

Pentecost: The Church's First Breakthrough
Sermon on selected verses of Acts 1 & 2 (5/14 & 5/15/16)
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

This weekend marks our annual celebration of Pentecost. Many biblical scholars and church historians would argue that Pentecost is a Christian holy day on par with Christmas and Easter...but, to my knowledge, Hallmark doesn't have a "Pentecost" line of cards, and major retailers haven't yet capitalized on this holy day as one worth marketing. So, it can be easy for Christians to forget about Pentecost.

But not us! Not here. Pentecost is too important.

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The word "Pentecost" comes from a Greek word that means "the 50th day." For us Christians, Pentecost falls, every year, the 50th day of, or *after*, Easter.

Yet, while we Christians recognize Pentecost as the 50th day of *Easter*, the story of Pentecost does not have its roots in the story of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

See, at this point in Christian history, Jesus' first followers were still faithful *Jews*: they still believed and practiced the laws of Judaism. They also still celebrated Jewish holidays.

And what is referred to in Acts chapter 2 as "Pentecost" was actually the Jewish holiday called Shavuot, or the "Feast of Weeks"...which is celebrated the 50th day after the second day of the Jewish Passover.

On Shavuot, Jews celebrate God giving Moses the law on Mt. Sinai, and, back in biblical times, Jews from all over the place would have made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate this holiday.

As the story of Pentecost goes, "all the Lord's followers" were gathered in one place about 10 days after Jesus' ascension into heaven. Then, all of a sudden, a sound like a mighty wind overtook them and the Holy Spirit descended upon them with what looked like tongues of fire resting above the head of each person present.

After that, each one started speaking in a language that was *not* their native tongue. We don't know how long this lasted, or how loud it all was, but it drew the attention of many of the visiting Jews who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot.

None of these visiting Jews really seemed to know what was going on, but those who could hear it happening heard the apostles speaking about God's work through Jesus – and they heard it *in their own languages*.

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Some people refer to Pentecost as the “birthday of the Church” because it was the first time the message of Jesus was shared with people outside of Jesus' own region.

Until the first Pentecost, the only people who had learned about Jesus were people who had experienced him themselves or who had learned about him from the disciples' travels before Jesus' death.

See, after Jesus was raised from the dead, and after he ascended into heaven, the first apostles stayed pretty close to their home turf, waiting for what God wanted to do next.

Well, that first Pentecost, by the power of the Holy Spirit, folks outside of Jesus' own traveling region heard his message thanks to what the apostles spoke. And the miracle of it all was the fact that the languages being heard were *not* languages the apostles knew how to speak.

It would be like if, all of a sudden, everyone in this room who only speaks English was suddenly talking about Jesus in Spanish, or in German, or in Persian, or Swahili, or Malay, or Lakota, or Arabic, or Hindi. If that happened, most of us wouldn't have a clue what we were saying...but that wouldn't matter because, if we were loud enough, the people who understand those languages would understand *us* perfectly.

If that happened, we would experience a breakthrough like the one that happened on the first Pentecost: a breakthrough that would remind us how God's love in Jesus Christ is for *all* people...no matter who you are, no matter where you're from, no matter the color of your skin, no matter the language you speak. The message of God's love in Jesus is for *everyone*.

That's the message of Pentecost – and it's the message that drives the entire book of Acts.

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Starting today, here at McCabe, we're going to spend the summer exploring our way through the book of Acts, driving alongside the first apostles...joining them on their original journey as they shared the message of Jesus with those who'd never heard it before.

And, if the Pentecost message is what *drove* the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is what *fueled* it. So, for the next several months, we'll be on a journey through Acts.

As we make this journey, we will not be able to avoid noticing the palpable presence of the Holy Spirit. I hope and pray that, as we notice the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts, we'll be ever more open to the Spirit's work in our own lives and here in this church.

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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. Amen.”

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For about the last month, our sermons and worship services have centered around that prayer. It's a prayer that's based on a book and companion study series by Max Lucado called *Before Amen: The Power of a Simple Prayer*.

