

Breakthrough Before Amen: “I Need Help”
Sermon on Romans 8, selected verses (4/23 & 4/24/16)
Pastor Jenny 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

Presbyterian pastor and preaching professor, Thomas Long, has told the story of a Confirmation Sunday in one of his friends' congregations. As the story goes, in that particular church, on Confirmation Sunday, the class of confirmands were to stand in a line at one point during the worship service and recite from memory a particular passage of Scripture.

The Scripture reading this group of young people was to recite was the last piece of the Scripture we're focusing on today here at McCabe: the end of Romans chapter 8. The way the recitation worked was that the Confirmation teacher asked each confirmand the question St. Paul asks in Romans 8: the teacher called each student by name and then asked, “[What] shall separate us from the love of Christ?”

Then, after the teacher asked this question, the student said – from memory – “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

One-by-one, the teacher went down the line with this Confirmation class: each student answered confidently and flawlessly. The congregation was so proud! “What shall separate us from the love of Christ?” the teacher asked each student.

And, again, in response each student recited the words of Romans 8:38-39: “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Each student did so well...but the folks in the pews started to get a bit nervous as the teacher got closer and closer to the end of the line. See, the last student in line was a beautiful girl named Rachel. Rachel had Down's Syndrome and people worried about what would happen when her turn came. Would she get all the words right and would she get them in the correct order?

The congregation worried about how she would do.

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

When the teacher got to Rachel, she asked, “Rachel, what shall separate you from the love of God?” Rachel stood there, smiling, and proudly declared, “Nothing!”²

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Well, it's Confirmation weekend here at McCabe United Methodist Church. While our students won't have to recite Scripture in front of the congregation, I certainly hope that, like Rachel, each of our confirmands feels assured by the promise of Romans 8 – this promise that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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This weekend's class of confirmands met this past Wednesday for our last class time together. While I expect we'll continue to see this year's class of confirmands learning and serving through McCabe, their time in Confirmation ends this weekend. That said, this ending is really more of a beginning.

When they stand together to be confirmed, they will affirm their own faith in Jesus Christ and, together, they will make their own commitment to serve Christ through the church – from this day forward.

These are affirmations and commitments their parents made on their behalf when they were each baptized years ago...but, this weekend, our 12 confirmands make these powerful affirmations and commitments for themselves.

So, again, while this Confirmation weekend marks an ending, of sorts, for them, it also marks a new beginning on their journey as followers of Jesus: a new beginning marked by choice and personal responsibility...a new beginning marked a bit *less* by parental prodding and a bit *more* by their own decisions.

Yet, as much as Confirmation marks a moment of personal decision and commitment, as with everything else in the Church, Confirmation is also about the entire body of believers: it's about our 12 confirmands, for sure, but it's also about everyone else here at McCabe.

Whether we take this seriously or not, everyone who calls themselves “Christian” is committed to – and responsible for – everyone *e/se* who calls themselves “Christian.”

A couple of weeks ago, our youth director, Justin Balzer, preached a sermon about how, within the Church, we are all given different gifts...and how our gifts are meant to be used together to serve God both within and outside the walls of our churches.

So, we need each other to serve God well.

2 I have heard Thomas Long tell this story in a couple of different sermons, but can't find a direct source of his to cite. I have modified the story based on a telling I found:

http://firstunited.echurch.net/CEDocuments/Downloads_GetFile.aspx?id=422007&fd=0

We also need each other for support and help...which is very much the focus of this weekend's message within our *Breakthrough Before Amen* sermon and worship series.

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“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.”

You first heard that little prayer last weekend as we began a five-week series here at McCabe called *Breakthrough Before Amen*. This prayer – and this series – is based on Max Lucado's book *Before Amen: The Power of a Simple Prayer*.

Each week of this series, we'll focus on a line of this prayer: last week, we reflected on the importance of beginning a prayer by acknowledging that God is *good*...that, in everything, our God is working for *good*.

In fact, that is the very message of one of the verses in today's Scripture reading: Romans 8, verse 28, states that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” Part of what it means to love God is training yourself to look for the ways in which God is working for good in *all* things.

