

Robert Berra
All Saints Sermon
Proper 6, Year C
1 Kings 21:1-10, (11-14), 15-21a
Psalm 5:1-8
Galatians 2:15-21
Luke 7:36-8:3

If I have not had the chance to greet you yet:
My name is Robert Berra and I bring greetings from the Diocese of Arizona where I serve as the
Episcopal Campus Chaplain and teach sociology at Arizona State University.

Jim was so gracious as to allow me to preach today—and even though I’m on vacation I said yes. I did not know at the time that I was also signing up for a week of intense personal struggles with central truths of the Christian faith—but it is what it is. I stand before you today still struggling with justice and forgiveness and love and sin.

You see, even before I went to seminary, my graduate work focused in large part on the relationship between gender and religion. My graduate work has since turned into my pastoral work. I have witnessed the emergence of a long-necessary conversation about rape on college campuses. On college campuses, 1-in-4 women and 1-in-16 men will experience sexual assault. I work on a campus that was once referred to on The Daily Show as “the Harvard of Date Rape.” I have co-facilitated a course for other campus chaplains on campus rape culture. I write on the topic academically. One week this past semester, four different pastoral conversations I had involved counseling people who were dealing with the aftermath of rape—either because they knew the victim or the perpetrator. The aftermath of rape is rarely only held by the victim and perpetrator—it radiates out to friends, families, and communities.

So as you can imagine, I have been following the case involving Stanford student Brock Turner, who was found and chased down by two bicyclists while he was attempting to rape an unconscious woman behind a dumpster. This past week, he was sentenced to 6 months in jail after being found guilty on three felony counts. The victim’s statement has rightfully gone viral on social media, as she demolishes his attempts to shift the moral locus from his decision to rape her to a

generalized complaint against college drunkenness and promiscuity. He promises that he will go on a speaking circuit and dedicate his life to addressing drinking and hook-ups; but at every turn he refused to admit that the real problem is that he thought he could rape an unconscious woman. Adding insult to injury, the father of the rapist wrote a letter to the judge, in which he lamented that this entire messy business of being on trial for rape had taken away his son's appetite for steak dinners, and that "20 minutes of action" should not cancel out the promise of his son's first 20 years of life.

"20 years of action." That is the closest the father of the rapist comes to mentioning his son's victim. But the judge seemed to agree, and reduced the prosecution's recommended 6 year sentence to six months, saying that such a long "prison sentence would have a severe impact" on the rapist. [Although, I do note he will be a registered sex offender, and that will follow him around for the rest of his life.]

I take some comfort that there has been quite a bit of outrage, at least in my little corners of the world and internet. The ways in which rich white men are treated with kid gloves for heinous crimes was *unusually* transparent in this case. And it became painfully clear that we live in a world in which a judge will give a rapist a sentence that seems less like taking rape seriously and more like a consolation prize to the rapist for the inconvenience of being found guilty. ...Where the perceived promise of the rapist's future is valued more highly than the past and present suffering of the victim.

But even as I share the outrage, I'm aware that at least one thing mingled with my outrage is recognition. I do see Brock Turner in younger versions of myself. Even though I was raised to consider rape a great moral evil, I was also raised in a culture that treats a woman's 'no' *not as the final word*, but the opening of a negotiation. As one judge in New Zealand said during his summation of a rape trial 45 minutes before the rapist was acquitted by a jury, "if every man stopped the first time a woman said 'no', the world would be a much less exciting place to live." We learn in this culture not to respect the word "no", but to try to get around it. Twelve years ago, it took sitting with friends who had been raped to realize that the way many men treat intimate relationships cause profound

damage.¹ I do not speak as though I'm above our rape culture; I speak as one who is embedded within it. It took time to learn how to avoid shifting the moral locus of a rape from the perpetrator—to keep from asking the questions that blame the person who got raped—and instead focus on the fact that the perpetrator alone made a conscious choice to overpower someone to use their body.

Maybe you have known for a long time about these counter-cultural messages—how consent is an affirmative yes, not just the absence of a partner saying “no.” Maybe you've known that rape is *nine times out of ten* not the attack of a stranger, but an acquaintance or a partner who overrides a “no.” But I suspect many of us men may recognize Brock Turner in us, and the recognition can silence us even as we are disgusted with his refusal to own up to what he did. And so some men defend Turner, or the lessened sentence; they counsel us to consider that the jury may have been wrong; we are urged to forgive and be merciful to a rapist who refuses to name his own crime for what it was.

So now that I've shared more about me than you may have ever wanted to know, maybe you understand some of why, this week of all weeks, I might struggle with scripture about forgiveness.

