

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**  
**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • SEPTEMBER 13, 2020**  
***“WIDE-OPEN SPACES”***

**Song of Focus**  
***“Unfettered Places of the Wide-Open Spaces”***  
**Words and Music by Ed Varnum**

1. Remember that day you dressed, put on your Sunday best,  
to sing some hymns and hear the Word?  
You found your own parking space, the pew you say is your place.  
Everything familiar and sure.

And you were feeling all right, Sunday morning so bright,  
Found the number for the opening song.  
But your mood plunged as you stared at that family right there.  
You could see that they did not belong!

*Refrain:*

Then, the preaching began with Paul's book, Ephesians,  
how Jesus broke down dividing walls.  
Preacher said, "Fence someone out, and you just fence yourself in.  
There is one God who created us all!"

2. And you thought, "Yes, it is wrong how the church for so long  
"built fences by color and creed."  
O Lord, why do we care how they talk, what they wear,  
Denomination, nationality?

So, let us come to our senses! Christ has torn down the fences  
And calls the faithful to God's liberty.  
Come to unfettered places of the wide-open spaces.  
Hallelujah! God of grace and glory!

*Refrain:*

So, let's all look again at Paul's book, Ephesians,  
how Jesus broke down dividing walls.  
Remember, fence someone out, and you just fence yourself in.  
There is one God who created us all!

So, let us come to our senses! Christ has torn down the fences  
and calls the faithful to God's liberty.  
Come to unfettered places of the wide-open spaces.  
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## The Scripture Romans 5:1-2 (*The Message*)

*By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us – set us right with him, make us fit for him – we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand – out in the wide-open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.*

### The Message **Wide-Open Spaces: Is God a Belief System?** Mark Briley



We’re far enough into the pandemic to make it a sad country song. Luke Combs was one of the last major concerts to come through Columbia’s Mizzou Arena before the world shut down. Like artists do, they respond to the reality of the times and put feelings into measures or brush strokes or poetry. Combs wrote a sentimental country song. His song, “*Six Feet Apart*” says, “*I miss my mom. I miss my dad. I miss the road, the band, giving hugs and shakin’ hands.*”

It’s tough. We’re all Corona’d out. Someone tried the old youth camp trick of writing the words “*corona virus*” on a piece of paper and throwing it into the bonfire in hopes of erasing its weightiness from our lives. But alas, even that camp trick – that could burn up the biggest sins sixth graders could throw into the fire – couldn’t eradicate the virus, so we’re still singing sad country songs with Luke Combs. In that same song, however, Luke Combs (*we’re on a full name basis*) throws out a little hope on a line. He believes a day will come again when “*We aren’t six feet apart.*” I believe that too. But when? We don’t know.

What can we possibly make of this wide-open season of wide-open spaces? And as social and physical distancing is the norm, I wonder if we are moving closer to God or distancing ourselves when it comes to faith as well? We launch a seven-week sermon

series this morning exploring the wide-open spaces<sup>1</sup> of our faith during a pandemic. Can we emerge closer to God than ever before? We shall see...

It was a bit of a week, wasn't it? That's always true. But for parents of school-aged children, virtual school started on Tuesday. It's always fun to see the first day of school pics. Some hopped out to their physical schools to take a pic in front of the school sign and rushed back home to log on for the start of the school day. Some stayed in pajamas – “*Hey are you gonna put on 'outside' pants today?*” “*Nope!*” Some parents scrambled and built make-shift desks and classrooms at home and added “*Principal*” to their resume. In most all the pictures, kids were smiling... sometimes with a second picture that had their masks over the smile so they could tell their grandkids someday what it was like going to school during a pandemic. It's weird, and we were a bit anxious about it having three kids in three different schools starting at three different times and changing ZOOM classes every 40 minutes or so. I tried to work from home that day, and Tuesday is Carrie's busiest ZOOM day of the week, so at one point all five of us were on separate ZOOM calls! Six months ago, I didn't know what ZOOM was. Somehow, we found our way through to the next day. As I prayed for the many students tackling the year with all the pressures of being impressionable social media'd influenced humans, as the adults in their lives are divided about well... pretty much everything... I wondered what kind of anxiety they must be carrying.

We work so hard, you know, to break down barriers of fear of others for our kids, but now they're taught to keep a distance, wear a disguise and assume everyone has a disease. While such may be necessary to protect the most vulnerable among us, it is hard to imagine the long-term effects of this season of COVID on every aspect of our lives. One would hope that such a season might bring humanity together... rallying against a common foe. Instead, our division grows.

