

USE ME

Week #1 of the 7-Week Lenten/Easter Series, "Space for Grace"

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So I just want to start with a shout out to Unity in St. Croix, who watches us online every single Sunday. Hey there, Unity of St. Croix! Let's love 'em up a little bit! [Congregation applauds] You're a part of our ministry, so thanks for joining us!

So suppose I give you 40 days, and asked you do something that would transform and improve the quality of your life. What would you do? What would you work on? What would you change? You know, what would make your life better in the next 40 days?

Regardless of the economy, regardless of the impact of Covid, regardless of what may not be going so well in our lives right now, what is the best thing that you could do for you in the next 40 days that will give you a breakthrough, and will take your life to the next level?

You know, this past week we began the season of Lent, the 40 days of preparation for the sacred event of Easter. And do you know that the word "Lent" comes from an Anglo-Saxon origin that means the word "spring"? Things bloom and blossom and grow in the spring. And that word also comes from a word that means "to lengthen." And so Lent is really a preparation to expand spiritually, expand our capacity for God.

And so Jesus, in his 40 days of preparation of fasting and prayer, prepared himself spiritually for Holy Week and the miraculous on Easter Sunday of resurrection. You know, Jesus and Lent really invite us all to do a period of inner preparation to help bring forth -- to help resurrect -- any area of our lives that have gone dormant. Any area where we feel stuck or lost or hopeless. That we can reawaken those if we do the inner preparation within us to have a breakthrough in those areas. Lent really shows us that process of preparation to bring forth something even greater in us and in our lives.

When I was a kid, I did not like Lent at all! I thought it was hard; it was difficult, not fun and painful! Because, in our house, we had to give up meat. And I am quite the little carnivore, and particularly when I was a kid! To me, a dinner was not dinner without meat. And what made it even worse is that my birthday is in the beginning of April, and so it was always before Easter. And so I didn't get meat. And growing up, all of us -- we got to pick what we wanted to eat on our birthday ... except me! [Congregation laughs] There was no meat on the agenda!

And my mom would say, *"Oh, well, you give that up because you think it's important to you, but God is even more important. You use that energy over that time to get closer to God."* I said, *"Mom, why is it so hard to get closer to God?"* [Congregation laughs] *"I just want you to know, Mom; I can love meat and God at the same time!"* [Congregation laughs]

As clever and logical as I thought I was, it did not work. And it's a signal that we all want it to get easier, don't we? We want things to come easier, including our relationship with God.

Kind of reminds me of my favorite Lenten story. You may recognize it from many classes that I teach, because I love it. Here we go:

So this Baptist guy moves into an all-Catholic neighborhood. And the first Friday of Lent, he's out there grilling steaks. And all the Catholic people are eating fish, and the smell of the steaks is intoxicating; it is so good, it is absolutely torturous! And on the second Friday of Lent, he's out doing it again, and it's just killing them! And they're thinking, *"Oh, we've got to do something about this; we cannot go all through Lent with steaks cooking every Friday, and we're eating fish."*

So they went over to his house and said, *"Hey, man; you're in an all-Catholic neighborhood; you need to convert to Catholicism and follow all our rules."*

And he said, "Really? Is it hard?"

"Nah; it'll be easy!"

So they came over and the priest came with them. And the priest sprinkled some water on his head, put his hand over his head, and said, "Born a Baptist; raised a Baptist; now a Catholic."

The guy said, "That's it?"

He said, "That's it! That's all you need to do! And so you've got to follow all the rules now."

And so everybody's relieved that they're not going to have to be tortured with grilling steaks any more.

So the next Friday comes; they're all sitting down to their fish dinners; the guy's cooking steak again! They cannot believe; what, did he forget?!?

And so they thought they'd give him one more week. He did it again the following week. And so they all went over there, and they said, "What is up? You're a Catholic; you've got to follow all the rules!"

He said, "I did! I did a little conversion thing just like you!"

They said, "What do you mean?"

