

The Reality of Sin
Genesis 2:15–17, 3:1–7; Matthew 4:1–11; Romans 5:12–19
Sunday, March 1, 2020 (Lent 1)

About a month ago, I was watching TV with my kids when the news broke that basketball player Kobe Bryant had been killed in a helicopter crash. There was just an *outpouring* of sadness and disbelief. People were praising him as one of the best basketball players of all time; praising him for his community work and his impact on young people; praising him as a devoted husband and father. I came across one comment on Twitter that said, “R.I.P. Kobe Bryant...a life well lived.” It gave me pause because, I thought to myself, “A life well lived? But he *raped* a woman.”

Back in 2003 Kobe Bryant was accused of sexually assaulting a 19-year-old woman. The case was dismissed because the woman refused to testify (some people say due to death threats and intimidation from the public). She filed a civil suit that ended up being settled out of court for over \$2.5 million. With all the praise being lavished on him in the wake of his death, I was conflicted because it seemed like people were just glossing over or just *ignoring* this very problematic aspect of his life. In the hours following his death, a reporter for the Washington Post, Felicia Sonmez, posted something on Twitter about that incident and received over 10,000 abusive and threatening comments, many of them containing death threats, from people who thought she was tarnishing his legacy by bringing it up. Sonmez said, “Any public figure is worth remembering in their totality, even if that public figure is beloved and that totality is unsettling.”

Now, hold on to that for just a moment, and we’ll come back to it. But I want to tell you about another man who was *not* as well known as Kobe Bryant but *should* have been. His name was Jean Vanier. Vanier was a Catholic philosopher and theologian who lived in Canada, where he founded L’Arche, a residential community where people with developmental disabilities can go

to live and be treated with dignity and love. It was a groundbreaking community when it was founded in 1964, and since then L'Arche has spread around the world, with 147 communities in 37 countries. It has been a saving grace for people with developmental disabilities who have gone to live there.

Vanier was also a prolific author, writing about how to live together in community with people who are different from us. He wrote books like *Becoming Human, From Brokenness to Community, Community and Growth, Befriending the Stranger, and Encountering the Other*, books that have been tremendously impactful in *my own* life and spiritual journey. In fact his books were contributing substantially to my doctoral thesis. Vanier died last year at the age of 90. He had been nominated for a Nobel Prize and had even been discussed for possible sainthood in the Catholic Church. A life well lived.

A week ago, I woke up on Saturday and was checking the morning news, when I came across an article. L'Arche, the community he had founded, had just released a report after an internal investigation revealed that Jean Vanier had sexually abused six women between 1970 and 2005. These were women to whom he was giving spiritual guidance, and he had convinced them that this abuse was part of his spiritual leadership of them. I was absolutely heartbroken. I only knew him through his writing, but I simply did not know how to reconcile this new information with the man I thought I knew and with his work that had been so impactful in my life. It was devastating.

I posted the article and my heartbreak over it on social media, even saying that I didn't know what I was going to do about using his work in my doctoral thesis now. When you write a book called *From Brokenness to Community*, but you are acting in ways that *further* brokenness in the

community, it kind of diminishes your authority on that subject. People responded to me with things like, “we are all sinners in need of grace. If we only allowed ourselves to quote those who were without reproach, we would be left with no one to quote.” (I’d say we could quote *Jesus...*) Or, “All people have human failings. I try to find the good in people and ignore short falling.” And I *get* that. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Not one of us is perfect, least of all me, so far be it from me to point out the sin of another. But at the same time, it feels *wrong* to just ignore it. It feels like, in ignoring it, we are ignoring the suffering and pain of the women who were victims of these actions.

I was struggling with how you balance the reality of *sin* in this world and in our lives with the reality of *grace*. We are called to forgive – to extend to others the grace that God has extended to *us* – but if you ignore sin or simply brush it aside in the name of grace and the good things that a person has done, are you simply permitting and perpetuating it?

Lent is a season in which we are forced to confront the reality of sin. We spend most of the year *ignoring* it, both in our lives and in the world around us. We don’t talk about it. We don’t name it for what it is. We substitute words like *mistakes, failures, shortcomings, and brokenness*. But Lent is a season of repentance; examining and cleansing our lives in preparation for the salvation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it’s like the author James Baldwin once said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” Our sin will never be changed until we are willing to face it and name it. And so on this first Sunday in Lent, we are immediately confronted with the reality of sin in our reading from Genesis.

We see in this story the introduction of sin into the world. Adam and Eve are living in the garden, where God has told them that they may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden *except* the

tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for the day that they eat of it, they shall die. The serpent comes to Eve and says, “You won’t die. God just knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So Adam and Eve eat of it, their eyes are opened, and they know good and evil.

A lot of times we hear this story and talk about the sin of Adam and Eve as being *disobedience*. And that’s definitely *part* of it. God told them not to do something, and they did it. But the *temptation* that they faced was to be *like God*. Adam and Eve could not resist the temptation to be like God, and by giving in to that temptation, the reality of sin entered the world. Now, compare that to the story of Jesus in the wilderness that we heard at the beginning of worship. Jesus is tempted three times. The first time is to turn stones into bread because he is hungry. The second time is to throw himself down from the top of the temple because God’s angels will save him. And the third time is to worship Satan because he will give him all the kingdoms of the world. Each time Jesus resists and affirms his trust and reliance on God, rather than assuming for himself the power of God.