In that book and study series, in order to teach us what prayer can look like, Lucado uses a prayer very much like the one we've centered around these last few weeks.

His prayer, however, did *not* include the line about “breakthrough.” So, I added it... because praying for God's Spirit to breakthrough into our hearts and minds is not only *important* for our spiritual health, it's also necessary if we want to grow into the mature Christians God calls us to become.

And there's no better book of the Bible to explore than the book of Acts when it comes to learning about the power of breakthrough prayer. As such, this sermon today serves not only as the last sermon in our *Breakthrough Before Amen* series, but it also serves as the first sermon in our Acts series.

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Now, the concept of “breakthrough prayer” is important, generally. There is, however, a very specific reason we here at McCabe are spending a season focused on breakthrough prayer *now*.

See, at the invitation of our bishop, Bishop Bruce Ough, McCabe is in the beginning stages of a church renewal and vitality process called The Missional Church Consultation Initiative – or, more succinctly referred to as “The MCCI.”

McCabe joins five other Dakotas United Methodist congregations in this process, the purpose of which is to help us grow and adapt in ways that will make us more effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Breakthrough prayer is Step One in this process...because it's about asking God's Spirit to breakthrough the barriers in our hearts and minds that might prevent us from growing.

Believe it or not, but church people – pastors included – can have a tendency to want things to always stay the same...even if we know making some changes will help us be more faithful and will help us connect people to Jesus who have never been connected to him before.

I mean, can you imagine what would have happened to the Church if, after that first Pentecost, the apostles had just dug-in their heels and had done nothing further to

share the message of Jesus with those outside of Jerusalem? *Nothing* is exactly what would have happened!

We would not be here today, worshiping the God we know in Jesus Christ, if the apostles 2,000 years ago had squelched the Holy Spirit breakthrough that happened in their midst!

Each of us is here today – in some way, shape or form – because we have experienced the powerful, life-changing love of God in Jesus Christ.

That our God's love is powerful enough to change lives, well, that is news too good *not* to share – don't you think?

Every time we somehow communicate the love of Jesus with someone who doesn't yet know it, or with someone who hasn't experienced it in a long time...*every time* we communicate the love of Jesus with others, we are allowing Pentecost to happen again. But sometimes it takes a Holy Spirit breakthrough in order for us to do this.

This is what our McCabe 6:10 Prayer Challenge is about: praying *every day*, at either 6:10am or 6:10pm for God's Spirit to breakthrough among us, to expand our ability to share God's love.

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Speaking of conversion, I'm something of a new convert to the concept of breakthrough prayer. I've always believed prayer makes a difference and that prayer is vital when it comes to our relationship with God. But “breakthrough prayer” was a relatively new concept to me. And so I was intrigued when I began to hear about it a couple of years ago.

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About two years ago, the first group of United Methodist churches in the Dakotas began The Missional Church Consultation Initiative, The MCCI. This group of churches included my home congregation: First United Methodist Church in Sioux Falls.

My parents are still active members there, so I got to hear all about The MCCI as they were getting started. And, just like it is for us here at McCabe, Sioux Falls First Church got started on The MCCI with various “Breakthrough Prayer” initiatives.

In fact, the first time I heard about a church doing a “timed” prayer challenge like the one we just kicked-off here at McCabe was when I heard about a similar prayer challenge my home church started around this time two years ago.

I was visiting my parents in Sioux Falls during the Spring of 2014 when, at one point, one evening, my mom's cell phone began ringing. I figured she was getting a call,

but she said, “Oh! I’m supposed to stop and pray for our church now. That’s the daily alarm I set to remind me.”

Fascinated by this concept, I asked her to tell me about it...so my mom informed me that First UMC in Sioux Falls was starting The Missional Church Consultation Initiative process – The MCCI – and that this special, daily prayer time was part of that.

I thought this concept was interesting. I thought it was extremely faithful and inspiring. Plus, I thought about how powerful it was to imagine hundreds of people from my home church praying, at the same time, every day, for God’s Spirit to move among them in new ways. //

When my home church initiated their timed, breakthrough prayer challenge, it was soon after I knew I was going to be moving from Wahpeton to Bismarck to become the Senior Pastor here at McCabe and I remember thinking, “That’s an idea we should consider once I’m in Bismarck!”

