

## McCabe United Methodist Church

### ***“One Breakthrough That Led to Many Breakthroughs”***

Sermon on Luke 24:44-53 & Acts 2:1-18, 41-47 (6/3 & 6/4/17)

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*Almighty God, take our minds and think through them... take our mouths and speak through them... take our hands and work through them... take our hearts and set them on fire; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Last fall, we held a Neighborhood Block Party on our parking lots. The West lot had carnival games, an inflatable bounce house and obstacle course, as well as tables for the party food we gave away. The Southeast lot was filled with classic cars and owners who loved to talk with people about them.

Our Neighborhood Block Party was lots of fun: we had so many McCabe folks volunteer to help in various ways, many of whom made a point to invite people to the Block Party who were not connected to a church here in Bis-Man. We handed out little New Testament Bibles to many who came to the Party... and we even had a handful of Block Party guests begin to connect with McCabe *after* the event.

In fact, one of the families who attended our Block Part last fall quickly became regular worshipers with us... and one of them even joined our staff in January as part of our custodial team. Her name is Sandrine and she and her family are originally from the Central African Republic. (I am grateful to Sandrine for giving me permission to tell this story.)

Sandrine and her family have been in The United States for many years and they moved to Bismarck in the last couple of years. Her husband works in the community, but Sandrine hadn't yet found a job that worked well with their family needs... we at McCabe were delighted to be able to bring her onto our custodial staff part-time!

One of her ongoing challenges, however, is the fact that she had not yet learned to *drive* in The US... and most of us would agree it's a major challenge to live, work, and raise children in Bismarck-Mandan without

the ability to drive yourself around! So, Sandrine and her husband knew she needed to learn to drive here – which would mean *first* passing the written driver's test so she could acquire a learner's permit.

The added challenge there is that *English* is not Sandrine's first language. It's not even her *second* language! (Her primary languages are French and a native African language called “Sango.”) And, while our Department of Motor Vehicles offers the option of taking the written driver's test in languages other than English, she was choosing to take it in English, but was finding it very difficult. So...!

For weeks, on Wednesday evenings, while other McCabe folks ate and chatted during our Wednesday evening meal, with the help of some dedicated individuals, Sandrine worked through practice versions of the written driver's test. Every time I witnessed her sitting down with someone, a book or practice test in front of them, I thought to myself, “This right here is the church fulfilling its mission in a beautiful way!”

Well, about two weeks ago, Sandrine passed the English version of the written driver's test! She, of course, was rightfully proud of herself... but, here at McCabe, staff members and others celebrated *with* her – some of us with hoots of joy, others of us with little happy dances... some with both.

Sandrine passing her written driver's test was a wonderful *breakthrough*. And, when God brings breakthroughs, we celebrate.

About a year ago, we started talking about “Breakthrough Prayer” here at McCabe United Methodist Church. We started talking about it – and we started *doing it* – as part of a church vitality process called “The Missional Church Consultation Initiative”... or, more simply, “The MCCI”. Many United Methodist churches in the Dakotas are participating in The MCCI and step one of the process is to build a Breakthrough Prayer movement.

Now, in general, people of Christian faith believe prayer makes a difference. We pray when we are worried, we pray when our health – or someone else's health – is fragile, we pray when we hope something will happen (or will *not* happen). We pray in all kinds of circumstances.

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Personally, it might look like asking the Spirit to breakthrough to help you forgive someone who hasn't yet offered an apology or repented of hurtful behavior toward you.

Personally – and in the church – breakthrough prayer might look like asking the Spirit to open your heart to, say, sit in a different spot in the room to help make space for new people ... or, breakthrough prayer might look like asking the Spirit to help you be willing to park on the street or in the Capitol loop when you come to worship, if you're able – doing so helps newcomers or those with particular needs to find a spot closer to the building.

Breakthrough Prayer might also look like asking the Holy Spirit to make a way in your budget to offer more financial gifts to support what God's doing for the kingdom through McCabe. It might also look like asking the Spirit to give you courage to invite to church that friend or family member who you *know* is in need of a relationship with our living, loving God.

This type of prayer is called “breakthrough” prayer because it's asking God to *break through* a barrier in our heart, mind, or church – a barrier that's preventing us from being as welcoming and as faithful as God is calling us to be.

And every breakthrough in the church today is a contemporary ripple from the *first* Holy Spirit breakthrough in the church – the grandparent of all breakthroughs: The Holy Spirit's breakthrough on Pentecost... the incredible breakthrough story we heard about from our reading in Acts chapter two.

This weekend marks our annual celebration of Pentecost.

The word “Pentecost” comes from a Greek word that means “the 50<sup>th</sup> day.” For us Christians, Pentecost falls, every year, the 50<sup>th</sup> day of, or *after*, Easter. Yet, while we Christians recognize Pentecost as the 50<sup>th</sup> day after *Easter*, the festival 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 50<sup>th</sup> 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” – all of Jesus' 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.