Adam and Eve *could not* resist the temptation to be like God, and it introduced sin to the world. Jesus *did* resist the temptation to be like God, and in doing so, he showed *righteousness* to the world. He showed the world what it looked like to live in right relationship with God, in total trust and reliance upon God.

This is what Paul picks up on in his letter to the Romans. He contrasts Adam and Jesus, saying that just as sin and death came into the world through Adam, grace and life came into the world through Jesus Christ. That what was *broken* in Adam has been *restored* in Christ. Obviously, there is still sin in the world. Jesus did not get rid of sin entirely. What Paul is saying here is

that Jesus broke the *power* that sin holds over us. Whereas previously human beings were judged according to their ability to keep God's law, and if you *fall short* of that law you are *condemned*, now we are judged according to God's grace through Jesus Christ. Previously we were judged by what *we* did, but now we are judged by what *Christ* did; by his good and gracious act toward us, this *free gift* that Paul keeps talking about.

Sin and death no longer hold the power to keep us from God. Through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, we are *all* able to live *with God*, now and forever.

Even Kobe Bryant and Jean Vanier? Yes. Even this person who has hurt you or others? Yes. God's grace is poured out upon all, a free gift that is not dependent upon anything that we do. It is given, not because of how good *we* are, but how good *God* is.

But does that mean that we just ignore sin and focus on grace? That's the question I was struggling with. Do we just ignore the bad things that someone has done to focus on the good things they have done? Because doesn't there need to be accountability for sin? If someone hurts someone else, we can't just ignore that or excuse it away, or else the world falls to evil.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer addresses this question in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, when he talks about *cheap grace* and *costly grace*. He's not talking about how we "get" the grace that God gives to us, whether we have to *earn* it or how hard we *work* for it. He says that God's grace is poured out upon *all*, and that God's grace is *costly* in that it cost Jesus Christ his very life. What he's talking about is how we *respond* to the free gift that we have been given. If we receive God's grace and say, "I am forgiven of all my sin," without *repenting* and *changing* anything about our lives, that is *cheap grace*. God's grace is not costing *us* anything, we're just taking

advantage of it. If someone hurts you and you forgive them, that's a hard thing to do. It *costs* you something. But if, after you forgive them, they keep doing the thing that hurt you, do they really *value* you and what it *cost* you to forgive them? Has your forgiveness made any *difference* in their life?

Costly grace, however, is grace that effects a *change* in our lives and our behavior. We want to live differently to show that we *value* this gift that has been given to us; that we do not take it lightly. It's not that our repentance *leads* to forgiveness, but rather, *because* we are forgiven, we *want* to repent and live in righteousness, in right relationship with God and with each other.

After the accusations against Kobe Bryant became public, I remember him holding a press conference where he sat next to his wife, and before reporters and millions of people watching on television, admitted that he had cheated on his wife. He apologized to her, over and over again. He talked about how embarrassed and ashamed he was for committing adultery. He *named* it for what it was. Later, he publicly apologized to the other woman and her family for hurting her and putting them all through this. And he vowed to be the best husband and father he could be going forward. He repented, publicly. He changed his behavior. And while he wasn't perfect, it seems like toward the end of his life he *had* been a really good husband and father, and a devout Christian. But the grace and forgiveness that he had been extended *cost* him something, and not just *money*. It effected a change in his life.

Jean Vanier hurt multiple women over a span of 35 years. He never acknowledged or admitted it. In fact he actively worked to *hide* it. There was no public confession or apology. He was never held accountable for his actions. While he may have repented with *God*, there was never any visible evidence of repentance in his life.

The hard truth about both of them is that they both did good, and they both caused pain. Both of those things can be true at the same time. And they are true for us. We are all capable of the most beautiful good and the most horrific evil. And we each have to chose – day by day and moment by moment – which path we are going to follow.

Sin is a reality in this world and in our lives. We cannot ignore it or excuse it. All we can do is *confess* it and strive to *live differently*. None of us is perfect. We are all sinners who routinely fall short of the glory of God. We are going to stumble and fall over and over again because sin is a reality in our lives. But *grace* is also a reality in our lives. And, in fact, Paul says that grace is a *greater* reality for us than sin. He says, “If the many died through the one man’s sin, *much more surely* has the grace of God *abounded* for the many. If death exercised dominion through the one, *much more surely* will those who receive the *abundance* of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in Christ.” He is saying that while sin is real and powerful, grace is *more* real and *more* powerful. It’s not about finding a *balance* between sin and grace, because God’s grace *far outweighs* our sin.

So while we *are* called to name sin for what it is and call all people to repentance, we are called to *do* that in a way that reassures people of the love and mercy and grace of God. It’s like Billy Graham once said, “It is the Holy Spirit’s job to *convict*. It is God’s job to *judge*. And it is my job to *love*.” It is not *my* job to convict people of their sin and force them to acknowledge it. It is not *my* job to judge people for their sin. It is my job to *love* them, even in the midst of their sin. That doesn’t mean *condoning* what they’ve done or allowing it to continue. It simply means that we receive *them* in *their* sin the way that *we* would want to be received in *ours*.

We can't ignore sin. But we also can't place a greater focus on *sin* than we do on *grace*. Because we are never as perfect or great as we make ourselves or others out to be. But we're also never as *bad*. We are all simply sinners, reliant on the grace of God. May that grace humble us into new ways of living, in Christ.