As it happened, that spring and summer of 2014, I was with my mother on multiple occasions to hear that phone alarm of hers go off at the appointed time...so I knew she stopped to pray when the alarm went off.

Well, one evening, after her prayer alarm went off, my mom quietly said to me, “I actually pray for *you* every day when my prayer alarm goes off.”

As a daughter, I found this to be kind...sweet. McCabe is my mother’s home church, so, that Spring of 2014, I knew she was praying things would go well as I moved here to be Senior Pastor. So, again, as a *daughter*, I found it to be very sweet that my mom was praying for *me* – not her church – when the daily prayer time arrived.

As a *pastor*, however, I must admit I was a bit horrified! She was supposed to be praying that the Spirit would breakthrough into her *church*...and here she was praying for *me*. But, parents will do what parents will do and I certainly wasn’t about to tell her to stop praying for me every day!

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Well, as many of you know, I came to Bismarck in the summer of 2014 *single*. I’d always hoped I’d find Mr. Right, but, after many fits and starts, and after my heart had gotten broken multiple times, I’d gotten to a point where, while I still hoped I’d find someone, I knew remaining single was better than ending up with the *wrong* person.

That said, I was thrilled when, about five months after arriving in Bismarck, I found myself on a first date with a delightful man.

Our first date developed into a second date...and a third date...etc, etc.

We fell in love and exactly 10 months after our first date, that delightful man proposed to me and, three-and-a-half months after *that*, we got married. It's been a bit fairy tale-like...and sometimes I still can't believe how quickly, and how beautifully, that part of my life changed. It's been a dream come true and, literally, an answered prayer.

See, at some point during our engagement, my mom got even more honest about what she prayed for when her breakthrough prayer alarm went off every day: she prayed that I'd meet Mr. Right in Bismarck.

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Now. That my mother prayed *every day* for months that I'd meet Mr. Right once I moved to Bismarck was not a magic wand she waved to make my marriage happen. Prayer is *not* magic and prayers do not always get answered in the way we hope they will. Most of us know that.

But I *will* claim my marriage as an answered prayer because it *is* an answered prayer. And I believe whole-heartedly that my mom's daily prayers made a difference – in some mysterious way.

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Of course, we *all* need breakthroughs. Each of us has an area of life that needs the Holy Spirit's intervention. So, when you pray our McCabe breakthrough prayer at either 6:10am or 6:10pm, feel free to add some specific prayers for yourself or your loved ones. By all means!

And, if, right now, in this season of your life, you can *only* pray for your own kind of Holy Spirit breakthrough, do it. Perhaps your immediate circumstances are overwhelming enough that your 6:10 prayer is just for yourself or a loved one. That's okay.

But I can honestly tell it's already been incredible this past week to see how others have put our 6:10 Prayer Challenge into practice.

We had a Leadership Team meeting on Tuesday at 5:30pm and at 6:10, several phone alarms went off around our meeting table, so we stopped to pray our 6:10 prayer together. We also took about 10 minutes to prayer-walk through the church and I must admit it was my favorite part of the meeting.

Then, Thursday evening, we had a Missions meeting at 5:30. So, when 6:10 hit, we stopped and prayed our 6:10 prayer together.

Then, on Friday evening, before the Band Day Parade began, when a handful of McCabe folks were gathered to sell treats to parade goers near our East entrance, several of us stopped at 6:10 to pray together.

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Praying this prayer at 6:10 every day has already started to open my mind and heart

to the ways God's Spirit is calling us to share the love of Jesus Christ in new ways.

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Friends, powerful things can happen when you ask God's Holy Spirit to do new things in your life. So, I hope you will join me in this season as we pray for breakthrough: in our hearts...within these walls...and to the ends of the earth.

Because when God's Spirit breaks through, challenging us to share the love of Jesus with those who need to experience it, it's like Pentecost happening all over again.