So he went over to the grill and he sprinkled a little water over the steak, put his hand over it and said, "Born a cow; raised a cow; now a fish." [Congregation laughs and applauds] And so ... [Laughs]

Don't you wish it was that easy? Sprinkle a little water on it; put your hand ... [Congregation laughs]

Lent is 40 days -- 40 days. Now, the number 40 in the Bible symbolically represents a period of discipline, devotion and preparation to bring forth something greater. Moses was up on the mountain for 40 days before bringing forth the 10 Commandments. The spies that were sent out were sent out for 40 days for them to discover and see the Promised Land. Elijah journeyed for 40 days to reach a cave where he received his vision. And Jesus spent 40 days in prayer and fasting to prepare himself to begin his ministry.

Today we begin a six-week Lenten series entitled, "Space for Grace." And it is to show how to apply the discipline, the devotion and the preparation for God to use us to bring forth some greater miracle or transformation or good or greater blessings through us and into our lives.

So "Space for Grace" begins by, first – **YOU'VE GOT TO CREATE THE SPACE.** How many people have a closet or a drawer, or your garage, just crammed with stuff. [Congregation laughs] Just a lot! How many people have so much stuff that you either have a storage unit or you need a storage unit for all that stuff?

You ever felt like your life is just so crammed and full? Like, every day you're going, going ... Like, not enough hours in the day to do all the things, get to all the appointments, and do all the responsibilities you have to do. I mean, the fact of the matter is: our lives are packed; our minds are crowded; and our closets are stuffed with not enough space. We don't have enough space! And we wonder why our lives aren't getting better. We wonder why we're not having great breakthroughs.

I read an article about the importance of "white space" -- or what they call "negative space." That's the place where there's nothing on a page, whether in an advertisement or a magazine. And so, while white space is nothing -- there's nothing there as compared to when there's photos and text -- the fact is that it's the white space that makes the photos and the words more effective. If there's not enough white space, it's too busy, and you can't read it and take it in. White space -- negative space; space in our lives is important! For interior designers, they know the importance of space. For musicians. For people who build gardens.

I read something that said that relationships: the number one factor in long-term relationships is giving each other space. Some people think it's sex, but it's space. [Congregation laughs] I'm just telling you this; I'm just passing on information to you! [Congregation laughs] Space is important in relationships!

In sports! The reason the Suns are number one, because one of the things they do well: they space the floor well. Space is vital and important in all areas of our life, including our spiritual life.

Space sounds like nothing! it's empty! It's unimportant! And, yet, it's vital. Because space creates openness. It creates balance. It creates a flow. It creates peace. It creates beauty. It opens a place for creativity and spontaneity and goodness. Our lives cannot be too crammed; we need space!

So where in your life do you need some space? And I would suggest that one of the areas where we need space is to have more space for God. More space for quiet. More space for prayer.

How many people know that it would behoove you to create a little more space in your spiritual life, and to create more quiet in your life? How many people? Okay, about five; perfect! [Congregation laughs] That's exactly the number of people I wrote this for. [Congregation laughs]

The great Paramahansa Yogananda, the founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship, said, *"Every person needs a retreat: a dynamo of silence where he may go for the exclusive purpose of being newly recharged by the Infinite."*

We need to create more space for the Divine; create more space for our spiritual life. So here are the four elements that we need for creating more space.

The first one is that **prayer and your relationship with God needs to be a priority in your life.** That's why Jesus said, *"Seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you."* Seek first, and then these things. Nothing wrong with things! But to seek God first; seek the Source first.

Sometimes we like to say how important prayer is, how important God is, how important a lot of things are in our life ... but we don't always back it up with behavior. I can tell you lots of things that we say are important to us, but we sometimes cast away and don't take time for. Sometimes we say that exercise is important, but sometimes we'd rather not get off the couch that day. We'll say eating is important; how often do we skip meals? We'll say sleep is important; how often do we give up sleep? We'll say our family's important; how often do we give up time with our family?

And prayer: we say it's important. Well, you can't create space unless it's a priority. Unless it's a value. Unless you get, like that parable says, "the pearl of great price" -- that you see how important it is. That the greatest activity we could engage in is the power of prayer: to immerse our mind in the mind of God! It is! The question is: Do you value it enough to make it a priority to create that space?

The second one is you've got to be sincere. **You have to have a sincere desire to feel the Spirit and the presence of God.** Sometimes we treat God like a spiritual Santa Claus: *"Hey, God, I want this; God; I want that!"* -- like a Genie just granting wishes. Sometimes we want the gifts more than the giver. And the truth is: we need to seek and yearn just to feel that pure Spirit and power and love of God in our hearts. That is a vital and crucial things for us.

