

## **McCabe United Methodist Church**

The Book of Acts: A Spirit-Fueled Adventure!

### **“Remembering Who and Whose We Are”**

Sermon on selected verses from Acts 21-22 (8/13 & 8/14/16)

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*Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to your ears, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be ever tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.*

“Just when you think you've seen it all ... I can scream it now: it's a tie! It's a tie for the gold! Wow, look at this! Unbelievable! Oleksiak, Simone Manuel! And for so many reasons, certainly personal, this gold means so much, but it means so much more for our sport. I can't begin to tell you what this means for the sport of swimming in The United States!”

This past week, my favorite story from the Olympics was the story of how USA's Simone Manuel tied for the gold medal in the women's 100-meter freestyle swim with Canada's Penny Oleksiak. I had seen many Facebook friends post about this particular race and I finally watched it online [this / Saturday] morning.

Then, after watching it once – tears welling and my throat catching with emotion – I watched it again...and again...and again.

Neither Simone Manuel nor Penny Oleksiak were in the lead until the final stretch of the race. It was incredible to watch as they both put on a burst of speed within the last meters of the event, to not only tie for the gold medal, but to also set a new Olympic record.

I watched the video of the event over and over again, mostly to watch as these two women came up from behind to win the race...but I also watched the video on repeat because I loved listening to the commentators' obvious excitement over what happened:

*“It's a tie for the gold! ... Unbelievable! Oleksiak, Simone Manuel! And for so many reasons ... I can't begin to tell you what this means for the sport of swimming in The United States!”*

The commentator certainly did not want to diminish the monumental, *personal* meaning this win held for Simone Manuel.

However, with these words, the commentator also wanted to be clear the story of this particular win was much bigger than Ms. Manuel herself – because this particular win made her the first African-American woman to win a gold medal in swimming at the Olympics.

See, the story of swimming in The United States is not an innocent story. Especially in days of legalized segregation, swimming pools were not places where white people and black people co-mingled.

Just like there were “whites only” and “blacks only” drinking fountains, there were “whites only” and “blacks only” swimming pools. Except there were *far* fewer “blacks only” pools.

When the era of Civil Rights came, and segregation was no longer legal in public spaces, that meant – in theory – all public pools would be desegregated...that whites and blacks would swim together in joy and peace. But that's not what happened in many places.

Instead of that happy integration, many communities chose to close their public swimming pools. Or, in communities where the public pools remained open, over time, white people tended to look elsewhere for their aquatic entertainment: opening private, neighborhood pools or joining private clubs where racial segregation was a legal option.

As you can imagine, in order to learn how to swim, you have to have access to safe swimming water...preferably a pool. And, for decades, if you were black in The

United States, you likely did not have convenient access to a pool. That fact has contributed to the reality that, statistically, twice as many white people as black people know how to swim.

Thankfully, this statistic is changing for the better. But our country's history of racial segregation created a system where fewer black people than white people have become competitive swimmers.<sup>1</sup>

For that reason, it is worth celebrating the fact that, when Simone Manuel tied for the gold in this week's 100-meter freestyle swim at the Olympics, she became the first African-American woman to win a gold medal in swimming.

Again, I just absolutely *love* what the commentator said: "It's a tie for the gold! ... Unbelievable! Oleksiak, Simone Manuel! And for so many reasons ... I can't begin to tell you what this means for the sport of swimming in The United States!"

It was a historic, personal win for Simone Manuel – and that is worth every ounce of the gold medal she earned. But it was a historic win, period, for The United States because, in it, another piece of our racist past went up in glorious, golden, Olympic flames.

It is Simone Manuel's story, for sure. But the story is much, *much* bigger than Ms. Manuel. Thank God for her and thank God for this triumphant step forward in our own, national story.

So often our stories are, actually, bigger than we are individually. So often our stories are not just about us, but are about something more grand, more epic. Most of us are not going to become Olympic athletes...but our stories *can* be just as grand – even if they are grand in a different, less dramatic way.

