

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • OCTOBER 4, 2020
“WIDE-OPEN SPACES”

Song of Focus
“Into the World”
Words and Music by Ed Varnum

Refrain:

Jesus said, “I send you as Good News to your neighbor.
“I send you into the world to listen, love, and care.”
I said, “Yes, my Lord! I’ll go in loving labor!
“Wherever you send me, I know you are there.”

1. I have hidden away day after day
troubled by this world I see, sinking in dismay.
Then like the first Christians, I heard Jesus say,
“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

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“I send you into the world to listen, love, and care.”
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2. Reaching out in joy (wide-open spaces!),
sharing God’s Good News (alive in those new places),
breaking free to grow and through God’s holy graces,
allowing me to hear Christ’s call, “I am sending you.”

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“I send you into the world to listen, love, and care.”
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The Scripture
John 17:13-18

But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the

world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

The Message
Wide-Open Spaces: Elastic Hearts
Mark Briley



The “send” button is the most powerful click your mouse makes most days. You start a new email. “*It’s the big one!*” you think. You’ve crafted it just so knowing the implications are large once it leaves your cyber station and reaches its next destination. You read through it a second time, a third, and make some needed edits. What’s the tone? Will it be received like you intend? You delete it and quickly reclaim it. You save it in your drafts and walk away for a while. Finally, you come back to it; you take a deep breath; terrified and exhilarated at the same time, and with one tiny like click: “Send.” and it is now out of your control.

Imagine Jesus on a late night in his home. He can’t sleep. He’s sitting at the desk in his home office. It’s dark. The glow of the computer screen illumines his face. He’s sweatin’ bullets. He’s been hashing it out with the disciples. They want to know more than they’re ready for, but they’re not getting much of a handle on the basics as it is. So Jesus pours his heart out in this prayer to God... email style. Jesus so longs for the disciples to succeed. The future of the world depends on it, of course. And in these five, short verses of prayer, Jesus names the “world” nine separate times. So we know it’s important. He uses “world” in several different contexts. He types in this email prayer, “*the world hates them because of me.*” Ouch. He says, “*They don’t belong in the world, but I’m not asking you to take them out of the world.*” Boom. So here goes nothing. “*Bless them, God. Sanctify them God and into the world?*” ... he moves his mouse to that little but all powerful button: “Send.” It was an Amen if there ever was one. “*Send them into the world as you’ve sent me God. Send. Amen.*” May it be so. And leaning back in that office chair, he breathes out a huge sigh... for it is now out of his control and placed fully into the hands of God. Or is it?

He prayed. He wrote. He sent. But there remains an underlying angst, right? Is this it? Or am I supposed to get in the fray again and be somehow, some way in the mix of this world... named nine times in this sort passage and named in a big way several chapters back when Jesus said, "*God so loves the... world.*" Dang it. And so, Jesus says, "*I'm sending them out there, God, just as you sent me. I'm doing it. I'm really doing it.*" *Send.*

And it's hard to send the rough draft out there, right? We want it to be the fully edited, polished version. But there's not time for that. And so the rough drafts that were known as Disciples... or that are known as you and I... are *sent* into the world with some rough edges. After all, we're all just rough drafts of the people we're still becoming, right? So, we're out there... in the mix... navigating the differences, the fray, the ups and downs and Jesus says, "*God hold them please, because it is an absolutely chaotic dumpster fire out there.*" That's a paraphrase.

But... *am. I... right?* We are living on the edge of yikes! I was part of the team leading a Bethany Fellows virtual retreat this week. Forty newly-ordained pastors sent into the world to put out dumpster fires with the love and justice of God. It's a very steep task and I tell you what; these pastors are tired. It was a ZOOM heavy experience which is taxing enough, but it's also an honest take as we all sat there peering into these screens ... 40 mug shots... leaning in... believing God's love has something for this moment in time. *Surely.* Right?

One pastor finally named it pretty straight. "*I know we're all trying to hold our chins up; and we're trying to bring the energy, bring the positive vibe, bring the sense that everything's fine; and justice is coming but I'll just say it: "We're not okay. And none of us are okay. And we just need to name that."*

There was a palpable, communal exhale. Do you need that same exhale? I invite you to just let it out now. Deep breath in... and exhale. We can't be sent into the world God loves to make an impact of any kind if we can't exhale all that is pent up within us from time to time.

There was really no greater image to describe what is pent up within us right now than last week's presidential debate. It was horrifying. I had several friends utilize the Facebook tool used to mark yourself "*safe*" from natural disasters and the like. They posted: "*Marked 'safe' from the presidential debate.*" We went from living on the edge of yikes to being pushed right over that cliff's edge. There was fighting and name calling and an unnecessary defiance. As a people, we've got to be able to name without hesitation that white supremacy is a terrible stain on society at the ongoing expense of our black-and-brown-skinned brothers and sisters. What is happening?

