Alienated from our own beauty

Sin distorts the reciprocity for which God made us.

by Debra Dean Murphy in the February 14, 2018 issue

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I was a few weeks into a sabbatical when the story of the *Access Hollywood* tape broke. Alone at a writer's retreat, I tried to limit my exposure to the news, figuring I would take to heart the invitation—elemental even to an academic sabbath—to stop and rest. Avoiding the unseemly story felt all the more necessary because my sabbatical project was an exploration of beauty, the particular contours of which I hope to explore in a future column. It was hard to reconcile my immersion in my subject with the growing realization that this vulgar tape would not, after all, doom candidate Trump's chances.

These many months later it is a new day of reckoning. Not so much for this president who seems—forgive the foul pun—untouchable, but for powerful men from every social sector whose violations have been publicly catalogued, their reputations

shattered, and their crimes no longer concealed or explained away.

It is also the beginning of Lent. And while these many months have been demoralizing, exhausting, and a hundred other things for anyone who has experienced sexual harassment or assault, I wonder if Lent makes things even more difficult. For 40 days we are asked to attend to our inner lives with rigorous self-scrutiny. I may be given to schadenfreude with each new revelation of sexual impropriety or criminality, but Lent bids me consider my own sin especially abhorrent.

What does this mean in this particular cultural moment? Maybe these matters provide a test case for revisiting the revisioning of sin—the shifting ways Christian theology has come to see it, name it, and know it in ourselves and others.

In the 1960s, feminist theologians began challenging the notion of sin as pride or the assertion of ego, arguing that such a view presumed a sense of self and autonomy that most women do not possess. Their work also confronted a range of theological and cultural orthodoxies, including the inordinate blame placed on women for all manner of human sin and the view of women's bodies as dangerous sources of sexual temptation.

While there were problems with these early revisions of classic Christian doctrine (the assumption of a uniformity of women's experience, for one), they did important work in reevaluating sin as a theological category and contesting inadequate accounts of both personhood and the nature of God. They made it possible to ask more illuminating questions. What does it mean to confess the sin of a lack of self? And how is sin, at root, systemic—less about individual weakness and more about institutional cruelty and human collusion with it?

Feminist theology also challenged conceptions of divine power distorted by patriarchal norms. The best of this work has recovered a view of God as a sociality of being. It envisions God's power as a kind of divine *eros*, a desire for reciprocity and kinship, not possession or domination. Sarah Coakley describes divine being as ecstatic overflowing, as desire born not of need or lack but of plenitude and longing love.

To name God's power in such ways is to recognize its non-coercive character. To know ourselves as people created in the image of this God is to condemn all forms of coercive power—and to confess when we fail at this.

And here is where I'll bring beauty into my first column after all. If beauty, as Elaine Scarry argues, assists in addressing injustice, it does this not only by requiring perceptual acuity but by revealing what lifesaving reciprocity looks like: a symmetry of relations. Beauty is fairness in every sense of the word.

If the ceaseless love of the Trinity is the essence of beauty, then Lent offers an opportunity to consider humanity's alienation from its own beauty. In Jesus' confrontation with his Roman abusers, he hanged deformed on a cross. But his deformity, Augustine insists, is our beauty. His act of self-emptying love imparts the gift of our being created anew in his likeness.

Like all gifts, this one can be received well or poorly or not at all. We can refuse to live in *imitatio Christi*, opting for well-worn paths that demean us and others. We can also fail to receive this gift because of ignorance or fear or wounds. Sin, a falling short of God's desire for good, may be committed willfully—as in the violation of another's dignity. But sin may also result from weakened capacities for which one is not directly culpable: the inability, say, of a victim of abuse to trust their own belovedness.

These are the shadow sides of ourselves, and the places where we recognize that sin is fundamentally social. Sin's insidious work is to distort our humanity and alienate us from the beauty for which we were made, a beauty that is God's own life: reciprocity and kinship and a symmetry of relations.

Sin's social dimension also means that I can be complicit in the sin of others—their failure to receive God's gifts. Lent calls me to reckon with my shadow side, with how my action and inaction have dehumanized my neighbors, making it harder for them to embrace God's life-giving desires for them. And, if that weren't enough, Lent also calls me to reckon with my tendency to see the abuser as beyond the bounds of divine love.

Lent asks us to reckon with these hard truths, to face our shadow sides in the conviction that none of us is beyond God's grace and redemption. This is the season's difficult but necessary work.

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