

OPEN ME

Week #3 of the 7-Week Lenten/Easter Series, "Space for Grace"

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So I just want to give a shout out to Jefferson, who watches us regularly in Montana. Can we hear some love for Jefferson? Jefferson! Even from Montana, you're a part of our spiritual community. So thanks for tuning in!

So this big city lawyer from New York goes duck hunting in Texas. And he shoots and drops a bird, and it falls over a fence into a farmer's land. And so he starts climbing the fence to go get his duck, and he sees this elderly farmer driving up on a driver. And he says, *"So what are you doing?"*

And he says, *"Well, I shot this duck, and I'm just collecting it."*

And the farmer said, *"You know, this is my property. And that duck is on my property, so that's my duck."*

And the lawyer arrogantly said, *"Look, old man; I'm one of the best litigating attorneys in this country. And if you don't let me have that duck, I will sue you and take everything you've got."*

And so the farmer kind of smiles and says, *"Fella, young fella; I guess you don't know how we settle things like this in Texas ... little disagreements like this. We use what we call the 'Texas Three Kick Rule.'"*

And the lawyer says, *"What's that?"*

And he says, *"Well, I kick you three times, then you kick me three times. Then I kick you three times. And we keep going back until somebody gives up."*

And the lawyer thinks about this proposal, and he thinks, *"Well, this old coot. I can take him easy."* So he agrees to the local custom.

So the old farmer slowly comes down from the tractor, walks over, and he takes a big swing with his leg: kicks him with the hardest part of his boot in a place nobody wants to be kicked. [Congregation laughs] The guy goes down on one knee just wincing, out of breath. And then the second kick: he kicks him in the ribs. And the lawyer just squeals in pain; he's flat on his stomach. And then he kicks him in the kidneys. And the lawyer's about to give up, he's in so much pain. It takes him, like, two, three minutes to get to his feet.

But he finally gets to his feet, and he says, *"Okay, you old codger! Now it's my turn."*

And the farmer smiles and says, *"Nah; I give up. You can have the duck."* [Congregation laughs]

So how many people ever had somebody in your life that just rubs you the wrong way? And you just can't stand them? Anybody ever have somebody like that?

You know, the fact is: in life, I think we all have some people who are challenging and difficult to deal with. And whether it's a critical parent; whether it's a bossy supervisor; whether it's somebody who is so intense we feel that we're walking on eggshells to be around them; whether it's a co-worker you just don't see eye-to-eye with. Maybe it's a partner who doesn't honor their agreements; maybe it's a politician that it irks you every time you see their face or hear them speak; maybe it's a neighbor who you've asked politely, but still they will do nothing about stopping their dog from barking all night. You know, whether it's a conflict or disagreement or hurt or heartache, our common response as human beings to these difficult situations sometimes is to shut down and close down our heart; close down ourselves; withdraw and pull ourselves back.

And sometimes we think that closing off or shutting down or pulling back protects us. Sometimes we think distancing ourselves or closing ourselves somehow will keep us safe and make us feel happier. We believe doing this is helping us but, in fact, it is actually hurting us.

You know that when we shut down our hearts several times a day, every week, every month, every year, what happens is: we develop what is called a "Closed Heart Syndrome." That is saying "no" so often -- closing your heart so often in little situations -- that we end up living a fearful and guarded life. Saying "no" to so many things so often -- shutting down so often -- that we're closed off to trying new things. We are closed off to risking or taking a chance, or really opening ourselves fully and freely to our lives. We keep shying away and pulling back.

In traditional Chinese medicine it says that when you close your heart, what happens is: we create an emotional block within ourselves that holds us back from living and loving as fully, and holds us back from progressing and feeling a sense of peace and attracting the life we actually want. Closing off actually stops us; closing our hearts stops us from living the life we want.

How many people would admit that you have had sometimes in your life where you close your heart off? Anybody? You know, the Bible says emphatically several times -- it alludes to the vital importance of keeping your heart open. The greatest commandment says that we are to love the Lord, our God, with all of our heart. In Proverbs it says, *"Trust the Lord with all your heart."* Jeremiah says, *"If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart."* Psalm 51 says, *"Create in me a pure heart, O Lord."* And finally, Proverbs says, *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."* Everything we do flows from our heart.

So all of these things -- to love God requires an open heart. To trust God, an open heart. To have a pure heart, we have to have an open heart. Above all else, everything flows from our heart, so we need to have our hearts open.

Notice that it says, *"Love with all your heart."* Not some of your heart, most of your heart, a bit of your heart. ALL of your heart ... which means to open your heart fully. Because there is a huge difference between a closed heart and an open heart.