Our passage from the Gospel of Luke today takes places right after Jesus notes that he is taking criticism from the religious leaders around him because he is “a glutton and a drunkard who eats with tax collectors and sinners.”² Luke then tells the story we heard today to drive the point home. In the very home of a Pharisee who probably invited Jesus over to size him up and test his credentials, one of the pesky unclean sinners—a woman, no less— barges in and performs this service for Jesus. It is just as likely as not that the woman may have met Jesus earlier, experienced forgiveness, and this is simply her service of gratitude. Instead of forgiving her *because* of the foot-washing she gives him, Jesus reiterates her forgiveness in front of men who could not see the woman beyond her sin. Hence Jesus's question to Simon the Pharisee: “Do you see this woman? Can you look past the sin and see the love and gratitude that forgiveness brings forth?”

¹ Other men called me an “emotional tampon” after noticing that I was spending the time to listen to women without trying to score. Many of them are now military officers.

² Lk 7:34.

A general lesson to be pulled from Luke is that we are to be like the unnamed forgiving woman, grateful for the forgiveness that Jesus offers—and rightly so; we are not supposed to be like the judgmental Pharisee. And so it is easy to see the passage as offering us that choice: do we want to be like the woman, loving so much more because we know the power of forgiveness and offer forgiveness in our relationships; or are we like Simon who cannot see beyond past sin and holds the past deeds of a person as the only measure of who they truly are, or have become?

If we were to place ourselves in the Story as Simon, what would we see and do if we saw Brock Turner's victim in the woman at Jesus's feet. What if it was Brock Turner there, instead?

Am I too much like Simon if I ask what it means to be forgiving when, in this society, it seems to be an informal norm that men can more easily escape the consequences of raping someone than a woman can escape questions of what she may have done to bring the rape upon herself? Can we be too quick to forgive?

And here are the two big questions that have haunted me all week: Is my anger that a rapist was let off easier than I think is fair counter to the Gospel imperative to be forgiving?

Am I failing at being loving?

Not necessarily.

Forgiveness is commanded to the church in terms of how we handle our interpersonal relationships, but we also live in a world in which we have to use our best judgment about how we will live together as a society. Unless we are willing to completely forgo any sense of moral decision-making, we have to come to grips with the complexities of love and justice.

There are those who would divide the concept of love and justice, and set them as opposite shores of a deep, broad river. Such a division is harsh and, for a Christian, it is ultimately artificial.

A sharp division between justice and love leads to a justice better called retribution and revenge. Love fares no better in the division: On this side of perfection, love without justice cannot admit that the wounding we suffer at the hands of others bears any significance at all, and so it has nothing of substance to offer to those who suffer. For if God offers an unqualified patience and affirmation to everything we do—even those things which harm others—then the Gospel holds no good news for the many who suffer for the sake of the comfort of a few.

The truth is more complex, and as the 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, justice is “an approximation of brotherhood under conditions of sin.” Rather than there being a sharp division between love and justice, justice is the degree of love that is possible among strangers and societies in a world marred by self-interest and a desire for control—in other words, sin.

And it has to be said that outrage at injustice is itself an expression of love. We follow a God who loves all with an equal loving regard, and we are created to bear and respond to and mirror that divine image. Our very ability to discern and desire fairness is that imperfect approximation of our sharing of God’s equal loving regard for all. A perversion of love that offers preemptive forgiveness to our wrongdoing with no redress or naming of the wrong is the denial of love and worth to those who suffer. And, ironically, such a perversion of love will always benefit those who practice evil and indulge selfish desire. The world already practices that sort of love, in which white, male bodies possessing money are favored over others. Christians are called to a more radical love—a more equal regard that responds to divine image rather than earthly markers of favor.

Am I still Simon the Pharisee?

Maybe, but I do not think Simon was being just. He did not allow the possibility of redemption or forgiveness, and so he lost sight of God’s equal loving regard—to the point he could not see the woman past her history. There is a lesson there worth heeding.

I suspect that everyone in this church knows some measure of forgiveness and so we may also know the gratitude of the unnamed woman; and yet we all could experience and give more forgiveness. That is easy to say and hard to do, but it is the life we are called to live. At our best, Christians point to forgiveness and

redemption. Any number of people have histories that need such good news—oppressors and oppressed, perpetrators and victims, activists and the apathetic.

And if we choose to live in the world, we are called to take on the work of love, which always includes forgiveness, and yet our love will occasionally have to look more like justice. While I may decide to turn my own cheek when I am attacked, there is no love or justice in holding out another person's cheek to be hit again. How often do we fail in this when we refuse to believe a rape victim, or hold the perpetrator's future of more worth than healing the living hell the victim still experiences, or believe a rapist will not act again when he cannot even name what he did wrong in the first place? How do we hold our responsibility to forgive in tension with our desire to acknowledge and mirror God's equal loving regard for all?

Ultimately I cannot answer these for you. I can tell you that I have commitments to ending systems that see some lives as less worthy of consideration. I simply offer that this tension between love, and justice, and forgiveness, and sin is a part of a conversation we do not have permission to avoid, consider settled, or abdicate.

How might you engage this conversation and point the world toward a more perfect justice and love?

May your discernment be fruitful.

Amen.