

00:04

So our story started several years ago, when my wife and I got a complaint letter in the mail from an anonymous neighbor.

00:12

(Laughter)

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I'll never forget the way my wife transformed before my eyes from this graceful, peaceful, sweet woman into just an angry mother grizzly bear whose cubs needed to be protected. It was intense. So here's what happened.

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This is our family. This is my wife and I and our five awesome kids. We're pretty loud, we're pretty rambunctious, we're us. You'll notice, though, that two of our children look a little different than Mary and I, and that's because they came to us through adoption. Our neighbor, though, saw two different-looking children playing outside of our house every day and came to the conclusion that we must have been running an illegal day care out of our home.

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(Murmuring)

01:01

We were really angry to have our children stereotyped like that, but I know that's a relatively minor example of racial profiling. But isn't it sometimes what we all tend to do with people who think differently, or believe differently or maybe even vote differently? Instead of engaging as true neighbors, we keep our distance and our actions towards those are guided by who we think sees the world as we do or who we think doesn't.

01:32

See, what my neighbor suffered from is a condition called agonism. And sometimes we all suffer from the same condition. It's not a medical condition, but it is contagious. So let's talk a little bit about what agonism is. My favorite definition of agonism is taking a warlike stance in contexts

that are not literally war. Agonism comes from the same Greek root word "agon" from which we get "agony." How very appropriate. We all tend to show symptoms of agonism when we hold on to two deeply held beliefs, first identified by author Rick Warren. The first one is that if love someone, we must agree with all they do or believe. And the second is the inverse, that if we disagree with someone, it must mean that we fear or we hate them.

02:29

Not sure we really recognize the agony this way of thinking brings to us, when our relationships die because we think we have to agree or disagree no matter what. Think about the conversations we've had around Brexit, or Hong Kong, maybe Israeli settlements or perhaps impeachment. I bet we could all think of at least one personal relationship that's been strained or maybe even ended because of these topics, or tragically, over a topic much more trivial than those. The cure for agonism is not out of reach. The question is how.

03:10

So might I suggest two strategies that my experience has taught me to start with. First, cultivate common ground, which means focusing on what we share. I want you to know I'm using my words very, very deliberately. By "cultivate," I mean we have to intentionally work to find common ground with someone. Just like a farmer works to cultivate the soil. And common ground is a common term, so let me at least explain what I don't mean, which is I don't mean by common ground that we were exact, or that we totally agree and approve. All I mean is that we find one unifying thing that we can have in a relationship in common with another person.

03:55

You know, sometimes that one thing is hard to find. So I'd like to share a personal story, but before I do, let me tell you a little bit more about myself. I'm Caucasian, cisgender male, middle class, evangelical Christian. And I know, as soon as some of those words came out of my mouth, some of you had some perceptions about me. And it's OK, I know that not all those perceptions are positive. But for those who share my faith, know that I'm about to cut across the grain. And you may tune me out as well. So as we go, if you're having a hard time hearing me, I just gently ask that you reflect and see if you're buying into agonism. If you're rejecting me simply because you think you see the world differently than I do, because isn't that what we're here talking about? Alright, ready?

04:47

So I've been thinking a lot about how to find common ground in the area of gender fluidity, as an evangelical Christian. For Christians like me, we believe that God created us man and woman.

So what do I do? Do I throw up my hands and say, "I can't have a relationship with anybody who is transgender or LGBTQIA?" No. That would be giving into agonism.

05:15

So I started looking at the foundational aspects of my faith, the first of which is that of the three billion genes that make us human -- and by the way, we share 99.9 percent of those genes -- that I believe those three billion genes are the result of an intelligent designer. And that immediately gives me common ground with anybody. What it also gives me ... is the belief that each and every one of us have been given the right to life by that same intelligent designer.

05:54

I dug deeper though. I found that my faith didn't teach me to start relationships by arguing with somebody until they believed what I believed, or I convinced them. No, it taught me to start relationships by loving them as a coequal member of the human race. Honestly though, some who share my faith draw a line and refuse to address somebody by their preferred gender pronoun. But isn't that believing the lie that in order for me to honor you, I have to give up what I believe?

