

McCabe United Methodist Church

Breakthrough Before Amen

“Thank You...”

Sermon on Psalm 100 & Philippians 4:1-9 (5/7 & 5/8/16)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

The other night, my husband, Derrick, and I were preparing to go to sleep when he told me that, at the end of each day, he likes to review the day in his head, making sure to offer special thanks to God for all the good that had happened throughout it. I love knowing he does this!

Then he mentioned an interesting, rhetorical question he'd heard somewhere...the question is this:

“What if you woke up today with only the things you thanked God for yesterday?”

Obviously, this is merely a “what if” and is not something that would actually happen...but the question certainly gives us pause for thought and forces us to think of all the things we take for granted...it reminds us just how easy it is to forget to be intentionally thankful.

“What if you woke up today with only the things you thanked God for yesterday?”

Of course, this Mother's Day weekend, I'm particularly thankful for the “mothers” in my life: for my own mother, for my mother-in-law, for my grandmothers who now live in God's eternity...and for the other women in my life who have offered me strength and wisdom over the years.

This Mother's Day weekend I'm also thankful for women who teach me about motherhood in various ways: I hope someday to be a mom myself and so I'm thankful for all the women whose mothering I've been able to observe and from whom I've learned over the course of my lifetime.

This weekend I'm also thankful for women who, despite their sincere desire, have not been able to become mothers. Mother's Day holds within it deep sadness for many women due to struggles with infertility or because they remain single while their hearts yearn to find lifelong love and companionship.

Unfulfilled dreams remind us that all is not as we want it to be, or as it should be, in this life. The unfulfilled dreams of others remind us of our own unfulfilled dreams...and should inspire us to compassion.

“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*.

As I've said in previous weeks of this series, 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.”

We started this series three weeks ago 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*. When we add “you are good,” we then remind ourselves God is working for good in *all* things...no matter our circumstances or the circumstances around us.

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: two weeks ago, 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.

Last week, we considered the next line of the prayer...the line, “*others* need help.” Of course, we know all sorts of ways others are in need of help: whether it's illness, grief, fear, struggles with family, financial issues, work-related problems – the list could go on and on.

When we pray, we are challenged to think beyond ourselves and to pray for the needs of others. And, as we pray for others, we should open our hearts

and minds to the reality that, very often, God answers our prayers *for* others – and the prayers *of* others – through us.

So we've covered the first three lines of this simple prayer: “God, you are good. I need help. Others need help.” Now, it's onto the second to the last line...the line, “Thank you for all you've already done.” This line is pretty self-explanatory. However, depending on the season of life in which you currently find yourself, it may be quite difficult to practice.

It may simply be natural human tendency, or it may be our particular culture, but we often look to our immediate circumstances as the indicator of whether we're thankful or not: if things in life seem to be going relatively well, we find it easy to be thankful...if, however, we're struggling, or things seem to be spinning out of control, we find it more difficult to be thankful.

But true gratitude – a life marked by a thankful heart – is never based solely on what's happening in any given moment or in any given season of life.

A thankful heart is one that looks back on how God has been actively bringing good in the midst of *everything*. A thankful heart remains mindful of laughter brought in the midst of tears, relief discovered in the midst of pain, and light that shines after seasons of darkness.

A thankful heart also serves as an antidote, as a “cure,” for the many negative attitudes that plague us...something to keep in mind as our current political season continues to spiral into greater depths of negativity and mud-slinging.

On top of that, our own denomination heads this week into General Conference, which happens once every four years. General Conference is the “Congress” of The United Methodist Church and, considering that analogy, it *is* our most political gathering. As such, it desperately needs our prayers.

Even as we worship today, representatives from every Conference of our church are descending upon Portland, Oregon, for two weeks of worship, meetings, conversations, and votes. Some of it will be beautiful, some will be mundane, and some will be downright ugly.

As with any General Conference, there is the potential for major changes to be voted-in. If such changes come, we'll deal with them appropriately.

For now, especially for those of you who pay close attention to General Conference, please lift up prayers that God's Spirit will work in and through our General Conference...and that, no matter what happens, God's Spirit will *continue* to move powerfully among those of us who call ourselves United Methodist Christians.

I'm going to read again several verses from Philippians chapter 4. In these verses of Scripture, St. Paul makes a very specific connection between being thankful and receiving the gift of Christ's peace – a gift many of us long for desperately on a regular basis.

As I read, listen carefully for this connection between gratitude and peace.

Again, St. Paul writes: “Always be glad because of the Lord! I will say it again: Be glad. Always be gentle with others. The Lord will soon be here. Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God. Then, because you belong to Christ Jesus, God will bless you with peace that no one can completely understand. And this peace will control the way you think and feel.

“Finally, my friends, keep your minds on whatever is true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper. Don't ever stop thinking about what is truly worthwhile and worthy of praise. You know the teachings I gave you, and you know what you heard me say and saw me do. So follow my example. And God, who gives peace, will be with you.”