One woman's 19-word blog brashly sums it up: “*I hate you. You hate me. We hate them. They hate us. What does it take to change this?*” That was the blog in its entirety. The truth? Many of our belief systems reinforce this hatred – this sense of in and out, right and wrong, good and bad. We've created a list of doctrines and called it God. But is God really a belief system of tight boundaries and “*thou shalt not's*”? If you're curious, come along and ride with me today and follow God into what the Apostle Paul calls some “*wide-open spaces of grace and glory.*”

Eugene Peterson is the one, who words that verse from the fifth chapter of Romans that way. It's a marvelous image... Jesus opening new doors of faith for people. Paul says something about us finally getting the courage to throw wide open our lives to God only to discover God has already done the same for us. And then that line that so inspires me:

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<sup>1</sup> Series inspired by Jim Palmer's “*Wide Open Spaces.*” Thomas Nelson Publishing. 2007. Support for this first message comes from the first chapter.

*“We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand – out in the wide-open spaces of God’s grace and glory.”*

Doesn't that sound marvelous? It sounds like a vast place open to mystery, at once distanced but ever so close. This sounds so freeing! Not at all like the belief systems and doctrines that so confine our spirits, our opinions, and our freedom in the faith. It's natural that we long to boil down our God into something we can manage in an easy-to-digest, five-minute PowerPoint presentation. Such doctrine-heavy faith, however, is sending away seekers in droves. Isn't God bigger than any formula we can come up with? It's not that people are pulling away from Jesus – they are retracting from institutions that have tried to cage him – like an exhibit at the zoo that we simply want to walk around every side of once a week, poke on the glass of the enclosure and take some pictures. When we get so caught up in the doctrine, we put a strangle hold on God. And honestly? We may like holding God at bay in such a space. We feel a sense of control that way. But imagine God as a loose Jell-O mold in your hands (*I'm guessing you've never done this before!*). The more you try to squeeze it, get a grip on it, contain it, the more Jell-O just gets squeezed out all over the place.

Paul wrestled with this no doubt. He came from a disciplined religious background – and professional pursuit – that capitalized on memorizing a way, a list of laws, a system that he could grasp, master, and then use against anybody who challenged him otherwise. We're all likely a little stubborn this way. We learn something a particular way and we got it... we've moved on... don't make me learn another way. It's why we get grumpy about things that move from concrete to abstract. It's why we struggle with change.

Jesus was a disrupter and it was tough for people to flip the script on their lives and their rigid understandings, and so they just killed the guy. We do the same to each other, because we're afraid to change, consider another view, and we're so sure about our politics... for example. We're so sure about how it's all supposed to go down that we might as well be speaking different languages. And most of us would follow up that statement with “*Yep. Mine's called the right language and yours is called the wrong language.*” But this clear-cut stuff doesn't sound a whole lot like *wide-open spaces of grace and glory*.

Paul Asay, a movie reviewer and editor of “*Plugged In*” notes this very thing. “*My own spirituality,*” he says, “*has always been a little disheveled, and so I'm always a little*

*envious, and slightly skeptical, of people whose relationship with God feels so tidy—those who have a feel-good, doctrinally pure answer for everything.”*

Shane Claiborne described doctrinal huffing and puffing in a similar way but with different imagery. He said, [The tidy faith of the evangelist] *“reminds me of professional wrestling. There’s a lot of yelling and sweating but I’m not sure all the moves are real.”*

And let *us* be real. Everyone has a different history, a different story, a different personality. Peter and John get to the same empty tomb, see the same abandoned bath robe and Crocs that belonged to Jesus. John *“instantly believes.”* He’s in. He’s got it. And I admire that faith. But Peter? The Rock? He leaves the tomb shaking his head. Unsure, the text simply says, *“He went home.”* On any given Sunday, that’s you and me. Sometimes you leave the hill shaking your head and saying under your breath, *“Pastor’s full of it today.”* Some days, it’s the breaking bread, or the slide of a guitar string, or a wide-open space of Scripture that introduces transformation in your life. Either is okay and has its place – what’s more important is your openness to transformation.

You don’t see Jesus rounding up the disciples for a class on Trinitarianism or sending them to their Schoology App to study hermeneutics. What does he say over and over? *“Follow me.”* It’s as if he’s saying, *“Check out this wide-open space and see what God has to offer you there.”* Religion wants us to get our list of doctrines right. Jesus says, *“When was the last time a list transformed anything?”* Okay... maybe the Ten Commandments. But things of the Spirit must be more dynamic than that; don’t you think?

I’ve lamented this over time. I went to seminary, you know; and I was looking for answers. Instead, I mostly discovered how to love the questions. I was looking for stone tablet answers and discovered the mysteries of the heart and soul. I wanted to make things easier for people and discovered there’s not an *“easy button”* for the faith. But then I discovered Christ in a way that I discovered most of the other things I love in my life – through invitation to the wide-open space. If I were hanging with Jesus, he wouldn’t have thrown the Hebrew Bible at me and say, *“Learn it, kid.”* He’d encourage me to know it, to love it, to appreciate the wisdom and the history and the revelation of God found in it... but more often than not he’d say, *“Come over here, Briley. Check this out. Follow me.”*

If you and I are going to play a game together, sure I want to hear the rules ahead of time but at some point, when you’re trying to explain the rules to me, don’t you usually say, *“Let’s just get going, and it’ll make more sense as we play.”* This is how Jesus taught. The term Christian ... follower of Christ... Disciple... Learner... somehow became replaced by the idea of affirming certain beliefs about God. But agreeing to four or five theological statements is not what Jesus was after.