I love in the song, "Joy to the World" -- *"let every heart prepare him room."* There's a wonderful line in Scripture that says, *"If you seek me, you will find me ... if you seek me with all your heart."* A sincere desire for God is a vital part of creating space for grace.

The third one: let me just read you a line. Jesus said, *"When you pray, enter thy inner chamber and shut the door, and pray to your Father, who is in secret; and your Father, who is in secret, will reward you."*

So the third thing is **you've got to enter your inner chamber.** That is that place of quiet and stillness in you -- in your heart. To quiet your mind. Jesus constantly created space for God in his life; for prayer time. You know, for 40 days he prepared himself by creating more and more space for God. To allow God in all the way. To commune and to connect with that Spirit.

And then the last one is -- I love when it says, *"Close the door."* It means to **close the door on the outer world and distractions.** We have a lot of distractions in life! Our worries, our problems; all the things we've got to do; all the responsibilities. They take up a lot of space. And all of our stuff: worrying about

our money; worrying about our house; worrying about our car. You know, we spend a lot of time on our iPhones; taking selfies; posting pictures of food we just ate or about to eat. [Congregation laughs] We do all these kind of things, don't we? Making sure we watch our big-screen TV. You know, we're worried about the Suns; about friends; traveling. We spend so much time loving up on coffee and chocolates ... and nothing wrong with it! [Congregation laughs] But I'm just sayin'!

If you really want to pray, when it says, "*Close the door*," it means turn away from the outer world and the distractions. Let go of those attachments and give your heart fully to God. To immerse yourself fully in God.

The truth is: the more space we create for God, the more space in us to allow the flow of God's peace and wisdom and goodness in our lives. The question is: Are you willing to make creating space a priority? Are you willing to seek God with all your heart? Are you willing to go to that place of inner silence and block out all the distractions to truly deepened your connection to God's Spirit?

You know, 40 days represents the discipline, devotion and preparation. So here's our homework assignment. For 40 minutes a day, create space to connect with God in the silence, and to unify yourself with that Spirit.

The second thing we need to do ... The first one is to create the space. The second one is to **STATE YOUR CASE**. Which is stating your intention for how you want to be used for a greater and higher purpose.

Martin Luther King: here's how he stated his case. He said, "*Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do and use it for a greater purpose than myself.*"

There's a wonderful passage in the Book of Isaiah when God is needing someone to go forth and minister to people. And he said, "*Who shall I send? Who will go for us?*" And Isaiah said, "*Here I am, Lord; send me.*" Even before he knew what the assignment was fully, he said, "*Here I am, Lord; send me.*"

So what he's really saying: "*God, I want to serve you. God, I want my life to have purpose. God, I want you to use me to make a difference in the lives of others. God, I want to fulfill my divine purpose.*"

When Isaiah said, "Here I am, Lord; send me; use me," he was talking about owning who he came here to be. Owning the gifts that he came to share, about making the difference that he came to make.

don Miguel Ruiz -- in his book, *The Fifth Agreement* -- said, "*From the moment you were born, you deliver a message to the world. What is that message? That message is you.*" *It is the child; it is the angel; it is the messenger from the Infinite in a human body. The Infinite creates a program just for you, and everything you need to be who you are is in that program, but you've got to declare it. You've got to claim it. You've got to state your case.*" To say, "God, use me! Show me! Here I am! Send me! Let my life be used for something greater than myself."

George Bernard Shaw, in a wonderful quote, said, "*The greatest joy in the world is to know that your life is being used for something greater than yourself.*" To have a lasting impact, not just on the people now, but in the future, as well.

And it doesn't matter whether you're a doctor, a lawyer, a minister, or whoever it is. There is a purpose for which we have all been sent. And the question: Are you willing to open your heart and say, "God, use me."

And so the two things we need to get to that place -- to say, "*Here I am; use me!*"?

The first one is to surrender: surrender our attachments and surrender our fears. Have you ever been in a place where you say, "*God, I want to serve you; God, I'm ready! I'm ready!*"

"*You want me to do what?!?*" [Congregation laughs] "*I'm not quite sure I'm cut out for that ... but is there something else you have for me?*" [Congregation laughs] "*Oh, I'm willing, God; I'm really willing ...*

or at least I'm mostly willing. And I'm fully available Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for anything you ..."