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<sup>1</sup> This section informed primarily by the following articles: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37057236> & <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/04/black-children-swimming-drownings-segregation>.

About a week ago my husband gave me really lovely gift: a large, wooden wall hanging with the words of Esther 4, verse 14, painted onto it...“Perhaps this is the moment for which you were created.”

*“Perhaps this is the moment for which you were created.”*

Sometimes it can feel like we are pretty small...like the story our life is telling is not a very big story – no very epic, not very grand. But, thanks be to God, every once in a while, something happens and we realize our stories *are* bigger than we first thought: we affect another person or we get to play a part in something amazing.

And, in those moments, we remember *who* and whose we are: we remember we are beloved children who belong to God. In those moments when our stories are bigger than ourselves, we also remember the truth that applies to us applies to everyone else as well: that they, too, are beloved children who belong to God.

In many ways, this is the simple truth of Jesus' message. And, likewise, in many ways, this is the simple truth of the book of Acts.

A truth we see reflections of in chapters 21 and 22 – the chapters we hear snippets from a few minutes ago.

Paul and his closest ministry partners were Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. After reaching a bit of a dead end sharing the message of Jesus with other Jews in Jerusalem, Paul and Co. left their home turf to share the message of Jesus with Gentiles – with non-Jews.

And it's extremely important to understand that, to faithful Jews 2,000 years ago, Gentiles were quite literally understood to be *unclean* – to be unfit for connection with Jews.

Gentiles ate food and engaged in particular activities that were deemed “unclean” according to Jewish religious laws. And so, by extension, Gentiles did not simply engage in “unclean” behaviors, they were, themselves, *unclean*.

The segregation was clear, and it had divine mandate: according to their religious laws, Jews were *not* to co-mingle with Gentiles. Yet, despite this divine mandate to avoid Gentiles, Paul – a faithful Jew who believed in Jesus as Messiah and Lord – intentionally sought to share the message of Christ *with* Gentiles.

God had given Paul a vision that the heavenly kingdom was bigger, more full, more inclusive than he could ever have imagined it – so big, that God's kingdom was to include even Gentiles.

So, Paul and his ministry partners spent *years* traveling throughout Asia Minor, sharing the message of Jesus with Gentiles. Which, of course, meant that Jewish believers in Jesus would absolutely co-mingle with *Gentile* believers in Jesus. And that was not received well by many Jewish people at home in Jerusalem.

At the beginning of chapter 21, Paul and his friends left Ephesus to head to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival.

While they were traveling, they sensed the Holy Spirit warning them not to go to Jerusalem...but Paul was convinced they should continue. Even when they received a specific vision that Paul would find himself in danger, Paul responded that he was willing not only to be put in jail for the sake of Christ, but that he was willing to *die* in Jesus' name, for the sake of Jesus' message.

At that point, Paul's ministry partners stopped trying to convince him not to go to Jerusalem. Instead, they prayed to God that they'd be willing to do whatever God wanted them to do...and they continued on to Jerusalem.

They began their time in Jerusalem by staying with other Jews who believed in Jesus, including Jesus' own brother, James. While they were with James, Paul

explained his call to preach to Gentiles. This explanation was met with general acceptance by James and others, but, in the wider community of Jerusalem, Paul's mission to the Gentiles was cause for serious concern.

After Paul and four other men had participated in the Temple ceremony they'd gone to Jerusalem to participate in, Paul was arrested and put on trial before an angry crowd.

The Roman official in charge of the arrest and trial attempted to find out from the crowd who Paul was and what, exactly, he had done... but, as is so often the case with angry mobs, even the crowd didn't communicate one, clear message to the Roman official.

Eventually, the crowd had worked itself into such a frenzy that they began calling for Paul's execution. The crowd was so angry about the idea of including Gentiles in God's kingdom they actually called for Paul's death. Can you imagine that much hatred toward other human beings?