What Paul came to learn in his followership of Jesus was what he wrote to the Colossian church (1:27): *“Here’s the secret: Christ lives in you.”* Two-thousand years later, this is the secret we’re still trying to pin down. And it’s kind of awkward and new age-y and hard to grasp, but this *withness* is where it’s at. Instead of setting the Spirit free within us, however, we just keep trying to squeeze the Spirit tighter, and the Jell-O just oozes on. Jesus said his Spirit within us would guide us in all truth. But man... most of the time? I want to do the guiding, don’t you?

It gets tough to hold the wide-open space of God’s glory and grace for others. I’ll get calls once in a while from folks looking for churches to visit, and they’ll ask about our stance on the rapture, or pre-destination, or who’s qualified to pass the offering plates, or some social issue, or whether or not we have the good kind of donuts. Often if you ask back, *“We follow Jesus’ lead on that one,”* you’ll get some version of *“Well yeah, but, what’s your policy?”* or *“Right, of course... now what does Jesus say about that?”*

We’ve been programmed for some response – some right-leaning or left-leaning position, and we’re looking for key buzz words or phrases to decide what kind of Christians we are, or *they* should be. But then there’s Jesus and these wide-open spaces of grace. I want to be out there. I want to believe in the dialogue where Jesus says, *“You’ve heard it said... you’ve seen it done that way... you’ve traditionally held that belief... but come over here into this wide open space... follow me ... and I’ll show you something deeper.”*

While Jesus put every doctrinal test, he faced back on the tester, he did have an answer for the guiding force in this journey into wide open spaces – love. *“God is love,”* the Scriptures say. Jesus never said, *“God is a belief system.”* God is love, and that should be our starting place. And where does love lead?

Emilie Townes in her work, *Journey to Liberation*, said, *“When you start with an understanding that God loves everyone, justice isn’t very far behind.”* When you follow Jesus into the wide-open spaces, you open yourself to transformation. It’s going to be hard, and you’ll encounter some haters along the way who are pretty stuck in their ways. You can identify those people sometimes – it’s like all the hate in their lives congregates on their faces... but when you love even those people first before judging them, you get sucked through transformation’s back door. *“I did not see that coming.”* Those are the best surprises.

I had a colleague whose church was going through some division over a particular social issue of the day. If you really want to know what someone thinks about Jesus, ask them about a social issue – see if their response is more politically aligned or a more radically wide-open-spaced Jesus-type of response. People will often quote political slogans or one liners, as if they come straight out of the Bible. So, this church

was spending these days irritated at each other and wondering which camp everyone was in. It was sort of a “*My God can whup your God*” sort of situation. As it appeared leadership was leaning one particular way, the pastor knew one couple he was close to was going to struggle with the leadership’s stance – which was not to exclude those who thought otherwise. But when you’re making leadership decisions, sometimes you have to make decisions the most faithfully you can, knowing not everyone is going to agree. “*Where does love lead?*” is often a good question to discern in such times. This particular couple called my colleague to come in for a meeting. “*Here we go,*” he thought. “*Bring it on,*” he thought. He brushed up on all his own counter-stances and counter Scripture passages and the like, so he could debate hard core and head on. On that day of the appointment, the couple came into his office, approached the pastor and without saying a word, they removed his socks and shoes. They had brought in a basin filled with water and a towel and together, they washed his feet. When they finished, they left, and the pastor was stunned and deeply humbled. Was that it? Would he ever see them again? Sure enough, the next Sunday, there they were in their usual spots, singing, praying, listening, laughing, sharing. The pastor felt a bit foolish even as he was grateful. What a witness of grace in the wide-open spaces. They didn’t have to agree on everything to agree to let love lead. I’d much rather journey with a group of people like that than create a silo where everyone thinks exactly the same things, and therefore none of us have anywhere to grow. When we’re more concerned with belief systems than transformed lives, we divide, we hate, and we weaken love’s transformative power.



Actor Chadwick Boseman recently passed away after a silent battle with cancer. He portrayed some amazing characters in major motion pictures – like Jackie Robinson and James Brown. He became an icon in his super-hero role playing the Black Panther<sup>2</sup>. So many tributes pouring out to him of late, respecting his approach to his illness, his contributions to the arts and humanity, and his gentle genuineness that is seldom

celebrated enough in the world. In his iconic role, his final line in the movie speaks a word about wide-open spaces. The line? “*We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe.*”

What was it Luke Combs sang? *There’ll come a time when we aren’t six feet apart?* Maybe we can find our way with God, and each other... more faithfully than ever before... to a place where God is not a belief system and our neighbors are not simply

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1825683/>

labels of some kind. We may find our way into dynamic, transformative relationship... which I think Paul would call the "*wide-open spaces of God's grace and God's glory.*"

May it be so. Amen.