



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"The Overwhelming Scandal of Grace"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Katie Suddeth at Myers Park Baptist Church

On September 1, 2024, from Luke 15:11-32

How old were you when you found out your childhood hero was not as great as you thought? I was 12 years old when my heart was broken by none other than Michael Vick. As many of you are aware I am originally from the Atlanta, Georgia area. Michael Vick was the quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, and he was everyone's hero back then. The entire city loved Vick and everyone- including myself- had a Vick jersey. Now my dad didn't get me the cute pink Vick jersey, but I had one. If I am honest, it is the only time in my life I have seen the falcons have that kind of fan base.

Until that day in 2007, when Michael Vick was arrested for dog fighting. Vick and his partners would torture dogs to make them fight each other. They would also steal family pets from people's yards and have the dogs kill them. All while watching and enjoying the entertainment. There was money involved. The rumors about drugs and dogs were all over my school. **Everyone** was in a state of shock and sadness. Not to mention the anger that was to come after the intentional shock wore off.

Vick was our city's hero. If you had asked any of us back in the day, we would have told you that he was going to be bigger than Tom Brady and any of the Mannings. **He** was our boy. Vick was convicted and served a small time in prison. He was no longer welcome in the city of Atlanta. This was for good reason- no one wanted him around after he had disappointed us and ruined our reputation with such violence.

However, one man did not give up on Vick. That man is Arthur Blank, the owner of the Atlanta Falcons. He did not give up on Vick. He encouraged Vick to seek help and make better choices with his life. Blank extended a hand of grace to Vick. Most of this support and encouragement was done in private, until a couple years ago when Arthur Blank brought Vick back to the city of Atlanta to retire Vick's falcons' number. Number 7...

Y'all, I have never been as enraged as I was when I heard that Blank was extending any type of grace to Vick. I know that Vick has started animal rights charities and goes to give talks to people about how animal fighting is bad. I know that he has shown true remorse for his situation. I know he has suffered a lot for his crimes and choices.

BUT, I did not feel like he deserved to come back to my city and have his number retired when he did such a terrible thing and broke our hearts... When he ensued such violence on God's innocent creatures. He didn't deserve grace. He deserved the hard times and a failed football career in my opinion.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

It has been 15 years since Vick was arrested, and I am still not over it. I am not the only one. A lot of people were upset thinking that he didn't deserve to be forgiven and honored in that manner. BUT, after sitting with my anger and resentment, I realized that the way I reacted to this shows a lot more about my brokenness than it does Vick's... A lot of times with today's scripture, Christians put themselves in the shoes of the prodigal son, a lot of Christians love to imagine themselves running back home to God and being celebrated just as the son was. The brother being legalists, fundamentalists, or people that just doubted our value. We are not always wrong with that thought, a lot of us have those moments of spark with the divine that change us and our path. In reality, we have a bit of both brothers in us. This especially is true when we feel grace is given to someone less deserving than us.

See, I resonate with the brother in today's scripture, because **grace is offensive**.

If we are truly looking at God's grace to its fullest extent, then we will understand just how deeply offensive grace is. How offensive the idea of that kind of grace is. Grace is not based on a system of fairness. God does not grant people more grace because they are "good" people or have been faithful Christians. We see in Today's scripture that the older brother is bringing that up to the father. He says, "but dad, I have been with you the entire time?" The father answers, "all that is mine is yours."

What this interaction means is that the older brother has been there the entire time and has reaped the benefits of the father's grace. And just because the younger brother comes home and receives the father's grace, that does not mean that there is any less grace given to the older brother. Grace has no limit. The limit does not exist. Sometimes I think we believe we are better judges of who deserves God's grace than we believe God is. We believe that we know better than God. And we wish that God would be more discerning with God's grace than God is. I am not even sure if this is a conscious thought we have, but it shows through our actions and our words.

