

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**  
**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • OCTOBER 25, 2020**  
**“WIDE-OPEN SPACES”**

**Song of Focus**  
**“Begin in Me”**  
**Words and Music by Ed Varnum**

1. Creator God, may your kingdom come  
with peace on this earth, let your will be done.  
But I control response of only one.  
Let your kingdom begin in me.
2. Hurting my ears, scrambling my mind,  
the hatred, fear, folks that are unkind!  
Lord, let me be the change, my life as your sign.  
Let your kingdom begin in me.

*Bridge*

May I see Christ in those who disagree,  
remembering our connection as your family,  
accepting others as you accepted me.  
I want to be the change I long to see.

3. Creator God, may your kingdom come  
with peace on this earth, let your will be done.  
But I control response of only one.  
Let your kingdom begin in me.  
  
Let your will be done in me.

**The Scripture**  
**2 Corinthians 5:16-20**

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

**The Message**  
***Wide-Open Spaces: Closing the Gap***  
**Mark Briley**



We wrap up our *Wide-Open Spaces* series today. By no means does it mean we've finished the work, answered all the questions, or bought a farm so we can live in God's great expanse. On a ZOOM call this week, a friend actually named our series, fascinated a bit by this idea of God answering us from the great expanse, found another prompting word from the prophet Isaiah. She said, "*When we think of the wide open spaces, we think of this flat space of an open field where the eyes can see for miles and miles and such is a beautiful thought. But we know,*" she continued, "*that life these days is much more jagged than that. We stand at the foot of foggy mountains and feel like we can't see anything in front of us.*" And then she shared the prophet's word: "*The Leveler, capital 'L' (Isaiah calls God the Leveler here)... The Leveler evens the road for us.*" God opens us to this expanse if we're patient. Isaiah continues, "*We will linger in the path sign-posted with your decisions, God. Who you are and what you've done are all we ever want.*" And what does God want? God wants us to close the gap. Just what is the gap and how will we do that? The Apostle Paul has a word for us today.

But first? It's just a week before the Election. We're weary of the unbearable attack ads and more than a little nervous about how the world will react on November 3. We look at each other with suspicious eyes and hardening hearts. There are many things we cannot control, but we're grasping and gripping whatever we can in our attempts to drive the world forward. Some are watching the polling gaps and wondering how accurate they are.

There was a story some time ago now when George W. Bush was running for president about a mother and teenage daughter watching the evening news. The reporter announced that "*George W. Bush was closing the gap*" and the daughter shrieked which startled her mother, surprising her by the noise her daughter made but also unaware that she had taken such interest in the presidential race. "*What's wrong?*" the mother asked. Tears forming, the teenager says, "*They just said Bush is closing the Gap. Why would he do that? That's my favorite store!*"

A little levity helps us make it through these tough times. It's tough for sure. On top of the normal grief we hold through the ups and downs of loss and change, this season holds all the layers on top of it. COVID's hitting closer to home all the time it seems as you share stories from your family, friends, and colleagues who are touched by the virus. We're praying for you and with you. School's back in session for some and college students and profs have hit mid-terms. Some are calling things off and rescheduling, and some are just hitting that wall of exhaustion.

Jason Isbell's song, "*Hope the High Road*" comes to mind. See if it doesn't strike a nerve of truth within you. I tame it for him just a little. He sings, "*Last year was a son of a gun for nearly everyone we know. But I ain't fighting with you down in the ditch, I'll meet you up here on the road. I know you're tired and you ain't sleeping well; uninspired and likely mad as hell. But wherever you are, I hope the high road leads you home again to a world you want to live in.*"

Maybe that's it for us today. Can we find the high road? And what will we offer of ourselves to follow that high road home again to a world we want to live in?

Paul writes his friends at the church in Corinth for a second time, because they are on the fully-loaded struggle bus. You think you're going to find your way into a church, and everyone is just going to be enlightened and accepting and on their best behavior and inspiring and it turns out... the church is just a group of normal people living the ups and downs and struggles like everyone else. And yet... they're holding out for that glimmer of hope that something's still up in Christ, and we long to be part of it.

