

McCabe United Methodist Church

Breakthrough Before Amen:

“God, You Are Good”

Sermon on Genesis 1-2:4a (sel. vv.) & Mark 10:13-16 (4/16 & 4/17/16)

Pastor Jennifer Hallenbeck Orr

*God, you are good. I need help. Others need help. Thank you for all you've already done. Now, breakthrough into my heart and into this church. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*¹

“God, you are good. I need help. *Others* need help. Thank you for all you've already done. Now, breakthrough into my heart and into this church. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.” That prayer is based on the prayer pastor and writer Max Lucado wrote about in his book and companion study series called *Before Amen: The Power of a Simple Prayer*.

If you want the basic formula for prayer – the themes of what you might consider saying when you pray – this little prayer pretty much has it all:

“God, you are good. I need help. *Others* need help. Thank you for all you've already done. Now, breakthrough into my heart and into this church. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.”

I say this prayer is “based on” the prayer Max Lucado wrote about in his *Before Amen* series because I embellished on his prayer and I added something important – it's not *much* different, but the prayer I've just shared with you is not *exactly* the prayer Max Lucado wrote about.

That said, this weekend marks the beginning of a sermon and worship series about prayer – a series based on the prayer you've now heard multiple times...and that I will reiterate many more times over the next several weeks.

Each week of this series will center around a line of this prayer: this weekend, we'll consider the very first line: “*God, you are good.*” Before we look specifically at that line, however, it's important that we spend a few minutes simply reflecting on prayer in general. In order to get our minds

¹ This prayer is based on the “simple” prayer from Max Lucado's book & companion study guide *Before Amen*.

and hearts focused on prayer, in general, I'm going to read you a chunk of the opening chapter of Max Lucado's book *Before Amen*.

His words in the opening chapter of that book are so true and profound I couldn't imagine writing anything that would communicate it better. Rev. Lucado writes this: "Hello, my name is Max. I'm a recovering prayer wimp. I doze off when I pray. My thoughts zig, then zag, then zig again. Distractions swarm like gnats on a summer night ... Some people excel in prayer. They inhale heaven and exhale God ...

"[Some people] would rather pray than sleep. Why is it that I sleep when I pray? ... Can you relate? It's not that we don't pray at all. We all pray some ...

"We pray to stay sober, centered, or solvent. We pray when the lump is deemed malignant. When the money runs out before the month does. When the unborn baby hasn't kicked in a while. We all pray...some. But wouldn't we all like to pray...More? Better? Deeper? Stronger? With more fire, faith, or fervency? ...

"We want to pray, but why? We might as well admit it. Prayer is odd, peculiar. Speaking into space. Lifting words into the sky.
"We can't even get the cable company to answer us, yet God will? The doctor is too busy, but God isn't? We have our doubts about prayer.

"And we have our checkered history with prayer: unmet expectations, unanswered requests ... God, to some, is the ultimate heartbreaker. Why keep tossing the coins of our longings into a silent pool? [God] jilted me once...but not twice. Oh, the peculiar puzzle of prayer."² End quote.

I will confess that, like Max Lucado, I, too, am a prayer wimp in recovery. If it shocks you to learn that, well, all I can say is please try to get over your shock. Like all of you, I, too, am a human being who struggles, day in and day out, to be as faithful and Spirit-filled as I'd like to be – as faithful and Spirit-filled as I know *God* would like me to be.

2 Max Lucado in *Before Amen*. 1-3.

Each of us is unique and prayer comes more easily and more naturally to some people. If you happen to be one of those for whom prayer comes easily and naturally, you are a gift and I am grateful for you. But, if you are like me – and, apparently, like Max Lucado – prayer may not come all that easily or all that naturally. That's okay.

However easily or naturally prayer comes to us, it is critically important that we actually do it. If it doesn't come easily or naturally – or if it does, but we just don't feel like praying – we can't just set it aside. For people of faith, *prayer* is not a negotiable item on the “discipleship to do list.”

For people of faith, prayer is like breathing: if we want to survive and to thrive spiritually, prayer is not *optional*. Sure, there may be times when our spiritual life is in desperate need of support – times when the prayers of others act as a ventilator keeping us alive because, for who knows what reasons, we are simply unable to offer the prayers ourselves.

In those times especially, prayer is vitally important. And that is the gift of the church: brothers and sisters in Christ who will continue to offer prayers on our behalf when we are not able to pray those prayers ourselves.

But that gets us into upcoming weeks of this series. For now, let us keep in mind what Max Lucado wrote at the very end of the introductory chapter of his book *Before Amen*:

“Prayer is not a privilege for the pious, not the art of a chosen few. Prayer is simply a heartfelt conversation between God and his child.”³

Let me say that again: *“Prayer is not a privilege for the pious, not the art of a chosen few. Prayer is simply a heartfelt conversation between God and his child.”*

In order for any kind of conversation to begin, someone has to start communicating. Since it is God's nature to always be communicating with us in various ways, the initiative for *prayer* rests squarely on our shoulders.