So today's talk is really about paying attention and looking at the places in our lives where we're closing our hearts off. Where we've closed ourselves off, or closed parts of our lives off. Because an important part of our spiritual work -- if you want to have a greater life; if you want to have a spiritual breakthrough and live at a higher level -- is to open up. Is to open ourselves more fully.

Today we're in Week #3 of our six-week Lenten series called, "Space for Grace." And Lent, as we know, are the 40 days in preparation for the miraculous occurrence on Easter Sunday. And the number "40" in the Bible is symbolic, and it means a period of discipline, devotion and preparation. As Jesus did, as Moses did, as Elijah did. The time of prayer and fasting to do the inner preparation to allow something greater to come through us. So Lent really invites all of us to do our inner work of devotion and preparation and discipline to prepare room in ourselves to allow something greater to come forth.

Week #1 was "Use Me" to create more space for God, and allow ourselves to say, *"Here I am, God; use me! Allow me to be a channel for more light and good in this world and in my life."*

Last week was "Heal Me." That we all have something where we're wounded and need to work on and heal, and that is an important part of our spiritual journey.

Today it's "Open Me." That the next step in our "Space for Grace" is to expand our capacity to love and fully open ourselves to God, to life. And to open ourselves to let more out of ourselves that is already in us that we don't always use.

So the first thing we must do to open up is to **FULLY AND FREELY FORGIVE**. Anybody see "Yellowstone"? That show? And there's another spin-off series -- a prequel, I guess; what they call it is "1883." Anyway, this character named James is talking to his daughter, who is just devastated because somebody murdered her husband. And she's angry and hateful. And he says this to her: *"The meanest thing you can ever do to yourself is to hate another person."*

You ever had somebody betray you? Reject you or mistreat you in some horrible way? And hurt you? And you thought, even for a second, "*Oh, I don't want to forgive that dirty so-and-so! I hate them! I will never forgive them for what they did or what they said to me.*"

We have this tendency to just want to close off when we're hurt. And we choose to hold on to the anger or hold on to the pain; hang on to the past. Feeling a sense of resentment. Not realizing we're actually hurting ourselves; we're pulling ourselves down. We're affecting our joy. We're creating that emotional block in ourselves that stops us from feeling peace and progressing in our lives.

So I ask you: Is there anyone in your life that you're holding a grudge towards? Anyone you're unwilling to forgive right now? Is there any place that your heart is closed off toward anyone? Or maybe the bigger question is: Are you willing to open your heart to forgive? To forgive fully? To forgive freely? To forgive, not just others, but to forgive yourself?

To be open to forgive doesn't mean you put down or dismiss the hurt of betrayal. It doesn't mean that; that needs to be felt and processed. What it means is to release some of those reactions of hurt and pain so they're not constantly reoccurring and being relived.

You know, the word "resentment" means "to re-sense." When we resent, we keep re-sensing and re-inflicting ourselves with that same original pain over and over ... sometimes for weeks; sometimes for months; sometimes even for years! We keep hurting ourselves.

To be open to forgive means to say, "*I was hurt and I felt betrayed, but I choose to let go of the past. I choose to have a better life. I choose to be happy.*"

You know, to me, forgiveness is an act of freedom. But even more so, it's an act of self-love. If we're stuck and holding on to resentment, it's important to say, "*Do I love myself enough to stop punishing myself by hating that person? Do I love myself enough to stop holding on and living in the past? Do I love myself enough to let go and move on to something greater and better?*"

You know, if James Coat is correct that the meanest thing we could do is to hate somebody, maybe the kindest thing we can do for ourselves is to forgive someone. And to let that go and free ourselves.

One of the things that I've learned about forgiveness is that it requires two things. Number one is just be willing. You don't need to know how; you've just got to be willing to forgive. And the second one: I think it requires a level of compassion. At some level of understanding, the person who hurt us is hurting in some way. And it's not to excuse their behavior, and it's not about not having boundaries ... because you need to! But it's to have some compassion, and to wish for them that they will be healed; that they will find peace; and they will feel a greater sense of joy.

When Jesus said, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,*" that is a statement of compassion. To say sometimes we do stupid things! Sometimes we do unkind things! Sometimes we don't know what we do ... but forgiveness is a thing that can help heal.

I heard somebody say the other day, "*No matter how good you think you are, you are the villain in someone else's story.*" [Congregation murmurs and laughs] And no matter how bad you think you are, you are the hero in someone else's story! We're all villains and we're all heroes, and compassion is the thing that opens our hearts; that allows us to begin to open up our hearts enough to forgive and to forgive more freely.