I mean, it sounds crazy, but we say we're willing; we're not always as fully willing as we think we are. Let me take you back to a story in the Bible. Remember the story of the young man: the rich young man? He said, *"So, how do I have eternal life?"*

And Jesus said, *"Well, you follow the commandments."*

"Yeah; I follow the commandments. Anything else?"

He said, *"Yes; sell all your possessions and follow me."* And the young man bowed his head and walked away sadly.

And so the fact is: he wasn't willing to let go of his attachment of his stuff, and he wasn't willing to follow. And the truth is: that is the key. Are you willing? He chose to walk away, instead of surrendering and letting go and following.

A guy I meant many years ago -- a fabulous minister in California. His name is Dr. Tom Costa. and he wrote a book called *Life: You Want to Make Something of It?* And he was a fabulous guy! But one thing he did in that book was: there was a Scripture that says, *"Many are called and few are chosen."* But one of the things he said was, *"Many are called and few choose."* Few choose to make that spiritual commitment to go deeper. Few choose to open their heart and dedicate it fully to God. Few choose to follow at that deep spiritual level.

St. Francis of Assisi said, *"Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace."* What would you be willing to say? What would you be willing to commit? To say, *"Here I am, Lord; send me! Use my life!"*

And the thing is: it's not easy. Remember Jesus in Gethsemane, when he said, *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; but not my will; thy will be done."* So these things aren't easy! But the question is: Are you willing? Are you willing to be used? Are you willing for God to send you? Are you willing to get to that place where you say, *"Here I am, Lord; use me! What is that purpose? Show me! Because I am willing."*

And the final thing is **to ACCEPT THE GRACE**. You know, to me, the grace of God is the never-ending flow of God's goodness and love in our lives. It is that consistent flow and support of love and goodness and blessings and wisdom and guidance that is always available, whether we're aware of it or not. Like a river flowing in the direction of our highest good that is always there and available for us; always seeking to help us. And we can swim up against it; we can swim with it. It is always there and available. The question is: Are we using it? Are we accepting the grace of God?

I think of God's grace as reverse paranoia. You know, paranoia's like, *"Everybody and everything is against me. Life is conspiring against me."* And the reverse of that to wake up every day and think, *"Everyone and everything is for me, and the universe is conspiring for my highest good and my greatest levels of joy."* It is about accepting that grace and allowing you to be a greater challenge.

So here's three ways that we can accept and live in the grace of God every day.

Number one is to **wake up every day in the awareness that I am loved and supported by God.**

Every day -- every second -- in your life, you are loved and supported by God. You know that chair you're sitting on right now? It's supporting your body! You have total trust that that chair's supporting you. Well, God is loving and supporting you even more than that!

I am loved and supported by God. Let's say that together!

[With congregation]: *"I am loved and supported by God."*

One more time: [with congregation] *"I am loved and supported by God."*

Just take a deep breath. And can you own that and live in that awareness? Every moment of your life, you're loved and supported by God!

The best example I ever saw of that was a friend of mine. His name is Dave; I've told you about him many, many times years ago. And he was a Silent Unity prayer worker when I was at seminary at Unity Village. We became friends; we would hang out all the time. And I just loved him! He had a very simple, interesting way of life. And he was just a joy to be around.

I'd call him, and his voice mail was, "*Hi! This is Dave! You're gonna be glad you did!*" [Congregation laughs] And it was so adorable! I would call him and hope he wasn't there, just so I could hear the message! [Congregation laughs] And he had a very playful nature about him.

But we were driving around one day and he said, "*You see that beautiful sky? God made it just for me! You see that mountain? God made that for me? You see that sun? God made that sun for me? See all this air? God made that for me!*" He would say, "*The flowers! God made that for me!*"

And he said, "*The wonderful thing is: I don't have to pay for it or take care of it; God gives it all to me for free!*" [Congregation laughs]

I thought, "*This bad boy is nuts!*" [Congregation laughs] But I realize more and more he lived every day in the awareness that God is providing us with so much more. We look around and go, "*I don't have enough,*" and all this stuff. And yet, all this stuff is serving and supporting us! That we are loved and supported every single day of our lives. He believed that God was loving him; God was guiding him and providing for him every single day. And, really, that's the truth! To accept God's grace is to live in that awareness that you are loved and appreciated every moment in your life.

