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EVERYBODY GOT
A FATHER

GENESIS 4:1-9

God puts something good and something lovable
in every man his hands create.

—Mark Twain¹

IN HIS DELIGHTFUL little book *Papa, My Father*, Leo Buscaglia²
tells the following story:

I was observing in a classroom for mildly mentally challenged fourth graders. I sat beside six children and their teacher in their reading group. They were reading a story about a little duck that had no father. . . . The refrain was always: “But the little duck had no father.”

. . . When [the teacher] completed the story, she followed up immediately with a question-and-answer period. . . .

“Martha,” she asked a lovely little girl in the group, “tell us. Did the little duck have a father?”

The child answered . . . , “Yes.”

The teacher paused for a moment. . . . Finally, she smiled and said: “Martha, let me read to you again from the story. . . .”

She then repeated several parts of the story, each time accentuating the familiar refrain: “The little duck had no father.”

. . . [The teacher] again asked Martha: “Did the little duck have a father?”

. . . [Martha] responded very matter-of-factly: “Yes.”

The teacher’s frustration was beginning to show. . . .

. . . She again read from the book: “The little duck had NO-O-O-O father.” . . .

“Now,” the teacher asked again sweetly, regaining her control, “did the little duck have a father?”

. . . [Martha] answered again: “Yes, the little duck had a father.”

At this point the teacher totally lost control. “Martha, you disappoint me. You’re simply not paying attention! It says again and again in the story that the little duck had NO father.”

. . . “But, teacher,” she said, “*Everybody* gets a father.”

The teacher was taken aback completely. She hugged Martha in apology, smiled, and indicated that now she understood.³

Martha really was right. It’s universal. “*Everybody* gets a father.” We all know that.

We understand it biologically. We know the biological equation: a sperm + an egg = an embryo.

But we also know it spiritually. We know that “*everybody* gets a heavenly Father.” A loving Father who created each of us in his own image.

And yet, in the very moment we affirm that “everybody gets a heavenly Father,” we also affirm something else: biological or not, “everybody also gets a *brother*.”

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Why does that have to be true? Why does there always have to be the “other” brother? Or to quote from the New Testament parallel, Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son: Why must “a certain man” *always* have “two sons” (Luke 15:11, KJV)?

Why must there be Cain *and* Abel?

Why must there be Isaac *and* Ishmael?

Why must there be Jacob *and* Esau?

Why must there be Joseph *and* ten surly brothers?⁴

Why must there always be the “other” brother (or sister)? Couldn’t we manage just fine if he (or she) wasn’t around? And wouldn’t life be easier without him (or her)?

I mean, let’s be honest, there are disadvantages to having brothers and sisters. Having brothers and sisters means that life will never be the same for you. It means there will always be some bumps along the way that might have been smoother without them.

It means the world simply won’t revolve around you anymore. You have to learn to share—to share Mom and Dad, to share the attention, to share the affection, to share the responsibility.

You even get one present from Santa Claus instead of two—all because of your brother. And then you have to share the one toy you did get with your interloping brother!

It might not be so bad, if our brothers were like us at all. But most of our brothers are very *different* from us. Those of you who are parents can attest to this. Simply being from the same womb, having the same upbringing, and living in the same house is no guarantee of a duplicate.

Just because “*everybody* gets a father,” even the *same* father, there are no carbon copies. Every brother is different. Namely, he is not like you! He doesn’t think like you, act like you, or even hold the same values as you.

And that makes us competitive with our brothers. So we scrawl our names in Magic Marker on *our* army men and *our* Tonka trucks and say, “Don’t touch my stuff!”

When my sister and I were younger, for a short time we shared a room together. It was only a temporary arrangement, while we waited for our permanent house to be ready, but the battle lines were drawn.

We split the room in half with masking tape from the top of the ceiling, across the floor, and up the other wall. And then we threatened each other with menacing tones: “Don’t cross this line. This is *my* side of the room, and I want you to stay out!” “If you even step across that line, I’m gonna knock you into kingdom come!”

Evidently, we heeded each other’s warning because neither of us were ever knocked into kingdom come, and my parents seemed to be happy about that because then they would of had to come

looking for us, and I don't think they knew where kingdom come was.

It reminds me of the little boy who wrote a letter to his pastor: "Dear Pastor, I would like to go to heaven someday because I know my brother won't be there."⁵

It's never easy to live with our "brothers," biologically or spiritually. Yet as much as we wish a certain God *didn't* have other children . . .