So who is that person in your life? And are you willing to open your heart to forgive more freely?

The second way to open up is: we need to open up to **LOVE MORE DEEPLY**. So I want you to think right now of all the people that love you. Think about all the people that love you, and how good it feels. And I want you to think of how much you are loved, and how much you enjoy loving. And as much you are loved -- and you love loving -- how many people would still say in your life you'd like a little more love, and a deeper and more full experience of love? Anybody? Okay; three people. Perfect! [Congregation laughs] Perfect!

The fact is: every one of us wants love. A deeper, fuller, richer experience of love. That's why we're here! That's what we are seeking more than anything is love! And yet the very thing we're seeking the most is the thing we often hold back the most. We hold back love like we've got to ration it; we're going to run out of it. I mean, saying we're going to run out of love is like saying we're going to run out of sun! You know, we're going to run out of air; we're going to run out of ocean. We're not! We're going to run out of God is like what it's saying. And it's just not the truth!

The reason we hold back is because we're afraid we're going to get hurt. Sometimes love can even feel overwhelming and scary to us. Like, *"Can I really handle that much love?"* Love is the greatest thing, but sometimes love scares us -- to open our hearts fully.

And so what we need to do is create more space for God's love. God will fill our hearts with as much love as we're willing to receive ... as much as we're willing to express and share and experience and enjoy!

Remember the story of the widow's oil? She had a lot of debts; her husband died. She goes to Elijah and says, *"What can I do?"*

He said, *"What do you have in your house?"*

"I've got some oil."

"Great! Go get some vessels and pour that little bit of oil until all those vessels are full." So she got tons of vessels, and she poured that little bit of oil ... and kept pouring and pouring. And it didn't stop until all was full. And so that's symbolic of love. You think you've only got a little love, but you keep pouring love, and it will fill as much as you're willing to receive.

So right now think about this: How much love do you have the capacity to receive right now? And can you open your heart to allow even more love to be received? More love to be shared? More love to be expressed in your life?

So, as you know, my brother Derek has been struggling with cancer for a year. I saw him last August; I saw him in January. We've done tons of phone calls and meetings. And my birthday's in 10 days, and we planned ... I got a ticket to go up there and celebrate together and have a party up there. So a nice little celebration.

Unfortunately, he passed away this week. [Congregation moans and murmurs sympathetically] And so I'm still going to go to Canada. And there's still going to be a celebration ... and it'll be a celebration of his life.

And, you know, he asked me last summer; he said, *"I just want to double-check and make sure you're doing my funeral."*

And I said, *"Yeah!"*

And he said, *"Good answer! Because if it wasn't, I would have come back from the dead and haunted you!"* [Congregation laughs] I do not need any extra incentive, but I appreciate that he did! [Congregation laughs]

So, as you know, I'm from 10 kids. He was number one; I'm number eight. I'm the youngest boy. So, you know in a large family, the older ones get more responsibility. So Derek helped teach me how to count. He taught me to tie my shoes. He taught me how to drive on the highway. And that's because when my dad taught me to drive -- or tried -- he'd be yelling and telling me to stop, and mashing this imaginary brake, and saying, *"Be careful!"* And he'd just lose it! And that was in the driveway! [Congregation laughs] And so ... [Laughs]

So Derek was always kind of there, and he was my rock. And I'll tell you, it's been a hard year; but it's been a beautiful year. You know, it's so interesting. The hardest part, of course, is seeing a loved one hurt and suffer. That's the worst part. But I'll tell you, in this year ... Because of this, we've probably

shared more deeply and been more honest and vulnerable. We've probably laughed harder. We've probably said, "*I love you*" more than we did in probably the last 20 years. I mean, we shared at a deep level.

And, you know, it's an interesting thing when you observe someone going through a difficult period. This guy was relentlessly hopeful and optimistic. Even all the brothers and sisters were saying, "*My God! This guy's amazing!*" We even told him that on a Zoom call the other day. And so it's really been an amazing experience. Painful and amazing at the same time.

So I thought he was going to die several times. So I wrote him a little thing, and it said, "*You know, if by chance this is the end, the one thing I hope you remember more than anything else is how much we love you. And what a difference that you've made in our lives.*" And I said, "*If it's time to go, just go with the awareness of how loved you are. Remember Mom's love and Dad's love. Remember the love of your beloved Debbie.*"

He's had the same girlfriend for 32 years! They were thinking of getting married, but they didn't want to rush into anything ... [Congregation laughs] And so ...