Paul's writing feverishly with his favorite pen which you know makes all the difference. Don't you love a good pen? The passage we're looking at today actually opens with that familiar word, "*Therefore!*" That word... *therefore*... shows up 526 times in the New Testament, and it's one of Paul's favorites. So many times, when we shave down a passage to cover it in a message, we miss some of what's been happening, and we launch in with "*Therefore*" as if we all know what's going down. "*Therefore*" essentially means, "*By extension, here's how the dots connect.*" Everybody say, "*Therefore.*" Now, everybody say, "*Here's how the dots connect.*"

Isn't that fun? What dots is Paul trying to connect here? Well, remember, Paul's a bit worked up. People in Corinth are questioning his leadership and getting grumpy about things that are not the main thing. Keeping the main thing the main thing is often the very hardest thing to do. Paul has been reminding the people that they are living through some tough times and some tough stuff but stick to the high road. It will lead them home to a world they want to live in. Paul's also admitting he's taken a few rides on the struggle bus, too. Before our big "*therefore*" today he's apologizing, saying, "*If I acted crazy, I did it for God; if I acted overly serious, I did it for you. [My bad.] But*

*Christ's love," he says, "has moved me to such extremes. His love has the first and last word in everything we do."*

Paul and the posse decide to work out of this focused center of love. He says, *"We're all (and ALL means ALL)... we're all on the same bus, and we've all got the resurrection life ahead of us."* And so? *"Therefore! By extension, here's how the dots connect! We've got to close the gap. We can't look at each other from a human point of view in seasons like this."* He says, *"We looked at Jesus that way once, got it wrong, and we know how that turned out. No. We're now connecting the dots Jesus clearly laid before us, and we want you to be in on it, too."*

And what are these dots? It's what Paul calls the Ministry of Reconciliation. Sounds like you need a badge for that. But you don't. We can do this. Close the gap. *"As Christ's representatives,"* he says, *"we help each other drop the divisive hate in the world and work to make things right between each other."* And this is ours to do, friends.

My friend Jason Veach said it well: *"The way Christians handle conflict and disagreement will reveal to the world whether or not we believe the Gospel to be true."* Our faith can't be the disguise we hide behind as some masquerade to get our way. We've seen this abused any which way, and we know it's not pure and ultimately builds nothing forward for the Realm of God on earth. We've got to coordinate. We've got to get together. Why? Because I hate to break this to you, but all the same people will still exist after the election. They may take the sign down from the front yard, but they still live next door.

Jim Palmer reminds us that, *"Statistically, the world is chock-full of "Christians" – intelligent Christians, artistic Christians, successful Christians, church-going Christians, politically active Christians – but what about the Christians who risk everything for love? What about Christians who love indiscriminately, unconditionally, and sacrificially? Are these kinds of Christ-followers MIA?"*<sup>1</sup>

Now... we're not trying to define how this looks for every person... just pondering on what the Church is yet to become? Will Broadway be one of the places where we're not looking to shrink back or settle back into some status quo but imagine who we can be moving forward together? Can Broadway close the gap? Can we be a place of faith that connects to a generational hunger to find Christ in this day and age? Can we be that rare place where people of varied and broad backgrounds find common ground and demonstrate to the world that we've got more to work together **on** than we do to shame each other **for**? This is Paul's ministry of reconciliation request. If we're going to live in such a wide-open space... living in God's great expanse... then we've got to

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Palmer's, *"Wide Open Spaces: Beyond Paint-by-Number Christianity"* inspired the direction of this series. The quote shared here, the "Before and After" piece and the Muppet reference all come from this work. Thomas Nelson Publishing. 2007.

make room for others to say, “*Hey... I’m in for that... I’m up for that... let’s become that together.*”

It may call for us to do some of the uncomfortable work of closing the gap by gracing up and broadening the welcome. *Change*. I know. We talk about change a lot. We can lament about change or embrace it. A colleague and friend, Rev. Danny Gulden, put it out there this week that the first Blockbuster Video opened on October 19, 1985 – 35 years ago this week. Do you remember Blockbuster? In 2004, there were 4,000 Blockbuster stores around the world. Today, there is exactly ONE – a franchise in Bend, Oregon. Danny said, “*An entire industry began and ended in the span of 35 years. Forget who has a VCR, who even has a DVD player these days?*” And then this: “*As a church practitioner, the story of Blockbuster gives us a lot to think about, especially in the era of COVID. Change happening isn’t dependent upon how you or I feel about it. The way we adapt and respond is up to us.*”

Paul says this Ministry of Reconciliation is where it’s at. He was once a hater... but he had that wide open-space experience – blinded him for a time – so he could ultimately see things in a fresh way. And people hated right back on him, because he was a flip flopper, right? He hated Christians – bashed ‘em, tweeted nasty things about them, led rallies to snuff them off the planet, and then he changed. His horizon broadened. It’s a before and after pic that Paul and many since have uncovered.

