

The Overwhelming Scandal of Grace  
By Reverend Katie E. Hambrick

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. 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. Yes, I actually wore a falcons jersey even though in my superbowl baby heart, I am a cowboy fan. It was a weird time for me.

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 arrested and served a small time in prison. He was no longer welcome in the city of Atlanta. This was for good reason and safety of all.

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 this year 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 that 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 and gives 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...

It has been 15 years since Vick was arrested, and I was still not over it. I was 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 we reacted to this shows a lot more about our brokenness than it does Vick's... A lot of times with today's scripture, Christians put themselves in the shoes of the prodigal son, when really we have a bit of both brother's 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 understanding God's grace to its fullest extent, then we will understand just how deeply offensive grace is. Grace is not based on a system of fairness. God does not grant people more grace because they have done "good" 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.

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 he is. I am not even sure if this is a conscious thought we have, but it shows through with 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. Whether this is a conscious thought or subconscious thought of ours, it shows a lot about us. 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 what grace is?

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. And just because my broken pieces might look different than Vick's does not mean I am any more deserving of God's grace than he is. In fact, I am less deserving than Vick because I felt that God's grace should be withheld from anyone.

That is what is so offensive about God's grace. It is available to everyone and anyone, and you get no say in who receives it and who does. It does not matter how good you are, all you have to do is say “father” 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.

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. When we realize that we are not the father in today's scripture and we stop attempting to be that, then we open the door for God to really help us to heal our brokenness and to become whole without worry about others' brokenness. We allow God to be God and us to be human.

Max Lucado and I rarely agree on theology, 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, he was a serial killer that used to eat his victims. For the true crime junkies like me, there is a movie about him on amazon if you want to learn more about him as a teenager called my friend dahmer. Viewer discretion is advised.

Anyways, Lucado was talking about Dahmer because Dahmer was finally caught and arrested for being a murder and a cannibal. Both of which are illegal in the United States. However in prison, Dahmer starts attending a Bible class and has a conversion experience in prison in 1994.

He is even baptized 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 the good news, beloved. We do not have to understand the mystery and scandal of God's overwhelming grace. We don't have to like it. We can be offended by it at times. **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.

The final piece of this puzzle is this doesn't mean you invite Dahmer to dinner. I can name many reasons that someone should not invite Jeffery Dahmer to dinner, but we will stick with you shouldn't. It doesn't mean you let someone back in that hurt you. It means that you trust that God can heal all brokenness and make all things new.

That we are merely humans, who cannot be God. We cannot make all things new. We cannot be the judge. We just 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 face our own brokenness. Just like the older brother, all that the father has is and has always 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 his grace.

Amen.