I said, "*Remember her love; remember Melissa (his daughter's) love; his step-daughter, Alicia. Remember all our love when it's time to go.*"

In the preparation of the services, we've had pictures. You know, doing a little tribute. And there's a picture of the five boys back in 1970 in front of a fountain. We're all lined up there. And I'm next to Derek, and Derek's got his arm around me on the end. And all the boys are smiling and looking forward; I'm looking off, and his arm's around me. And symbolically, it made me feel like ... we haven't lived in the same country for 25 years. And I've been off distant, and his arm's always been around me, and will always be around me.

It's been a tough week. I've been hurting and crying. But then I realized the experience I've had over the year has helped open my heart to love more deeply, feel more deeply, laugh and share more deeply. And, yeah, I'm crying more deeply, but that's just the price you've got to pay to open your heart to love more fully.

Having a baby hurts, but they call it the miracle of life! [Congregation laughs] Having a baby hurts, but the end result they call a bundle of joy. And one of the things it's taught me is: you've got to open your heart. Yeah, it's going to hurt. Yeah, it's going to cry. But I wouldn't give it up for anything. We won't give it up for anything when we experience a depth of love and caring and sharing and closeness. It is worth it!

So where in your life are you being called to love a little deeper? To open your heart and maybe risk; maybe share a little more. Maybe be more vulnerable. Because it is worth the risk to get that close; to open your heart to love more deeply.

The final thing is to open to **DREAM MORE WILDLY**. Times when life is tough or we're getting a little older, we don't dream as much or as often. And so I think it's important for us to remember to keep dreaming! Keep thinking of possibilities, because they open our hearts; they open our minds to more joy and more success and greater levels of love. You know, dreams help activate and inspire us, and keep us more alive to use our creative powers and abilities. That's why it says, "*Where there is no vision, the people perish.*" But where there is vision, it brings us life.

Somebody once said ... When Jesus said, "*Whatever you ask, you will receive it ...*" Well, don't ask small! Ask big! Think big! If you're going to be thinking anyway, why not think big?!? [Congregation laughs] What's a bigger version of life that you could be living right now? What is some greater level of love or hope or possibility for your life? Because we need to keep dreaming! We need to keep opening our minds to new possibilities.

I always say, "*It's never too early, and it's never too late!*" Whether you're a senior or you're a teen; you're a male or a female; you're married or single ... dreams have a powerful impact on us.

You know, Stephen King wanted to be a writer since he was, like, 10/11 years old. By the time he was 14, he had over 60 rejection letters. And finally he sold his first story for \$35. And I believe it's because of his dream, even at that young age, that he has become one of the greatest writers of all time.

Everybody knows Jim Carrey was poor. He knew at 14 that he wanted to be an entertainer, and maybe even earlier than that. Did stand-up for the first time at 15; at 16, moved to LA. And he was getting a few gigs. And to not be negative and down on himself, he wrote himself a check for \$10 million. Kept seeing his name up in lights. And then, like, 10 years later, I think he signed a \$10 million deal for *Dumb and Dumber*. [Congregation laughs] I think that was smart and smarter, myself! [Congregation laughs] But why? Because he was willing to dream big! He opened the space in himself for greater possibilities.

Grandma Moses didn't start painting until she was 78 years old; it's never too late! She painted until she was 100! Colonel Sanders didn't start Kentucky Fried Chicken until he was 66 years old!

My own mama didn't start painting until she was 65; didn't start driving until she was 68; didn't go skydiving until she was 75; didn't go dog sledding until she was 76; didn't go parasailing until she was 78; and didn't send her first email until she was 83! [Congregation laughs and applauds] Isn't that fabulous? Here is her email: *"Hello; this is your mother."* [Congregation laughs] *"This is my first email. I hope you're enjoying this beautiful day. And if you're not, get out and enjoy it!"* [Congregation laughs] And I love that!

And so what dream do you want to dream? What do you want to become? What do you want to create? Any age or any stage, there are dreams for all of us. There are possibilities. There are gifts and blessings all available to us. The question is: What do you want to choose? What do you want to dream? I invite every one of us to have at least one dream. Think of one dream -- one greater possibility -- for your life that scares you and excites you at the same time! Because something is in you that's calling.

Sometimes we get so comfortable. But life is trying to say, *"There's more in store! There's more for you; there's more for you!"* We just need to be willing to listen and to open our hearts and to dream more wildly.

There's a big difference between a closed mind and an open mind. There's a big difference between a closed heart and an open heart. And so life is calling us to look at the areas where we're closed off. And even remembering that life hurts, and life is scary, and life is exciting, and life is glorious, and life is fun. With all those things, the best way to live is to open your heart to forgive more freely, to love more deeply, and dream more wildly. Create a space for God's grace, and do it by saying, *"God, open me!"*

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]

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