“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.”

Last week we focused on the first line of this prayer: “God, you are good.” This week, we have moved to the second line: “I need help.”

It may seem simple enough...but if you're anything like me, you struggle sometimes to acknowledge when you're in need of help. Then, after acknowledging you *need* help, you sometimes struggle even more to actually *ask* for it.

And I'm quite sure the independent spirit of American culture – with its “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” mentality – does not help us when it comes to, well, *help*. Despite our cultural insistence on independence, I have yet to meet *anyone* who makes it through life without regularly receiving the help of others along the way.

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Last Sunday morning, many of our McCabe folks got to experience first-hand a rather eventful morning...a morning during which we needed a *lot* of help.

During our 10:00 worship service – and while Sunday school was happening for our elementary-aged children and our middle and high school youth – we were put on official lock-down by the Bismarck Police Department.

This lock-down went into effect after reports of gunshot-like sounds were called into the police, beginning around 9:45am last Sunday. The sounds came from across the street and, as it turns out, the police investigation revealed no evidence of gunshots; they are confident the sounds were from fireworks being set-off.

Since the police didn't discern this officially until about 11:15am last Sunday, our immediate neighborhood was surrounded by police, and, while we were on lock-down, we had an officer inside our building, keeping us informed on any updates.

We were as safe as we could be in the sanctuary during the 10:00 service, so I wasn't informed anything was going on until after our Sunday School kids and youth had all been moved into the Fellowship Hall downstairs, and after the building had been secured.

Right before my sermon last Sunday during the 10:00 service, I was quietly told by another staff member what was going on...I was told we were secure, but that the police were investigating the incident across the street and that, because of the nature of the reports, no one could leave our building until further notice.

I then made the quick decision to go ahead with my sermon as planned – though with a slight adjustment at the end – and to go ahead with the offering time, also as planned...but to announce the lock-down before we all stood to sing the final hymn.

Since we were as safe as we could be, but since we couldn't go anywhere, it didn't make sense to me to announce the lock-down any sooner than before the last hymn.

I also made the decision to follow the final hymn with a hymn sing because, well, what else are you going to do when you're stuck in a sanctuary with a room full of folks – and at a time when we needed to stay calm and somewhat prayerful? //

If you were here last Sunday – or, even if you were not – you are likely aware that, after about the 3rd hymn of our hymn sing, we were asked to move to the Fellowship Hall downstairs as an added precaution.

Then, when nearly everyone was downstairs, we got the official “all clear” from the police and folks were invited to head home. A few of us stuck around to do an abbreviated 11:15 worship service...and, I must admit, it felt good to continue to worship after the anxiety of the morning...but, we were all eager to move into a more peaceful afternoon!

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I share this with you today partly as a way of offering some public explanation about exactly what happened last Sunday and how we handled it. Mostly, however, I share this with you to offer a powerful example of this weekend's worship theme: “I need help.”

As the Senior Pastor of this church, I am exceedingly grateful for the staff and volunteers who helped throughout the building – outside of and within the sanctuary – to help keep everyone safe, calm, and occupied during last Sunday's lock-down. I was well-informed and am so thankful I knew I could trust that what was happening outside the sanctuary was being handled well.

Last Sunday morning, I relied on the help of others outside the sanctuary to handle the lock-down. Here, *inside* the sanctuary, I relied on the help of God's Holy Spirit as we continued to worship in the midst of what was going on outside these four walls.
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There are times when the only word we can think to utter in prayer is “Help!” And, when we utter that word, I hope and pray we can also remember the message of Romans 8 verses 28 and 39: the message that, in *all* things, God is working for good...and that there is *nothing* that can separate us from God's great love for us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

If there is one, single thing I want every confirmed Christian to be able to remember always, *that* would be it.

So, to our confirmands – and to all of you – I offer these final words:

Ask for God's help frequently. And, when you find yourself in need of help, remember God is working for good – even in the midst of your current circumstances...and that, no matter what, nothing can separate you from God's love. *Nothing*.