According to Acts chapter two, 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 about it *in their own languages*.

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 geographical 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.

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.

So... the message of Pentecost – the message of this original Holy Spirit breakthrough in the church – is that 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 *you*. The message of God's love in Jesus is for *everyone*.

As I thought about the story of Pentecost – this original Holy Spirit breakthrough in the Church – I couldn't help but think about the story I shared a bit ago: the story of how God brought Sandrine and her family to us through our Neighborhood Block Party last fall... and how, with the assistance of some dedicated McCabe folks, Sandrine was able to pass her written driver's test – in *English*, a language that is not her primary language.

It's such a wonderful story of God's Spirit breaking through language barriers and bringing people of different cultures together for a wonderful, common purpose. (And, by the way, if any of you would like to learn French or Sango, I'm confident Sandrine would help teach you!)

Sandrine's story is not remotely the only breakthrough story that's happened through McCabe since we began our breakthrough prayer efforts a year ago! But, with Pentecost in mind, I couldn't help but think about her story. With Pentecost in mind, however, let me offer some examples of *other* Holy Spirit breakthroughs that have happened through McCabe this past year:

We welcomed Pastor Mark as our first-ever Discipleship Pastor, appointed to us with the primary and specific goal of helping with outreach and spiritual growth.

Many of the other breakthroughs I'm going to mention are directly connected to the ministry Pastor Mark has helped to begin or grow. But he would be the first to tell you that everything he has helped to begin or grow has been the result of God's initiating that work and *your* willingness to partner in that work.

Another breakthrough this past year – and going a bit further back – is major growth in McCabe's prayer chain. What started as just a couple dozen folks in one of our weekly small groups is now an email prayer chain of 50-plus people who commit to praying for any prayer request that arrives in their inbox... and those prayer requests arrive on a near-daily basis.

Another breakthrough is the fact that, last summer, we ordered and gave away approximately 250 forty-day prayer challenge devotionals.

This prayer challenge helped cover in prayer our fall ministry kick-off.

Another breakthrough is that, in the last year, here at McCabe, we have baptized *two* adults. That might not sound like very many, but it's two more adults than we've baptized in recent years – and adult baptisms in our church tradition are somewhat rare. Adult baptisms are signs that God is speaking and working in powerful ways not just with our children, but with adults who had not yet been baptized.

Another breakthrough is that, last fall, the number of Shoebox Christmas gifts we gathered to give away through the Spirit Lake Ministry Center was a higher number than ever before! *And*, our Christmas Eve offering was the highest of the three years we've been giving away our Christmas Eve offering.

Breakthroughs abound! But there are more!

Our McCabe Visitation Team that connects with nursing home residents and persons who are homebound has grown in the last few months, with two new members who are excited to put their caring gifts to work through the Visitation Team.

We're also discerning whether God is calling us to start a ministry called "Celebrate Recovery"... a ministry that seeks to help folks grow beyond their hurts, hang-ups, and unhealthy habits. (Sounds like something each of us could benefit from, don't you think?) There has already been significant interest in this ministry, so I'm 100% naming that as a Holy Spirit breakthrough!

Also... the discernment for and commitment to starting our Awana ministry this September is perhaps one of the most obvious Holy Spirit breakthroughs here at McCabe in the last year. Through this Awana ministry, we hope God will connect us with hundreds of children and families in our church and in our neighborhood.

The breakthrough of this Awana ministry start is that it will require *dozens and dozens* of volunteers – including leaders willing to be “in charge” of it. After intentional breakthrough prayer for Awana, dozens and dozens of volunteers *have* committed to helping, *and* not one but *two* ministry leaders emerged who are already proving they are exactly the people God was calling to lead Awana at McCabe.

Another breakthrough is that, just in the last couple of weeks, we had two separate individuals tell us they'd be willing to finance the remainder of our bus fundraising drive: when we find the right bus, these folks are willing to pay whatever we haven't already raised! (Now, don't let that mean you shouldn't contribute to our bus fundraiser if God has been nudging you to give toward it! We're still looking for the right bus!)

Plus, some of you may have noted in recent bulletins that Pastor Mark and I have been soliciting testimonies from you all for the sermon series we're

starting for the summer. We wanted to find 12 of you willing to share stories of times when God has been present with you in a particularly powerful way.

To be honest, I was just a little nervous we might not have 12 people willing to share such stories – I knew we had at least that many who *had* such stories... but *sharing* them is another matter entirely! However, breakthrough of breakthroughs, we've had close to 20 people tell us they're willing to share such stories with you all during this summer series! In our relatively shy, North Dakota culture, that is *incredible*.

Friends, the good news of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit broke-through 2,000 years ago to form the church: the church, with its message that the good news of Jesus' love is good news for *everyone*. *And* the good news of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit continues to breakthrough today.

Thanks be to God.

And now, as those gathered to celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, let us turn our hearts toward the gift of Holy Communion... the holy meal that blesses us, and nourishes us to be part of the breakthroughs God is bringing about in this place.