He does.

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It makes you wonder sometimes, *Why does it have to be that way?*

Well, according to Martha the fourth grader, it's because "*everybody* gets a Father." And therefore, every brother and sister, regardless of how different, is cut from the same fabric. Every brother and sister shares something in common from our Father.

It's an image.⁶

You see, you carry the part of me that I am trying to recover. And every time I am with you, you are helping me to rediscover the image of God within *me*.

It's a marvelous, amazing thing, the image of God.

What is the image of God? The image of God is relationality, which is to say, all love is relational.

We do not love and cannot love in a vacuum. We need someone to be in relationship with in order to love, which means we *need* someone to love.

And because that's true, do you know what else that means? Only in relationship with my "brother and sister" can I see *myself* and *God* most clearly.

God is love. That truth is affirmed by all faith traditions, but it is foundational for Wesleyan-Holiness folks. The love of God is the lens through which we see all other attributes of the three-in-one God.

The Trinity reminds us that before there was anything else, there was a holy fellowship of perfect love. The Father loved the Son, the Son loved the Father, the Spirit loved the Son, the Father loved the Spirit, and on and on it went.

Out of this overflowing love, God created beauty, nature, order, planets, solar systems . . . and us. God didn't create us because he was lonely. God is a Trinity. God didn't create us because he needed glory. God is already glorious.

God created us because God is relational, and his love overflows into human beings so that we can share in that love. The psalm writer declares that God has crowned us with "glory and honor" (Ps. 8:5). Can this mean anything less than God has made us relational too?

So here's the logic: God places "others" in our lives, because we need *them* to help us to know *him* more personally.

It's the way we've been wired. It's the way we've been designed. It's God's image stamped on us. And therefore, the only way we can be fully what God intended us to be is in relationship with another.

I must love you in order to love God. That's where our phrase "perfect love" comes from. Love perfecting us from the *image* of God, back to the *likeness* of God.

We need the other brother.

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This story from Genesis 4:1-9 is about the other brother.

Adam and Eve had two sons.⁷ They were different—very different. One was a shepherd—the other was a farmer. One worked with flocks—the other worked in fields.

Both made offerings to God.

The text doesn't tell us why Abel's offering was received and Cain's wasn't. Why is the text silent on this? Because the issue wasn't the offering—the issue was how Cain was going to respond to his brother.

This is a story about the problem of the other brother.

Competition.

Jealousy.

Anger.

Even premeditated cold-blooded fratricide.

But here is what we cannot miss. This story is not just about the problem of the other brother, because Cain took care of that in a hurry.

It is the brother and God together that creates the conflict for Cain. Cain discovered that life with the other brother is never lived in a vacuum but always in relationship to God.

God gave Cain the opportunity to confess what was really going on. “The LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’” (v. 9).

Didn’t God know where Abel was?

Of course he did. God was looking for some honesty. He wanted Cain to be honest with himself, admit what had happened and why, take responsibility for his actions, and clear the way for restoration to happen.

But Cain can’t give him a straight answer. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (v. 9).

“Yes, Cain, you are! That’s the right answer. Despite everything you’ve done to try and make it otherwise, you are. This is not just about Abel. This is about our relationship too.”

Cain doesn’t see the connection.

One of Cain’s descendants was named Lamech. Someone wounded him. Lamech takes revenge by killing him. He told his two wives, “If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times” (v. 24).

No forgiveness. No reconciliation. No image. And the vicious cycle goes on.

When will the madness stop? Who is going to break the vicious cycle of anger, blame, retaliation, and revenge with the “other brother”?

Cain’s question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (v. 9), turns out to be answered a million times over: “Yes!”

Are you more loving today than you were a year ago?

Are you more compassionate? More caring? More generous?
More forgiving than you were a year ago?

Are you more like Jesus?

If you can't answer those questions in the positive—and especially, if other people can't answer them in the positive about you—then you need to take a long, careful look into the nature of your walk with Christ.

Every step of progress in our spiritual life is directly related to our relationships with others. And every relationship has the potential of becoming the place of a transforming encounter with the living God.

I wish I could say that better. Isolated Christians will never experience all that God intends. It is the missing link for so many people in their journey of faith.

John Wesley said again and again that there can be no *personal* holiness without *social* holiness. But the opposite is also true. There can be no *social* holiness without *personal* holiness.⁸

Everybody gets a brother—because everybody gets a Father.