

- Malachi 3:1-4
- Hebrews 2:14-18
- Luke 2:22-40
- Psalm 84
- or Psalm 24:7-10

One of the things I don't talk a whole lot about was the fact that I had for nine years of my life I was a serious athlete. I was a Division I collegiate athlete. I rode crew for Brown University. We won a few national championships and I was the last cut from the 1988 Olympic team. The last big race that I won was a race in Philadelphia in the fall of 1988.

And I share this with you so that I can tell you that I was never a natural athlete. I was not one of those people that immediately got something when I picked it up. I often had to struggle and I often had to practice. I often had to put in extra hours. I often had to not give up. I had to persist and I believe that that persistence paid off. And, in fact, that persistence allowed me to actually continue to improve and transcend the thresholds and obstacles that people reach in their lives. When they have never experienced an obstacle before in their life and suddenly they are faced with it, often times people cannot somehow muster within them that kind of drive to move to the next level.

But I give thanks for the fact that I wasn't a natural athlete because that enabled me to do more than anybody ever thought was possible. And my career was a gift to me. And I say all this because I want to say to you that given my own history in sports, I was never a big fan of Kobe Bryant as a player. He was someone who had a father who had already played professional basketball. He was born with enormous gifts. He was given every opportunity to improve. Thousands upon thousands of dollars were poured into him so that he could be exactly the star he was on the court. He jumped to the pros from high school in 1996 and I having completed my career in 1988, I found that jump to be presumptuous.

And I never rooted for him as an athlete. I rooted for Michael Jordan always because he had drive. I rooted for Dennis Rodman sometimes when they weren't playing the Bulls and when he was in his right mind. I rooted again then for LeBron James when he moved to Cleveland. He showed this incredible resolve. But not Kobe Bryant as a player because he had so many gifts. Because he had so much support, I just didn't identify.

But I identify with Kobe Bryant, the person, and I identify with Kobe Bryant, the parent. As a person, he had to face some difficult things about himself. And he did so in a very public way and he was capable of doing some incredibly dangerous and violent things. And at the same time, as a person he was able to do incredibly wonderful and generous things. Things that were truly noble. And the Kobe Bryant, who is a person, is a reminder to me and a reminder to all of us that we are all of a picture. None of us is any one thing. We are all complex beings. There are parts of us that shine and there are parts of us that stay in the shadows. And we try to hide in the shadows and we try to let others see us only shine, but

the truth of the matter is we are all complex beings fully real . There is no part of us that is any less real than another; the part of us that shines or the part of us that is in the shadows.

Martin Luther with his incredible inspired theology of grace said that we are all always at the same time sinners and justified. And we are simultaneously justified and loved and accepted and forgiven by God and at the same time we remain sinners. “Simul justus et peccator” is what he wrote in Latin, and that is the message of the Gospel for us today when we think about Kobe Bryant, the person. Because one of the things you see in celebrities is you often see a kind of mirror of yourself.

Somewhere in the 20th century there was a shift in the world’s consciousness from looking at the lives of saints and trying to emulate them, to looking at the lives of celebrities. And this is why Andy Warhol, the artist, began to paint celebrities like Marilyn Monroe in images and colors that were reminiscent of the saints that he saw every time he went to church with his mother in the Ukrainian Catholic Church that they attended.

The only difference, of course, is that whereas saints seem to rest secure in their holiness and we create aphorisms to protect their sanctity, as it were, we tell ourselves stories that every sinner has a future and every saint has a past. With celebrities we often are waiting to watch them fall. We are as fascinated when a celebrity flies as when a celebrity falls. They just engross us.

And the wonder and the mystery and the grace of Kobe Bryant, the celebrity, is he was able to inhabit both sides of himself in front of so many people. He was able somehow to show us that he was not just someone who flies but someone who falls. He's also someone for whom there are wonderful qualities but also someone who did things that he should not have done and left things undone that he should have done. So there is a mirror that his life holds up to our lives. It gives us an opportunity to see grace and begin to have some compassion for ourselves so that we can see ourselves as God sees us, as whole beings, beloved.

