

God is

INFINITELY MORE

than we could ever imagine...



Week 3 - Spacious Love

Bible Reading: John 4:5-30

TEACH - Content to help inform a sermon or small group

Introduction

- Life with Jesus must have been a perplexing thing. Just when the disciples thought they'd worked out what he was doing, he'd surprise them by doing something unexpected. Not only that, he'd go and shock them by doing something socially unacceptable.
- When it comes to the 'infinitely more' of God, it's inspiring to think about the good things stored up for us and it's comforting to think about the limitless love that forgives, heals and restores. But more of God is also bound to include things we find less comfortable. Like the disciples, we need to be ready for God to break our rules.

Exploration

1) There's room for you

- Paul described the love of Christ as 'wide'. The story of the woman from Samaria shows us why. When people met Jesus, they walked into a spacious place. Whoever they were, whatever they'd done, his love made room for them and welcomed them in.
- This woman had been shunned by society for numerous reasons, yet Jesus had time for her. As she looked into the mirror of his generous acceptance, she saw that she had value. Perhaps it was the first time in her life she'd ever known that. But it wasn't a wholly comfortable experience. She also found herself admitting to her mistakes, and in so doing she discovered that spacious love had room in it for her to be forgiven and restored.



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- Knowing we're completely loved sounds wonderful, yet it can be a surprisingly uncomfortable experience. It's easy to believe that God likes our 'good bits', but it's difficult, even painful sometimes, to accept that spacious love has room for our failures too.
- Thanks to Jesus' death on the cross, our wrongdoing was forgiven so that it could become the raw material for a new work of grace in us. Yet that work can only happen if we acknowledge it. Buried sin and suppressed pain are toxic forces. Perhaps that's why Jesus confronted the woman so directly. Spacious love challenges us to take stock of the darker parts of our story and bring them to the cross.
- Paul wanted the Ephesians to know - deeply experience - the spacious love of God. What does that look like for us?
 - **It means knowing who we are** - our personality, our attributes, our gifts and our quirks - they're no accident. We are unique, planned, designed, known and loved by a God who doesn't make mistakes.
 - **It means believing that God delights in us** - Too often we have believed that God's love is narrow and exacting, petulant and hyper-critical, when in fact it is generous and kind, forgiving and joyful.
 - **It means trusting that there is nothing that can stop God loving us** - When shame, guilt and fear lock us down, it means going to the cross for forgiveness and restoration.

2) There's room for everyone

- Jesus quite literally went out of his way to find the Samaritan woman. He chose to travel close to a hostile, even dangerous part of the country and to be left alone in a deserted place.
- Spacious love takes risks to find people, and spacious love takes an interest in them when it finds them. When Jesus and the Samaritan woman met, he didn't



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just speak some kind platitudes to make her feel better; he discovered her interest in religions, he affirmed her in her intellectual questioning and he invited her to share the shameful parts of her story with him. His love did transform her, but not before it had heard and respected her.

- They had a debate, but his goal wasn't to win the debate; it was to love her. She had some moral issues in her life, but his goal wasn't to shame her or lecture her. His goal was to communicate to her that she was loved - loved by him and loved by the community she was a part of. She may have ended the day understanding theology better; she may have ended the day with a different set of moral values; but most importantly, she ended the day discovering, along with at least some of her local community, that there was a spacious love they'd never even dreamed of.
- Spacious love will not be toned down by our fears, edited by our prejudices, scheduled by our timetables or tamed by our need to be in control. Spacious love challenges us:
 - **To listen well** - We may have a message to share, but that message is received with far more enthusiasm when we have first taken an interest in the other person's story.
 - **To stop judging** - We may disapprove of people's opinions, their attitudes or their lifestyles, but it's not our job to pass judgment. Our job is to embrace them in spacious love, trusting that as they draw nearer to Jesus, his Spirit will convict and transform them.
 - **To enjoy people** - It's all too easy to see people as problems to be fixed or mission targets to be won. We're called to love people for who they are, to enjoy their company, to welcome what they bring and to delight in them the way God delights in us.
 - **To speak in love** - When the moment comes to share our faith, it needs to be first and foremost the good news of spacious love.



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Conclusion

- God's love is radically inclusive, and it's our job, as the Church, to make that truth known to the world. The trouble is, we humans are all too good at setting up rules and systems which allow some people in and keep others out.
- Jesus said we should love our neighbours, and that means making our own hearts spacious. It means being honest about the prejudices which cause us to exclude people or think them less important.



