

Breakthrough Before Amen: “Others Need Help”
Sermon on Philippians 2:1-9 & 1 Timothy 2:1-3 (4/30 & 5/1/16)
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Early in the afternoon a couple of weeks ago, I had a meeting in my office with our new McCabe Lay Leader, Chris Chase. We were chatting about life and about the church's ministry, and, after we'd been meeting for about a half-hour, I heard a bell ding in the background.

Our McCabe secretary, Joy, was away from the main office desk, taking her lunch break. The bell I heard had been rung by someone who stopped in needing some sort of assistance; I couldn't see who it was because, the way our offices are configured, I can't see who's at the main office desk when I'm sitting at the desk in *my* office. If the bell gets rung over the lunch hour, it's typically a delivery person or a church member...but that wasn't the case this time.

When I heard the bell ring in the middle of my meeting with our Lay Leader, I excused myself to see who was in the main office. It was a gentleman I hadn't seen before and he was looking for an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to attend. It's not his real name, but I'm going to call him “Ron.”

Ron is currently living in the area, and had heard McCabe hosts AA meetings: he was hoping we'd be able to tell him when the next meeting was at our church. In that moment, I so wished I could have told him that we do, in fact, host Alcoholics Anonymous meetings...but we don't. I told him we host a couple of *AI-Anon* meetings every week, but not actual AA meetings.

As it happens, Chris, our Lay Leader – who was sitting in my office in those very moments – is extremely passionate about addiction recovery and I had a feeling Chris would love to connect with this gentleman. So I asked Ron if he would sit tight for just a moment while I went back to my office to talk to Chris. (By the way, Chris gave me permission to tell this story...)

So I popped back to my office, explained to Chris what was going on and asked if he would like to go talk with the gentleman for a bit. Chris was *thrilled* to have the opportunity to talk to this guy; I introduced them and excused myself back to my office so they could speak more privately.

A few minutes later, Chris came back into my office and asked if I could print the schedule of all the local Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in our area. I said, “Of course,” and then Chris went back out to be with Ron while I hunted around online for the list of local AA meetings... I then printed the list, highlighted the meetings I knew to be within a few blocks of McCabe, and then delivered it to Chris so he could talk through the meeting options with our guest.

As I headed back to my office – again – I heard Chris give Ron his cell phone number, encouraging him to call any time he was struggling. Chris is passionate about addiction recovery because he understands it personally. He wants others to find the freedom he's found.

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I do not say things like this lightly, but it was no “accident,” neither was it pure “coincidence,” that Chris was meeting with me when Ron came to the church looking for recovery-related help. As people of Christian faith, we call this *providence*...the hand of God, actively guiding us, caring for us, protecting us – in the midst of our particular circumstances. //

Last week the theme of the message was how we often pray to God with prayers of “help” for ourselves...and I have no doubt that Ron had prayed prayers to God for *help* in the midst of his addiction.

Well, at least *part* of God's answer to that prayer was Chris's presence at McCabe when Ron stopped-by looking for an AA meeting. Ron didn't find exactly the help he'd come looking for...but God *did* offer help. And, who knows, perhaps the help God offered was even better than what Ron needed at that time.

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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.” 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.”

When we began this series two weeks ago, we started it by focusing on the first line of the prayer: “God, you are good.” This line reminds us that, in prayer, we must first address the one to whom we're praying: *God*. We don't pray to *ourselves* and prayer is not just our own, inner thoughts. No, when we pray, we address our all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, creator God.

So we start first by addressing the one to whom we pray. When we add “you are good,” we then remind ourselves God is working for good in *all* things...no matter our own current circumstances or the circumstances around us.

Not only is God all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, and our creator, but God is also *good*.

Which means we can trust that somehow, in some way, God is working for *good*, no matter what, in *all* things.

The next two lines of this simple prayer are designed for the times in which we need a special reminder of the good God is working in the midst of human struggle: last week we considered the line “I need help” – for those times we need some sort of supernatural intervention to get us through a particular situation or event. This week, we consider the next line of the prayer...the line, “*others* need help.”

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For people of Christian faith, praying for others is a biblical imperative and we heard that imperative in our readings from Philippians and 1 Timothy. In those readings, again, St. Paul wrote this – hear first from Philippians 2: “Christ encourages you, and his love comforts you. God’s Spirit unites you, and you are concerned for others. Now make me completely happy! Live in harmony by showing love for each other. Be united in what you think, as if you were only one person. Don’t be jealous or proud, but be humble and consider others more important than yourselves. Care about them as much as you care about yourselves and think the same way that Christ Jesus thought...”