At that point in the story, it is abundantly clear that *this* story is quite similar to the story of Jesus himself standing trial before an angry mob. However, unlike Jesus who stayed relatively quiet during *his* trial, Paul spoke up...and at some length.

In his speech to the crowd, Paul explained who he was: where he had grown-up, that he was a Jewish scholar, and that he had, for a time, harshly persecuted Jews who put their faith in Jesus Christ.

But then Paul told the story of his conversion: how he'd been on his way to persecute the Christians in Damascus when he was blinded by a heavenly light and Jesus spoke from heaven, asking Paul why he was being so cruel.

After that experience, Paul changed his ways and, instead of further harming those who believed in Jesus, he became a believer himself.

More than that, he became a leader among those who believed in Jesus. And, of course, eventually, Paul traveled away from his home territory, on a mission to extend the message of Jesus not only to other Jews, but to Gentiles as well.

The apostle Paul became clear that God's kingdom was not only for the Jewish people, but for Gentiles as well. He was clear that the heavenly kingdom was not only for *one* group of people, but for *all* people.

Here at McCabe, we're currently in the midst of a 40-day prayer challenge, using Mark Batterson's devotional book entitled *Draw the Circle*. The devotion for day 5 included this quote: "We have a natural tendency to remember what we should forget and forget what we should remember."<sup>2</sup>

*"We have a natural tendency to remember what we should forget and forget what we should remember."*

Maybe Paul told his conversion story to the angry crowd partly because it was a way of explaining himself to them. But maybe it was also a way of reminding himself *who* and whose he was.

We tell our faith stories to others for multiple reasons.

One reason is that it's important for others to hear those stories. The world needs to know our God is a God who can reach in to change our hearts and lives where change is needed.

The world needs to know the very personal, very real ways in which God is at work in peoples' lives. So we tell our God stories. But we also tell our God stories because telling them reminds *us* that God is clearly, obviously at work within our *own* lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Batterson, Mark. *Draw the Circle*. 37.

Because even the most faithful among us need, sometimes, to be reminded who and whose we are. So we tell our own stories of God's action in our lives simply to remember. Because what God did in the past, God *will do* again.

*“We have a natural tendency to remember what we should forget and forget what we should remember.”*

We need desperately to remember who and whose we are: that we are beloved children who belong to God. Beyond that, we need to remember this holy truth applies to everyone else, too.

We have titled this summer series on the book of Acts a “Spirit-Fueled Adventure” ...because that's what the book of Acts is: an adventure story filled and *fueled* by the Holy Spirit. More specifically, the book of Acts is an adventure story filled with *people* who are fueled by the Holy Spirit:

open to the Spirit's leadership, fueled by the Spirit's fire, and pushed by the Spirit to bring the message of Jesus Christ to *everyone*. And the stories of the faithful, Spirit-fueled people in the book of Acts? They can be our stories, too.

We, too, can allow God's Holy Spirit to take the lead in our lives. We, too, can be fueled by the Spirit's fire. We, too, can be pushed by the Spirit to bring the message of Jesus Christ to everyone.

When we live this way – open and obedient to the Holy Spirit – we will live as those whose stories are bigger than we are. Kind of like how Simone Manuel's Olympic gold wasn't *just* an epic, personal win for her, but was part of a grand and beautiful story about including all people at the table – or, in this case, at the *pool*.

Just as the apostle Paul's conversion story wasn't simply about him, our own faith stories are not just about us: rather, our faith stories are part of a grander, more epic story God has been telling since the dawn of creation.

When we allow the Holy Spirit to take the lead – to guide our actions, to shine through us in all we do – when we allow the Holy Spirit to take the lead, our stories are not, first and foremost, about *us*...they are about *God*. They are about what God is doing for others and for the world *through* us.

This day and always, may we remember *who* and whose we are ... and may we let our great and glorious God shine through us, so all we meet will come to know *who* and whose they are.

Beloveds, we are children of God. Thanks be. Let us pray:

*Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into our hearts and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.*