And there is another thing that he did. He wasn't just Kobe Bryant as a person that I admire. It was Kobe Bryant as a parent. One of the things that I found incredibly moving was that she was able to pour himself into his family and to give them the same kind of attention that had been shown to him. He had moved from being someone who was completely dedicated to his own self-actualization, his own achievements, and he saw himself at a pivotal point in his life in 2016, being called to live into deeper relations with his family and to lift up, particularly, his daughter, Gianna. And the images of his love for Gianna are real and beautiful. And the fact that he could support her in exactly the same way that he had been supported was not just the normal course of events but actually a kind of witness to God's transformation within him.

And s, I admire Kobe Bryant, the parent, because I see in the midst of his life the capacity for profound change. And while we have the axiom, every saint has a past and every sinner has a future, I think he is the embodiment of the fact that change is possible in each of us. Transformation is possible for all of us. We can all step into those relationships that God is

surrounding us with every day and discover ourselves anew, and perhaps even the life that has been waiting for us in the midst of all of our careful planning.

You and I are called to see ourselves, not only as people who are complex, but also as people who are going through a profound change and this change surrounds us each day and it presents us an opportunity each day to be transformed. And all of this I want to suggest to you, is in the background of our incredible reading from the Gospel of Luke. We see in the midst of the presentation of Jesus this moment in which everyday life is happening and then there is an invitation to change. And the Jesus that we meet in Luke is a Jesus who is fully involved in human experience.

As we read today in the Book of Hebrews, there is a wonderful line there that is my favorite. The author says, God did not send Christ to help angels. God did not send Christ to help people for whom it is not possible to sin. But God sent Christ to love complex people such as ourselves and to redeem all of who we are from within. And so, in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, there is an underlying and raising up of human experience just as it is. And all of the complexes and all of the challenges, everything is there.

And, yet, in the middle of that moment of regularity, of ordinary time, there is an invitation and a promise of transformation that comes from the prophets, Simeon and Anna, as a kind of hope and a kind of promise of rebirth. This child will not live an ordinary life. You will not live an ordinary life. You will be transformed by having this child in your family. The world will be transformed through Him. We will all be changed and life will never be the same. And lest we think this was a promise of prosperity, Simeon says to Mary that a sword will pierce her heart as well.

So today's gospel is a witness to the state of affairs that you and I know, to the human condition that we all are too well acquainted with, and it carries in it a message to that human condition that in all of the brokenness you find yourself in this time and place, that God loves you and God accepts you and God's grace is sufficient for you right where you are today. And today's gospel also brings in it a kind of encouragement, a kind of promise – an opportunity to take part in the profound work of grace that God promises us; the grace of rebirth, the grace of resurrection, the grace of forgiveness, the grace of reconciliation – all of that transformation that's possible too for you. God is not finished with you, even though God loves you as you are.

And each of us, just as Mary and Joseph brought their child, in the midst of just doing everyday life, each of us has that moment to be transformed. Each of us has that opportunity to experience God's presence in our lives in a new and possible way. And so, the question that is presented to us, this Candlemas, this Feast of the presentation, is where will God's light shine in you?

Candlemas, as you know, is a moment in which we just lit some candles. It was a time when people would bring candles into church. And the collect that we have for today is a presentation and summary of that whole thing, that just as Jesus was brought forth and was declared to be the Light of God, so may God's light shine in us; so may we be presented to

God as new and transformed people by grace – the grace which accepts and the grace that transforms.

Unless we think that any of surd in the gospels, I want to finish today with two pieces of scriptures that go with the grain of today's gospel. The first is from The Book of Romans and it picks up on the theme of presentation. Listen for it. “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

What is the will of God for you? What is good and acceptable and perfect for you? What is the transformation that God is inviting you to do? In what ways can you present yourselves as living sacrifices to God? And the second piece of scripture which is, again, a classic, comes from the Gospel of Matthew. And it's simply this: “Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in Heaven.” What is the glory that you owe God today? What is the glory of God working in you?

On the last day of his life when Kobe went with Gianna to a basketball practice, he started his day in the local Catholic church with a moment of prayer and the hope that the rest of his day would be consecrated to God. And so may it be. So may our lives be consecrated. So may we be lights. So may we be courageous enough as a congregation and individuals to be lights to the world around us, to let our soul lights shine. So may we be unafraid to present ourselves as living sacrifices for God's work among us.

Amen.

[End of Recording]