Just like how I showed my brokenness by being angry about Vick's number being retired, so we show our brokenness when we believe we are better judges than God. Just like the older brother, we somehow confuse that God's grace is given based on goodness and badness. There is a part of us that believes people who are "good" deserve more grace than those who are "bad." Is that really grace? Is grace really an assessment of good and bad?

Reverend Nadia Bolz Weber puts it like this: "God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings. My failings hurt me and others and even the planet, and God's grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word ... it's that God makes beautiful things out of even my own mess." God's grace is beyond our capacities as humans. God's grace is to make things whole and new. Grace is God helping us put back together our broken pieces.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

In Japanese culture, there is a practice in which when pottery breaks, instead of throwing away the broken pieces, they put the broken pieces together and fill the cracks with liquid gold- making a new and beautiful creation. That is what God's grace does for us. It takes all of our broken pieces and puts us back together with gold filling to inspire wholeness. **And just because my broken pieces might look different then Vick's does not mean I am any more deserving of God's grace than he is.**

That is what is so offensive about grace. It is available to everyone and anyone, and you get no say in who receives it and who does not. It does not matter how good you are, all you have to do is say the word and God's grace is available to you- just as the prodigal son only had to come home and say "father" for his dad to pour his grace out onto him. And this is especially hard when someone deeply hurts us. However, there is a healing and freedom that comes from admitting we wish God was more discerning with grace. You do not even have to be happy that God's grace is given to all. When we admit that to ourselves, we take the pressure off of ourselves to be God's discernment and to fix anyone or any situation or system that is beyond our control. When we realize that we are not the father in today's scripture, then we open the door for God to really help us to heal our brokenness. Sometimes only by admitting our frustration and limitations to God, then real healing can occur...

Max Lucado and I rarely agree on theology, or life- but when I was a teenager at a conference, I heard him give a talk that changed my life forever. **He** started talking about Jeffery Dahmer. For those who do not know who Jeffery Dahmer is, I suggest later, after the service, you look him up. Viewer discretion is advised.

Anyways, Lucado was talking about Dahmer because Dahmer was finally caught and arrested for his violent and horrendous crimes. However, in prison, Dahmer starts attending a Bible class and has a conversion experience in 1994. There is a documentary on Netflix that interviews the pastor and nun who support and journey with Dahmer through his prison days. He is even baptized while in prison. Lucado was talking about how he could not stomach the thought that Dahmer was now a Christian. He couldn't stomach the fact that God would **forgive** Dahmer and grant him the same grace that God gave everyone else. Lucado said however, that that is why it is great to worship a God who is beyond our human capacities. That is what makes God so big and mysterious, that God can forgive what we as humans deem unforgivable.

That is the good news, beloved. We do not have to understand or make sense of the mystery and scandal of God's overwhelming grace. We don't have to like it. We can be offended by it at times. I am offended by it most of the time. **We just have to trust it.** We have to trust that God's overwhelming and offensive grace is what will heal us, make us whole, and carry us through the darkest times.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

That this grace is what can help us strive to show love to all people- even the ones we feel don't deserve it. It is by God's grace that we can work for a better tomorrow for everyone- not just ourselves- because God's grace and love is so much bigger than what we can imagine. By allowing ourselves to not have to define or need to understand, but just embracing the bigness of a God whose capacities are far greater than our own, it means that you trust that God can heal all brokenness and make all things new. It means you work every day to be more and more loving and attempt to be peacemakers and hope movement shakers. It means that we own the fact that we are merely humans, who cannot be God. We cannot make all things new. We cannot be the judge. We have to trust God. We have to entrust God with our pain, frustration, and anger. Sometimes we have to entrust people and situations over to God, and trust.

Just like the older brother, all that his father has is and has always been his. All that God has is and always has been ours.

We have to trust that God's grace will continue to offend us and allow it to do so.
Even when we don't understand it,
Even when we don't like it,
we have to trust God and the scandal that is God's overwhelming, all loving, and all-consuming grace.
Amen.