I looked around at the faces of my kids soaking this in and thought what Jesus was messed up about with the disciples: "*They do not belong in **this** world.*" All the hatred. All the greed. All the shouting. It reminded me of a word of caution someone gave to the Church: "*A Church that only shouts and doesn't listen will be tone-deaf at best and harmful at worst. In order to love, we must learn how to listen.*"

We may not belong to this world, but Jesus says, "*I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, God. As you sent me into the world, so I am sending them.*" Click. Send. And here. we. are. We're in it. We're sent *into* it. What are we going to do? Jesus says, "*Sanctify them.*" That sounds extra holy; doesn't it? Sanctify just means "set apart", "to make holy," "to cleanse." Like having a Purell bath after the debate. Simply stated: "*We need to be sent into the world with a clean heart.*" Not a hardened heart. Not a jaded heart. Not a heart that plays games as the Backstreet Boys so instructed. We need elastic hearts... hearts that expand, not constrict. We will become in our lives what we do with our love. That's it. And because the world is on fire in so very many ways, now's the time. Jesus says, "*I'm sending them in there, God.*" Click. Send. Here we stand. What are we gonna do now?

Take a look around you. Don't be creepy about it. Just turn to your left. Turn to your right. You're in the world with these folks. As that classic Jars of Clay song says so well: "*In the shelter of each other, we shall live.*" We're in this thing together. If you're watching this at home alone, think of your neighbors. Do you know them? Do you know what they're about? What would it mean to approach them with an elastic heart? Could you greet them with the common Hindi greeting, "Namaste"? It's not only fun to say, but the spiritual significance of that greeting is on point. Namaste: "*The image of God in me honors the image of God in you. I recognize that you and I are equal in God's eyes. I greet you in that place where you and I are one.*"

Our hearts could grow a lot if we could approach everyone with this spirit. We need to pray ourselves out of our narrowness into this wide-open space of one another. Intrigued by our *Wide-Open Spaces* series, a friend prompted me to look at Psalm 118:5, and I'm so glad she did. Listen to the psalmist: "*From my narrow place I cried out to God; God answered me in expanse.*" Another version says, "*Pushed to the wall, I called to God; from the wide-open spaces, God answered.*" And the best part is the next line. "*And I'm not afraid.*"

We are sent into the world. Click. Send. And we are sent to consider the wide-open spaces – ever expanding our hearts so the world may know that our faith doesn't start dumpster fires. It puts them out.

What is that expanse for you? Where is your heart constricted? If you're worked up about the division of the nine-times-named world we are sent into, claim an expanse mantra: Deep breath. "*Elastic heart. Elastic heart. God give me an elastic heart.*"

Like sweatpants on Thanksgiving; you know? The only way we're going to build forward from the ashes of this season is with elastic hearts that rally around our common passions. We get stuck in narrow pathways, but God is answering us in expanse. For you this may be a broadening of circles built on compassion. Every religion leans on God's compassion. Jesus says, "*As you do to the least of these, you do to me.*"

Historical accounts say the prophet Mohammad never turned anyone away empty handed and always gave preference to the needy over his own needs. The Koran says, "*Righteousness is this: that one should give away wealth out of love for God to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and the beggars and for the emancipation of the captives.*" (2.177).

Buddha taught that the practice of compassion could introduce you to Nirvana (*and we're not talking about the grunge band that smells like teen spirit*).

Our shared Jewish Scriptures say through the prophet Isaiah: "*Break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families. Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at once. Your righteousness will pave the way. The God of glory will secure your passage.*" (Isaiah 58:6-10 MSG).

After you skim off every religion's five percent of extremists (including Christians), the remaining 95% from each group care about much of the same things: peace, justice, family, health, dignity, and basic necessities for living.

This is what the old Augustine idea of "*In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things charity*" is aiming for. And what we need to name is that religious folks have often abused the "essentials" part.

As Jim Palmer, author of *Wide Open Spaces: Beyond Paint-by-Number Christianity* offers, "*As I have grown more intimate with God these past few years, my "essentials" have changed from theological doctrines **about** God to the passions **of** God for the world.*" This is not a Republican idea. This is not a Democratic idea. It is not unique to any one faith. This is God's desire for all of us... sent into the world. *Click. Send.* And it is beyond tolerance. It is an active expression of an elastic heart.

One atheist shared that, to them, the phrase "*I'll pray for them*" is code language for "*Don't ask me to get involved.*" If Jesus is sending us into the world, it's not to be a passive presence but to get involved... to be a healing presence, a cleansing

presence, a sanctified presence. A little self-review moment here. Would you describe your presence in the world in that way? Take a peek at the person sitting closest to you now... don't stare... just peek... would they describe you in that way? This comes when we look beyond the surface of things.