3 Max Lucado in *Before Amen*. 9.

Whenever we pray, we are simply picking up a conversation God already started...but to which we may or may not have been paying close attention.

And so, like any respectful conversation, prayer begins with us addressing the one with whom we are communicating. Max Lucado suggests beginning a prayer with something simple, like, "God, you are good."

Starting with a direct address to God reminds *us* that we are *not* the one to whom we are praying...it reminds us we are *not* God. We are *not* all-powerful, all-present. It reminds us there are things that are far bigger than our thoughts and our circumstances. "*God, you are good....*"

This also reminds us that, regardless of our circumstances, God *is* working for good: in our lives and in our world.

God's goodness – and the fact that God works to bring goodness – is evident from the very beginning of the Bible, in the Creation story. God creates and then God calls the Creation "good." Not because creation is inherently good, but because it was created by a good God.

As God's beloved children, we are blessed to be invited into constant communication with our creator God. And, as Jesus said in our reading from Mark chapter 10, people who are like little children belong to the kingdom of God.

This, of course, doesn't mean we should remain spiritually immature throughout our lives...it simply means we should go to God eager to receive guidance and blessing – the way children are so often like excited little sponges, eager to explore the world and to learn what it has to teach them.

In Mark 10, people brought their children to Jesus to be blessed by them, but Jesus' disciples thought that would be an annoyance to him, so they told the parents to go away.

Jesus, however, rebuked his disciples and challenged them to be more like those children themselves – at least in the way the children approached Jesus...eager for a blessing, perhaps also eager for guidance. It makes me think of the way so many children come forward for the

Children's Message during worship. Many kids joyfully burst out of their seat when it's time and some even run to the front of the worship space: they are so excited for this special time that has been carved-out just for them.

That's how we should all be when it comes to prayer: we should be like those exuberant children who jump out of their seats and rush forward when it's time for the Children's Message. We should pursue prayer with that same kind of whole-hearted anticipation. We should be eager for guidance and eager for the blessing we will likely receive when we take the time to pray.

Those of us who've been around the church for a while know that a time comes for most children when they start feeling awkward about coming forward for the Children's Message. They start to feel a little bit too old, a little bit self-conscious about being up in front of all the grown-ups.

And so, eventually, those same kids who used to jump for joy and rush up front instead look down at their feet when it's time for the Children's Message, silently praying the grown-ups they're with don't force them to go. It's a little sad when this happens to the kids in our churches, but it's somewhat inevitable.

Child-like exuberance over many things dissipates as we grow-up. That's just the way it is. And it's okay. What isn't okay is that many of us lose – or never even had – a child-like exuberance about prayer. I hope this series ignites or reignites prayerful exuberance in you. And, very often, in order for something to get ignited or reignited, we need to take action in some way, shape, or form.

So, as a way of closing this message, we're going to do something kind of different – something in the spirit of children moving toward God with exuberance...whole-hearted anticipation.

What we are going to do is to physically pray a circle around this worship space. By that, I mean that we are going to move to the outskirts of this room and then we are going walk or wheel or be carried, *clockwise*, in a circle around it.

So, I ask that all of you who are physically able to do this quietly move *now* toward the outskirts of the room. I'm going to continue to offer instructions as you move, so *quiet* movement is extremely important!

If it is physically too difficult for you to do this, you may remain seated. Once we officially start this prayer circle, we'll move in a big, clockwise, group circle and we're going to quietly pray as we move: quietly pray the deepest prayers of your heart... prayers for yourself, prayers for your dear ones... prayers for this community and for our world.

And, since we're doing this here, in our church building, *please* also pray for McCabe: pray that God's Spirit will move powerfully and abundantly through us. Pray for those who are already connected to Jesus Christ through McCabe and pray for those we've not yet met – those who are lost and in need of a relationship with our living God.

Pray for those who may worship with us for the first or second time in the coming weeks. Pray that we'll be welcoming. Pray that our worship and our service in and through McCabe might bring abundant blessing.

If it's better for you to do a smaller circle, you can move clockwise around only your section of the seats – that is perfectly fine as well.

Regardless: whether you stay in your seat, whether you move in a smaller circle, or whether you do the entire circle, please spend the next minutes in quiet prayer. As you pray, touch the walls and doors, touch the pews/chairs. Make sure people are able to join the circle, so like well-flowing traffic, let folks in as needed.

When I can tell the circle is nearly complete and folks are close to their particular seating area, I'll begin offering the pastoral prayer. So, please, as you are able, let's begin our prayer circle...

Let us pray: God, you are good and we know you are working for good in our lives and in our world. That in mind, there are so many ways in which we need help...

There are so many ways in which others need help. Thank you for all you've already done to bless us with goodness. And now, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into McCabe United Methodist Church.

Breakthrough the walls of our hearts and the walls of our building. May we be led to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we work together to build your kingdom on earth. We pray all this in the name of your Son, Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying,

“Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name.
thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
forever . Amen.