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REFLECT - questions for discussion/small groups

Personal

- Has God's generosity ever surprised you? Have you ever heard a story of God's grace which has left you awestruck?
- Which of your character traits do you like most and which do you like least?
- Have you ever been made to feel as though God disapproves of you? What effect did it have on you?
- Is God challenging a prejudice in you - a negative attitude towards a particular person or group of people?
- Have you ever learnt something new about God from talking to someone who doesn't share your religious views?
- How can you delight in people this week? Could you plan to spend time with someone you don't often spend time with, just for the joy of their company?

Community

- Do you think your corps or centre is a place where people feel loved - where they feel safe to share their struggles and failures? What can Christian communities do to help people find the courage to be more honest?
- Do you think your corps or centre have any unspoken prejudices? Are there people who might feel less welcome if they decided to attend your meetings and activities?
- What opportunities have your corps or centre had recently to show God's love? Are there other things you'd like to see happen - initiatives that would carry the message of God's love out into your local community in new ways?



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ENGAGE - Interactive ideas for prayer, worship and mission

- Invite people to do an 'Examen' exercise each day for the coming week. The Examen is a spiritual practice developed by St Ignatius and it's a way of reflecting on the day that's just passed:
 - Write down one good thing that's happened today.
 - Write down one mistake you've made today.
 - Write down one hope you have for tomorrow.
- Allocate 5-10 people in two teams and place the first group in a line facing the second group. Give the second group up to ten seconds to look at the appearance of the other team. Once their time is up, ask the second team to turn around, so that the first group can change ten *noticeable* things about them (you may want to give props to add on, or people can simply put their pockets inside out, tie up their hair...). When the second group turns back around, they must work out what ten things have changed (it's best to give a set amount of time for this to happen). Swap the roles of the groups and encourage people to think about how well they truly notice others.
- Place a piece of A3 paper on the floor and ask one person to stand on it. Gradually invite more people to stand on the paper and see how many you can fit on. Unlike the limited space of paper, in God's love there is always room for one more!
- Set up a prayer station based around the cross, either for use in the meeting, during the week or both. Make the cross the centrepiece, then provide a simple activity to help people leave their sin and shame at the cross and ask for forgiveness.



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- Invite people to share some 'before and after' testimonies - talking about their life before they met Jesus, then about how a relationship with him has changed their lives.
- Spend some time in lament, saying sorry to God for the ways in which the Church has excluded people over the years. Give each person a piece of paper and invite them to write a short prayer beginning with the words 'Lord, we're sorry...' Then invite everyone to bring their prayers and lay them on the Mercy Seat or at the cross. You could also invite people to read them aloud if you have time.
- Do something to celebrate your diversity as a community, and to help people remember that each of them is designed, made and loved by God. You could have a meal together, with different cuisines from the nations represented in your community, or you could have a 'hobby fest' - a coffee morning or social evening where everyone brings along a hobby to do (craft, games etc).
- Who are the least popular people in your local community? What could you as a corps or centre do to show them love?





PRAY - Prayer liturgies for different contexts

A prayer

Lord God, you have taught us that anything we do without love is worth nothing, for whoever lives without love is counted dead before you; send your Holy Spirit, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the true bond of peace and of all virtues; grant this for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, who is alive with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

(Book of Common Prayer)

A prayer

Lord, help me to spread thy fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with thy Spirit and love. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of thine. Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel thy presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus. Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as you shine, so to shine as to be a light to others.

(Mother Teresa of Calcutta)

A confession

Lord, teach me to be generous; to serve you as you deserve.

Forgive me when my own worries make me mean or stingy;

when I give less than my best because I've become the centre of my own world.

Lord, teach me to give and not to count the cost.

Forgive me when I hoard my resources because I've stopped trusting you to provide for me;

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when I withhold from others because I've deemed them unworthy of my kindness.

Lord, teach me to fight and not to heed the wounds.

Forgive me when I retreat to safety and comfort, choosing not to see the pain others are carrying;

when I let injustice go unchallenged because I fear the consequences of speaking out.

Lord, teach me to labour and not to look for any reward.

Forgive me when laziness keeps me passive and busyness keeps me numb;

when self-pity makes me arrogant and pride makes me selfish.

Lord, teach me the joy of knowing that I do your holy will.

In your mercy, turn my anxiety to faith and my greed to generosity;

turn my fear to boldness and my passivity to action.

And, since you have done all for me, may my life become a song of joyful obedience to you. In the name of Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen.

(By Lyndall Bywater, based on a prayer of St Ignatius)