Jim Palmer, whom I named before and whose book helped prompt the shape of this series, shares about being an assistant coach on his daughter's soccer team. They were playing a team coached by a man that, Jim admitted, "*Frankly I didn't care for him. He seemed abrasive and arrogant. It didn't help that his team demolished us.*" The man happened to be Muslim as was the majority of the team. This didn't matter to Jim, but he noted it and recognized he had some bias that seemed to surface, especially as his team was getting crushed. It may not be unlike you may feel when you see certain bumper stickers or clothing or any other thing that prompt a judgment within. Jim and his family hung around for a while after the game and as they were leaving, he spotted the opposing coach loading up his own vehicle with soccer gear. And then something changed. Jim said, "*Then I noticed his wife walking over to the car with a little boy. It was evident the boy had severe developmental challenges. The boy was excited to see his dad and let out all kinds of animated sounds. The coach gathered up his son into his arms and kissed him.*" Jim said, "*My negative and judgmental thoughts about the man left me, and all I could feel for the man was compassion and love. In that moment, the man was not the enemy, the man was not Muslim, the man was not the coach that just demolished my daughter's team—he was just a man who loved and cared for his beautifully unique son.*" And then this important line: "*I realize now I was feeling the heart of God for this man.*"¹

Elastic hearts, friends. We need to grow our hearts now more than ever. The value of a person to God is not determined by what percentage of his or her theology is correct. Whenever you find yourself putting up a wall, hardening your heart, drifting into a sense of spiritual sophistication or superiority, remember Jesus who did not belong to this world but was sent and laid down his life for it. Those words today, "*As I have been sent, God,*" Jesus says, "*So I am sending them into the world.*" Click. Send. Here we are. What are we going to do now?

In a word? *Care*. That's it. *Care*. Your care in, and for, the world will look differently than others. Don't compare yourself to the way others will do it. Comparison is a killer. Or as someone cooler than me recently said, "*Comparison is a punk.*" And it is. It creeps up on all of us. But you are a once-ever-in-history you. Aiming for someone else's approach or target is what some even call "*sin*" – *cheit* in Hebrew which literally means "*missing the mark.*"

¹ As shared in Jim Palmer's, "*Wide Open Spaces: Beyond Paint-by-Number Christianity.*" Thomas Nelson Publishing. 2007. This story and the multi-faith approach to compassion found in Chapter 7.

Matt Emmons is an American Olympic athlete – one of the best rifle marksmen in the world. In the 2004 games, he had the gold medal sown up. Nobody was even close to his point total. He had one last shot and he could yawn and stroll over to the podium. He could have hit anywhere on the target – the black part, the white part, the center, the edge... any part. He steadied himself, took a half breath and slowly let it out as he pulled the trigger. Once again, dead-on bull's-eye. Nobody cheered. No applause. Total silence. Why? Matt was aiming at someone else's target. It's called crossfire. Extremely rare in the Olympics. I did bowl in a league as a kid and remember one of the other kid-bowlers getting mad and throwing his ball so hard that it bounced over a couple of lanes before knocking down a couple of pins in someone else's lane. Crossfire. Matt hit the target perfectly but choosing someone else's bull's-eye cost him the win.²

Paul wrote to some friends in Ephesus and told them to live a life worthy of the calling **they** had received. (Eph 4:1). Aim for the calling you have received. Not someone else's. When you're sent into the world this week, think about how you're called to care. How are you specifically called to care? If you think the needs are too great, and you can't possibly do anything to help, do for one what you wish you could do for all. Being sent into the world... (Click. Send.) ... is not about holding the entire world on your back. It's simply expanding your heart to care about one, and then another, and before you know it, you're simply a person that cares... and a caring person with an elastic heart will change our world.

The world is a thick place right now. And we've gorged ourselves on the world's 24/7 smorgasbord of news and hatred and fuming debates. Unfortunately, we tend to just stay gorged on the chaos, fuming as we leave the house imagining how we might tweet out our rage to the world at the first stoplight we come to. What if we committed, for a whole week, to spend that time of stuffing ourselves with news and social media fluff in a different way? What if you spent each day's time learning the story of one of your next-door neighbors? Learn what they wanted to be when they grew up. Ask them what their greatest struggle is these days? Find out their favorite flavor of ice cream and drop a pint by some night. Discover what they care most about. And then? Care *back*. That's it. Care. One neighbor at a time. It might just stretch your heart which just might stretch your loving action in the world, too. And since we're being sent into the world, sanctified to be a cleansing presence, why not tie our hearts together in this way instead of tying all of our shoelaces together which only trips us all up. Listen. Care. Namaste. *"The image of God in me honors the image of God in you. I greet you in that place where you and I are one."*

It was a sweatin' bullets prayer of Jesus, but it was his most heartfelt prayer for all of us: *"Sanctify them, O God. For this is the world. I love it. Grow their hearts. As you have sent me, so I now send them. Make it count. May it be so."*

² As found in Bob Goff's, *"Dream Big."* Nelson Books. 2020. Page 84.

Click. Send.