

HE AIN'T HEAVY
A Devotional Meditation from
Genesis 4:6-12, 44:18-34; Ezekiel 37:15-28; John 17:20-23, 26
Albert J. McCarn
December 26, 2020

There are different stories about the origin of “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother,” a song that became a hit in 1969. The song may be inspired by Boys Town, the orphanage established by Father Edward Flanagan in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1917. There is at least a connection. The phrase, “He ain’t heavy, he’s m’ brother,” has been associated with the institution for over a century, as Father Stephen Boes, Boys Town’s National Executive Director, writes:

Back in 1918, a boy named Howard Loomis was abandoned by his mother at Father Flanagan’s Home for Boys, which had opened just a year earlier. Howard had polio and wore heavy leg braces. Walking was difficult for him, especially when he had to go up or down steps. Soon, several of the Home’s older boys were carrying Howard up and down the stairs. One day, Father Flanagan asked Reuben Granger, one of those older boys, if carrying Howard was hard. Reuben replied, “He ain’t heavy, Father... he’s m’ brother.”*

In a way, the song itself bears out this story. It is the only song that Bobby Scott and Bob Russell ever wrote together. In fact, they had only recently been introduced when they decided to collaborate, and they had precious little time. Russell was dying of cancer, and within a year he would be gone. In a sense, Bobby Scott carried his newfound brother in the work that has blessed multitudes for half a century.

Carrying one’s brother, whether he is truly a blood relative or not, indicates a different heart than what was in Cain, the world’s first murderer. He was jealous of his brother, Abel, and that brought tragic consequences, according to Genesis 4:

Then *ADONAI* said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, it will lift. But if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the doorway. Its desire is for you, but you must master it.” Cain spoke to Abel his brother. While they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then *ADONAI* said to Cain, “Where is Abel, your brother?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”



Two Brothers statue that stood at the entrance of Boys Town in Omaha, Nebraska, from 1977 to 2017. [Photo: Nonpareil photos, “Boystown,” Council Bluffs Public Library.](#)

* Fr. Stephen Boes, “The Story Behind “He Ain’t Heavy...,” Boys Town Blog, June 9, 2017 (<https://www.boystown.org/blog/Pages/story-behind-aint-heavy.aspx>).

Then He said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying out to Me from the ground. So now, cursed are you from the ground which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. As often as you work the ground, it will not yield its crops to you again. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” (Genesis 4:6-12 TLV)

The tragedy is not only the taking of an innocent life, but that the jealousy Cain harbored against his brother consumed him to the point that he cared more for his own hurt feelings than for his brother’s life. No wonder he was cursed to wander the earth. Who would trust him after that, and whom could Cain trust?

This story of rival brothers is a theme that shapes the redemptive story of God’s eternal Kingdom. If Cain and Abel showed us how separation from God and man happened, Judah and Joseph show us how the separation can be repaired. When they were young, Judah’s jealousy of Joseph moved him to seek his brother’s life, or at least remove him from the family. Joseph’s attitude did not help. His pride in his status as his father’s favorite moved him to act arrogantly toward his brothers. So they sold him into slavery in Egypt and forgot about him. Forgot, that is, except for the nagging guilt that tugged at each man’s heart when they saw their father’s inconsolable grief.

Over the next 20 years, Judah became the leader of the family, while Joseph became Grand Vizier of Egypt and savior of the world during a seven-year famine. In time, his brothers came to Egypt seeking food, and Joseph put them to the test to see if they were still the callous, selfish men he remembered from his youth. The greatest test was his threat to make his younger brother Benjamin a slave for life. What happened next gave him the answer he had hoped to find:

Then Judah approached him and said, “I beg your pardon, my lord. Please let your servant say a word in my lord’s ears, and don’t be angry with your servant, since you are like Pharaoh. My lord asked his servants saying, ‘Do you have a father or a brother?’ So we said to my lord, ‘We have a father who is old, a child born to him of his old age is young. Now his brother is dead, so he is the only one of his mother’s children left, and his father loves him.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me so that I can look at him.’ But we said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father. If he were to leave his father, he would die.’ Then you said to your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you won’t see my face again.’ Now when we went up to your servant, my father, we told him my lord’s words. Then our father said, ‘Go back, buy us a little grain for food.’ So we said, ‘We won’t go down unless we have our youngest brother with us—then we’ll go down. For we won’t see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’ “Then your servant my father said to us, ‘You yourselves know that my wife bore me two sons. One went out from me, so I said, “He must have been torn to shreds,” and I haven’t seen him since. And if you also take this one away from before me and an accident happens to him, then you’ll bring my grey hair down to the evil of *Sheol*.’ “Now if I come to your servant my father and the boy isn’t with us, since his life is bound to his life, when he sees that the boy is no more, he’ll die. Then your servants will bring the grey hair of your servant our father down to *Sheol* in grief. For your servant became pledge for the boy with my father saying, ‘If I don’t bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before my father all my days.’

So now, please let your servant remain as my lord's slave in the boy's place, and let the boy go up with his brothers. For how can I go up to my father and the boy is not with me? Else I must see the evil that would come upon my father!" (Genesis 44:18-34 TLV)

Do you hear Judah's new heart? Cain cared nothing for his brother, but Judah had become his brother's keeper, willing to lay down his own life to secure Benjamin's freedom. That was all Joseph needed to know. In that moment, the breach was healed and the family restored.

This is exactly what our Heavenly Father seeks for all of us. It is His redemptive plan. Israel, the family He established to bring redemption to the world, is just as fractured and broken as the world itself, but it will not always be that way. Ezekiel demonstrated this with the prophecy of the Two Sticks, showing that fragmented parts of Israel would be reunited one day, and that the nations of the earth who join with them would be reunited as well – reunited into the oneness of humanity that our Father originally created. That is what our Messiah prayed in His priestly prayer –

I pray not on behalf of these only, but also for those who believe in Me through their message, that they all may be one. Just as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You, so also may they be one in Us, so the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory that You have given to Me I have given to them, that they may be one just as We are one—I in them and You in Me—that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them as You loved Me. . . . I made your Name known to them, and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17:20-23, 26 TLV)

This is the calling placed upon us. It is not a calling to be in complete agreement with our brothers and sisters, but to be unified with them as family. Our fathers Judah and Joseph showed us the way, and our Messiah Yeshua demonstrated how. Now it is up to us to complete the work so that the world at last may be at peace.