06:29

Come back in time with me -- let's say it's 20 years ago, and Muhammad Ali comes to your doorstep. And you open the door. Would you address him as Muhammad Ali or his former name of Cassius Clay? I'm guessing that most of you would say Muhammad Ali. And I'm also guessing that most of you wouldn't think we'd have to immediately convert to Islam, just by using his name. To honor him would cost me, would cost any of us absolutely nothing, and it would give us the common ground to have a relationship. And it's the relationship that cures agonism, not giving up what we believe.

07:12

So for me to honor my faith, it means rejecting these rigid symptoms of agonism. Meaning, I can and I will love you. I can and I will accept you, and I don't have to buy into the lie that if I do these things, I have to give up what I believe or chose to fear and hate you. Because I'm focusing on what we have in common.

07:38

When you can find even the smallest bit of common ground with somebody, it allows you to understand just the beautiful wonder and complexity and majesty of the other person.

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Our second strategy gives us room to (Inhales) breathe. To pause. To calm down. To have the kind of relationships that cure agonism. And how to keep those relationships alive. Our second strategy is to exchange extravagant grace.

08:21

(Laughs)

08:23

Once again, I'm not mincing words -- by grace, I don't mean we should all go sign up for ballet, that would be weird.

08:29

(Laughter)

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What I mean is not canceling everything over one mistake. Even if that mistake personally offended you. Maybe even deeply. Perhaps Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom put it best when she said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free, only to realize that prisoner was me." My faith teaches me that we humans will never be perfect, myself very much included. So we need the grace of a savior, who for me is Jesus. And while I define grace in the context of my faith, I know there's a lot of other people who have defined it differently and in different ways. One of my favorites is radio broadcaster Oswald Hoffmann, who said, "Grace is the love that loves the unlovely and the unlovable." And I just love that picture of grace. Because I know I am, and maybe a lot of you can think of a time when we're just pretty dadgum unlovable.

09:40

So it would be the height of hypocrisy, dare I say repulsive to my faith, for me to accept the unconditional, unqualified grace and love from God and then turn around and put one

precondition on the love I give you. What in the world would I be thinking? And by extravagant, I mean over the top, not just checking a box. We can all remember when we were kids and our parents forced us to apologize to somebody and we walked up to them and said, (Angrily) "I'm sorry." We just got it over with, right? That's not what we're talking about. What we're talking about is not having to give someone grace but choosing to and wanting to. That's how we exchange extravagant grace.

10:35

Listen, I know this can sound really, really theoretical. So I'd like to tell you about a hero of mine. A hero of grace. It's 2014. In Iran. And the mother of a murdered son is in a public square. The man who murdered her son is also in that square, by a gallows, on a chair of some kind, a noose around his neck and a blindfold over his eyes. Samereh Alinejad had been given the sole right under the laws of her country to either pardon this man or initiate his execution. Put another way, she could pardon him or literally push that chair out from underneath his feet.

11:29

(Exhales)

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I just ... I can't picture the agony going through both Samereh and this man at the time. Samereh with her choice to make, and this man, in the account that I read, was just weeping, just begging for forgiveness. And Samereh had a choice. And she chose in that moment to walk up to this man and to slap him right across the face. And that signaled her pardon. It gets better.

12:02

Right afterwards, somebody asked her, they interviewed her, and she was quoted as saying, "I felt as if rage vanished from within my heart and the blood in my veins began to flow again." Isn't that incredible? I mean, what a picture of grace, what a hero of grace. And there's a lesson in there for all of us. That as theologian John Piper said, "Grace is power, not just pardon." And if you think about it, grace is the gift we give someone else in a relationship that says our relationship is way more important than the things that separate us. And if you really think about it some more, we all have the power to execute in our relationships, or to pardon.

12:58

We never did find out the identity of our anonymous neighbor.

13:02

(Laughter)

13:04

But if we did, I'd hope we'd simply say, "Can we have coffee?" And maybe there's somebody you need to have coffee with and find your common ground with them. Or maybe there's somebody you're in a relationship with and you need to exchange extravagant grace. Maybe go first.

13:24

These two strategies have taught me how to exchange extravagant grace in my relationships and to enjoy the beautiful design of my neighbors. I want to continue to choose relationships over agonism. Will you choose to join me?

13:43

Thank you.

13:44

(Applause)