Now hear again St. Paul's words from 1 Timothy 2 – instructions with a bit more clarity about praying for others: “First of all, I ask you to pray for everyone. Ask God to help and bless them all, and tell God how thankful you are for each of them. Pray for kings and others in power, so that we may live quiet and peaceful lives as we worship and honor God. This kind of prayer is good, and it pleases God our Savior.”

As Christian people, we are compelled to pray not just for ourselves, but for others as well...and we are to pray for *all* others: our loved ones, our brothers and sisters in Christ, strangers, enemies, politicians and other societal leaders, etc.

St. Paul isn't kidding when he says, “I ask you to pray for everyone.” *Everyone*. And, of course, when we pray for others, we should always be aware that God might, in some way, shape, or form use *us* as part of the answer to our prayer...

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Nearly two weeks ago, I got a message on Facebook from Pastor Mike Flowers. Along with his wife, Libby, Pastor Mike directs our United Methodist outreach ministry on the Spirit Lake reservation. He has spoken here multiple times in recent years and some of you may recall that \$4,800 of our 2014 Christmas Eve offering went to Spirit Lake.

(That gift was, in and of itself, an incredible answer to a prayer for help: we hadn't told them Spirit Lake Ministry Center would be receiving any of our Christmas Eve offering that year...and, right at the time I contacted them about how they'd be receiving a \$4800 gift from us, they had decided they needed a \$4800 convection

oven in order to more effectively operate a growing meal ministry. We were all pretty excited about how that turned out!!!)

So, about two weeks ago, I got a message from Pastor Mike asking if McCabe could help cover the cost of an 8-flavor soda fountain machine with built-in ice maker. This machine would also help them with their growing meal ministry...and it's worth noting that their weekly meal ministry is now also connected to a weekly "faith conversations" event.

This weekly ministry is feeding an average of 40 people per week and having a soda fountain-type beverage machine will save them considerable money, compared to what they're spending right now to offer a good, hospitable meal to their guests.

I would have *loved* to think McCabe freely had the money to spend toward this beverage machine, but, the total was around \$3,000...and, while we are doing very well financially, I knew I would need to carefully assess whether or not we could help this time around. So, I quickly replied that I'd need to wait until I could look over our finances.

Pastor Mike said that was fine...and I hoped to have the opportunity to figure out what might be possible in the week after I got the message, but I just wasn't able to set aside the time I would have needed in order to do it. So, while I waited for the time I'd need to assess our church finances, I kept praying for a way to offer help in this case.

Well, about a week-and-a-half after Pastor Mike had sent his initial message about the \$3,000 beverage machine and ice maker, I received in the mail a check for \$4,700.

The check was from McCabe folks who recently came into some money they were not expecting. As a sign of gratitude to God for all they've been given, and for the ways in which God has cared for them in this life, these folks decided to give a portion of the money away, splitting their gift equally between two churches that are deeply important to them – McCabe being one of those two churches.

In the letter the givers sent explaining the gift, they requested that it not be used for our building fund at McCabe...and that, instead, I, as pastor, decide where to direct the gift – choosing "local projects" that are "important and personal" to me. //

Now, I love my job *most* of the time. But, I gotta say, being asked to spend someone else's generous gift on projects that are "important and personal" to me...well, those kinds of moments rank toward the top of the list of things that make my job truly wonderful!

The givers of this \$4,700 gift want to remain anonymous, but I did receive permission from them to share how their gift is going to be used. See, when I opened their letter and saw the gift amount, it took me all of half a second to know where the money should go:

the gift was an answered prayer regarding Pastor Mike's request for help purchasing that \$3,000 beverage machine and ice maker...the added perk is that the remainder will be used to help pay for new flooring at the Open Door pre-school – a fun way to help them celebrate their 40th anniversary!

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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.”

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Others *do* need help in so many ways and people of Christian faith regularly pray to God that help will come to them: help in the midst of sickness...help in the midst of sorrow...help in the midst of addiction...help in the midst of community and global strife...and, of course, help to know how we can be the hands and feet of Christ for others – others like those who randomly drop by the church looking for an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting...others like those on the Spirit Lake reservation... and others like the staff and children served by the Open Door pre-school.

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This week and always, may we earnestly pray for others. And, as we pray for others, may we be open to the way God answers those prayers through us.