians are to arrive today;
and they get bored with eloquence and orations.

Why this sudden unrest and confusion?
(How solemn their faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares clearing quickly,
and all return to their homes, so deep in thought?

Because night is here but the barbarians have not come.
Some people arrived from the frontiers,
and they said that **there are no longer any barbarians.**

**And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.**

The Complete Poems of Cavafy
New York: Harvest/HBJ Book, 1948