The stories are pretty consistently something like this...

*Before: Christianity is a belief system.*

**After: Christianity is a school of love carried out in apprenticeship to Christ.**

*Before: The main thing is getting people to adopt my beliefs about God.*

**After: Loving people creates desire within them to know God.**

*Before: The most powerful force on earth is hate.*

**After: The most powerful force on earth is love.**

C.S. Lewis said, “*You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.*” We’re re-writing the script right now. We’re voting and serving and listening to new voices and saying, “*Come along with us and let’s see what God can do yet.*”

If we’re going to be an active Ministry of Reconciliation, we’ve got to start being *for* each other instead of *against* each other. We’re quick to latch onto all the reasons we can’t work together. Can’t work with them – too liberal. Can’t work with them – too conservative. We latch onto what we’re against, and that’s it. We can’t build on ‘*against’s*’. We build on what we’re for.

A Broadway friend shared a story this week that’s held my spirit for a few days. It was a true story about a couple of runners. The first was Kenyan runner, Abel Mutai. He

was just a few feet from the finish line but became confused with the signage and stopped thinking he had already completed the race. A Spanish runner, Ivan



Fernandez, was right behind him and realizing what was happening, started shouting at the Kenyan to keep running. Mutai didn't speak Spanish and didn't understand why Ivan was yelling. Fernandez gently pushed Mutai forward across the finish line to victory. A journalist asked Ivan afterward, *"Why did you do that for Mutai?"* Ivan replied, *"My dream is that someday we can have a kind of community life where we push and help each other to win."* The journalist insisted, *"But why did you let the Kenyan win?"* Ivan replied, *"I didn't let him win. He was going to win. The race was his."* The journalist insisted, and again asked, *"But you could have won!"* Ivan looked at him and

replied, *"But what would be the merit of my victory? What would be the honor in that medal? What would my Mother think of that?"*<sup>2</sup>

This is a season where our core values are front and center... a time when we peek into the future at the next generation of rising leaders, and we wonder what values we are demonstrating as they are so shaped by this time in their lives. We can build on the best examples of each day or we can let the lead stories on the news tell the story for us. We can pass blame around, or we can do the hard work of reconciliation by living the change we wish to see in the world... looking at others not from our human point of view but as new creations with a wide-open space ahead of us to live into together.

We're going to end this series with the Muppets. Why? Because ... the Muppets! *The*



*Muppet Christmas Carol* is a favorite of many. It will undoubtedly be getting some airtime soon. It's based on Charles Dickens's book *A Christmas Carol* that connects some important truths that seem to wrap up this series with some good news. The story revolves around the life of Ebenezer Scrooge, who had lived so much of his life closed to love. As a result, he hurt

others most everywhere he went. He had managed his earthly affairs so efficiently, but he was filled with emptiness, loneliness, bitterness, and despair. Maybe you've been in

<sup>2</sup> As shared via my friend's Face Book page. I am unaware of the original source.

such a space of late. Maybe our country is in such a state right now. A dream, however, opens Scrooge to his life in a way he couldn't see before. All the sudden, he was alive to love in every way... behold, friends, a new creation. At one point, the narrator says, "*The thing that made Scrooge happiest of all was that his life lay before him and it could be changed.*"

Can you imagine if that was our goal of living in God's great expanse – that we are alive to love in every way? What gaps might that begin to close in our world? What if this day... this moment ... our lives lay before us, and we recognize – the course can be changed? The next move we make... the next decision we choose after we shut down YouTube could be one of reconciliation... one that breeds integrity and hope and positive change in the world. And if the hundreds tuning in today could make such a commitment, imagine the wave that could begin to pass over our community? The change we wish to see in the world?

May it begin in you and me. May the high road lead us, our families, our city, our nation, the world... home again. We are longing for a vaccine to put this virus in its place... but if we aren't intentional about the Ministry of Reconciliation... if we underestimate the power of love, we'll be much farther apart when this is all over than COVID's six feet. And so, we love well. We learn together. We reconcile. We see others... not from our own point of view but from God's. And that... just may be how we close the gap.

May it be so. Amen.