The second way to accept God's grace is to **be joyful and thankful every day for everything.** "*This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!*" Because there is so much! We all have fabulous lives, if we're really honest with ourselves. We are blessed in so many ways.

I love living in Phoenix! Is this weather crazy good, or what? [Congregation whoops and applauds] I mean, that's something I'm joyful and thankful about. Another one is: I just got a bunch of landscaping done, and I have some path lighting. My backyard looks so good! I am hanging out, enjoying it, every single night. I'm so joyful and thankful about that.

Last Thursday I got rear-ended. And there was stuff to be joyful and thankful about that, because the guy behind me got hit by the guy behind him. And I'm at a red light on Bell, heading west just by Highway 17. And I could tell I was going to get hit. And I wanted to push ahead, but there was a lady in front of me; we were at a red light. So I pushed ahead a little bit, and I got banged into. Not a fun feeling!

But I would say, for the most part -- even though the guy said, "*Hey; we're all going to meet at QuikTrip*"; they didn't show up! But anyway ... [Congregation laughs]

It didn't matter! I was joyful and thankful that I didn't get hurt. I was joyful and thankful that my car looks pretty good. You know, there are a lot of things to be joyful and thankful about.

You know, I decided I'm going to go up to Canada to see my brother. And his tumors are progressing; he's getting weaker. You know, there are bad days and good days. But, I tell you; that guy is just so amazing. He's saying, "*Hey, my energy is kind of low, but I'm trying to do things to make my energy go up. Like, I'm drinking coffee.*" My brother never drank coffee! But it perks him up, so he's doing it.

He loves talking and visits from the family; they're flying in from Vancouver, Montreal, wherever they are. And he said, "*The other thing: I'm trying to laugh every day.*" He said, "*I'm trying to Google these things to make me laugh, so if you know anything to Google to make me laugh. I want to laugh!*"

So far I've not sent any of my jokes to him. [Congregation laughs] I said to Jimmie; I said, "*Jimmie, what do you think?*" Jimmie said, "*If you really love your brother ...*" Um ... [Laughs]

So here's a joke; I'm going to have you vote with a thumbs up or a thumbs down whether if I should tell my brother this joke. Here we go.

So these gas prices, aren't they crazy, crazy high? I filled up half my gas tank the other day for \$42. \$42 for just half a tank of gas! I mean, right now Taco Bell is the only place you can still get gas for \$1.39! [Congregation laughs] Come on! Thumbs up or thumbs down? Give me a vote! Alriiiiiiggghht! Here we go! I'll tell you how it goes! [Congregation laughs] But I'm joyful I'm going to get to share some time with him anyway.

And the last one to accept God's grace is to **know: even when things aren't going well that things are going to work out.**

Remember the story of Joseph when his brothers -- his own brothers! -- threw him in a pit, left him for dead? And some gypsies found him; he was sold into slavery, and then got thrown in jail? But eventually, he became the governor of Egypt, and there was a reconciliation in his family. And you remember the line he said? *"Man means it for evil, but God means it for good."* Whatever you're going through right now -- even if it's not looking good -- just know that God means it for good.

Another great one is Paul. You remember when he was blinded on the road to Damascus? He was very angry and hateful, and came out loving and preaching the Gospel. His lines were, *"All things work together for good for those who love God."*

Both are saying: even in the times that didn't go/work well, they accepted the grace of God by knowing that God means this for good. All things work out for the best. And there will be an answer, even if I can't see it right now. That things will improve. And that is about accepting the grace of God. Knowing that stream of goodness and love is flowing in your favor all of the time.

In 40 days from now, how different is your life going to be? How will it change? How will it transform? What are you going to do for the next 40 days? If I said that to you, you could easily say, *"Well, for the next 40 days, I'm going to set goals; I'm going to work out; I'm going to eat; and I'll be better at the end of it."*

But the truth is: over the next 40 days, the best thing we could do is that spiritual discipline, that spiritual devotion, that spiritual preparation to expand our capacity for God. To allow God to do something amazing through us. But we need to create the space; state our case; and accept the grace. And it'll get triggered. And the first domino to fall is: Are you willing to say, *"Here I am, Lord; use me!"*?

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]

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