Being thankful – having a life marked by gratitude – is, in so many ways, a means of controlling your mind and heart to focus on that which is *good*, as opposed to that which is not.

And Paul is very explicit in these verses that we should focus our minds on things that are “true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper” ... things that are “worthwhile and worthy of praise.” Focus on such things brings a kind of peace that only comes from Christ.

I certainly don't like to be naïve about the ugliness that lurks in the minds and hearts of my fellow human beings – not to mention my own – and I don't like to be oblivious to tragedy around the world, but hateful attitudes and certain kinds of news can really get me down.

When that happens, I try to unplug and turn to something more joyful: I avoid social media for a while...or I open up a devotional reading...or I go for a walk, I give my dog some love, I laugh with a dear one...or I take a few moments to remember the lovely things in my life and in the world.

Doing these things doesn't make the ugly, tragic things go away, of course; but doing these things helps remind me of the first line of our simple prayer: “God, you are good.” It keeps my mind and heart tuned to things that are “worthwhile” and “worthy of praise.”

Practicing gratitude – having a thankful heart – reminds me of specific ways in which God has brought *good* to my life and to our world, even in the midst of ugliness and tragedy.

In her book *Daring Greatly*, social worker and researcher Dr. Brené Brown, tells the story of a time when she and her daughter, Ellen, were out enjoying a lovely afternoon together in a park.

At one point, when they were out on a lake in a paddleboat, 6-year-old Ellen stopped pedaling and just sat very still with her eyes closed. Dr. Brown began to get a bit nervous when her daughter stayed like that for over a minute, so she asked Ellen if she was okay.

In response, Ellen smiled broadly, opened her eyes, looked at her mother, and said, “I’m fine, Mama. I was just making a picture memory.” This was a new concept to Brené Brown, so she asked what that meant.

Ellen said, “Oh, a picture memory is a picture I take in my mind when I'm really, really happy. I close my eyes and take a picture, so when I'm feeling sad or scared or lonely, I can look at my picture memories.”¹

Isn't that a great idea?

Many of us probably do this in some way, shape, or form, at least on occasion. I don't know about you, however, but I'm a little less intentional about it than Brené Brown's daughter is.

I absolutely *love* the idea of “picture memories” as a way of tracking experiences for which we are deeply grateful. I know others who keep daily “thankfulness” journals and who make sure to spend time each day talking with their dear ones about the good things they experienced.

Practices like these are the practices that cultivate thankful hearts. They are the practices that help our minds dwell on that which is worthwhile and worthy of praise.

Next weekend marks the final weekend of this *Breakthrough Before Amen* sermon series...but next weekend also marks the beginning of another sermon series – a series which will take us on a journey through the book of Acts.

As we make the transition from this current series to the next, I'm going to tell you a little about the 6:10 Prayer Challenge cards you hopefully received either on your way into the service or soon after. If you didn't get one yet, you'll have ample opportunities to get one in coming days!

But, if you have one of those cards, take it out and look at it with me for a moment.

From this point on – for at least the next 5-6 months, though perhaps longer than that – you are hereby challenged to pray the prayer on this card at either 6:10am or 6:10pm *every day*. Yes, you heard me: the challenge is to pray the prayer on this card *every day* at either 6:10am or 6:10pm. And I hope you'll pray it wherever you happen to be at 6:10!

1 Brené Brown in *Daring Greatly*. 126-127.

Those of you who have cell phones or other digital timekeeping devices; you can easily set a daily reminder that will prompt you to pray at 6:10. I set my phone earlier this week and so I've been praying this prayer every day at 6:10pm. (I'm not a morning person!)

I've prayed it in my office here at church...I've prayed it on the couch at my house...I've prayed it while out for supper...and I've prayed it while out shopping.

This prayer challenge is about asking God to breakthrough into our hearts and into McCabe so that we can help build God's heavenly kingdom on earth in new and powerful ways.

That's why I chose 6:10 as the time for our daily prayer challenge: because chapter 6, verse 10, of the Gospel of Matthew is the line of the Lord's Prayer that says, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Praying for breakthroughs is a crucial part of prayer...because, no matter who we are, we're all in need of some form of a breakthrough – we're all in need of God's Spirit to offer us a kind of help we can't get, and to do a kind of work we can't do on our own.

You see, it's those times when God's Spirit has broken-through the barriers of our hearts that have caused the most growth – that have brought about greater compassion and maturity. It's those times when God's Spirit has broken-through that we've had the courage to conquer a daunting task or to live into a new reality.

And, very often, it's those times when God's Spirit has broken-through for which we are most grateful. Because, when we look back on a breakthrough, we know, without a doubt, it was *only* God who could have made it happen.

May we be ever thankful for the ways in which God breaks-through into our hearts, into our lives, into our church, and into our world. And may our hearts remain ever thankful, from this day forward.