

# McCabe United Methodist Church

The Book of Acts: A Spirit-Fueled Adventure!

## ***“When You Start to Pray...”***

**Sermon on selected verses from Acts 25-26 (8/20 & 8/21/16)**

**Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr**

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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.*

“It was the first century before Christ and a devastating drought threatened to destroy a generation of the Jewish people. The last of the Jewish prophets had died off nearly four centuries before. Miracles were such a distant memory they seemed like a *false* memory...and it seemed as though God was nowhere to be heard.

“But there was one man, an eccentric sage who lived outside the walls of Jerusalem, who dared to pray anyway. This man's name was Honi – and even if the people could no longer hear God, he believed *God* could still hear them.

“When rain is plentiful, it’s an afterthought. During a drought, “rain is the only thought. And Honi was their only hope. He was already famous for his ability to pray for rain, but it was on this day—*the* day—that Honi would earn his moniker, 'The Circle Maker.'

“With a six-foot staff in his hand, Honi began to turn like a math compass. His circular movement was rhythmical and methodical. Ninety degrees. One hundred and eighty degrees. Two hundred and seventy degrees. Three hundred and sixty degrees. He never looked up as the crowd looked on.

“After what seemed like hours, but what had only been seconds, Honi stood inside the circle he had drawn. Then he dropped to his knees and raised his hands to heaven. With the authority of the prophet Elijah who called down fire from heaven, Honi called down rain: 'Lord of the Universe, I swear before your great name that I will not move from this circle until you have shown mercy upon your children.'

“The words sent a shudder down the spine of all who were within earshot that day. It wasn’t just the volume of his voice: it was the authority of his tone. Not a hint of doubt. “This prayer didn’t originate in the vocal chords: like water from an artesian well, the words flowed from the depth of his soul. His prayer was resolute, yet humble; confident, yet meek. Then it happened.

“As his prayer ascended to the heavens, raindrops descended to the earth. An audible gasp swept across the thousands of congregants who had encircled Honi. Every head turned heavenward as the first raindrops parachuted from the sky, but Honi’s head remained bowed.

“The people rejoiced over each drop, but Honi wasn’t satisfied with a sprinkle. Still kneeling within the circle, Honi lifted his voice over the sounds of celebration. ‘Not for such rain have I prayed, but for rain that will fill cisterns, pits, and caverns.’

“The sprinkle turned into such a torrential downpour that witnesses said no raindrop was smaller than an egg in size. It rained so heavily and so steadily that the people fled to the Temple Mount to escape the flash floods. Honi stayed and prayed inside his circle. Once more he refined his bold request.

“‘Not for such rain have I prayed,’ Honi called, ‘but for rain of Your favor, O God – for rain of blessing, and graciousness.’ Then, like a well-proportioned sun shower on a hot and humid August afternoon, it began to rain calmly, peacefully.

“Each raindrop was a tangible token of God’s grace. And they didn’t just soak the skin; they soaked the spirit with faith. It would be forever remembered as *the* day. The day thunderclaps applauded the Almighty. The day puddle jumping became an act of praise. The day the legend of the circle maker was born.

“It had been difficult to believe the day *before* the day. The day *after* the day, it was impossible not to believe. Honi was celebrated like a hometown hero by the people whose lives he had saved.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Slightly modified from Mark Batterson's retelling of this story in “Sermon Outline Session 1” at <http://thecirclemaker.com/free>.

When you start to pray, incredible things happen...

That story I just told was Mark Batterson's retelling of the story of Honi the Circle-Maker, which is part of Jewish history and legend. *When you start to pray, incredible things happen.*

Right now, at McCabe, we are about halfway through a 40-day prayer challenge using Mark Batterson's daily devotional book *Draw the Circle*. On day 11 of this book, Batterson writes about how prayer helps us to become "first-class noticers."

He says, "Prayer is the difference between seeing with our physical eyes and seeing with our spiritual eyes. Prayer gives us a God's-eye view. It heightens our awareness and gives us a sixth sense that enables us to perceive spiritual realities that are beyond our five senses."<sup>2</sup>

When we start to pray about something, we begin to notice opportunities in our midst...we begin to notice how God is working to answer our prayers. When we start to pray, our spiritual senses awaken in new and powerful ways. *When we start to pray, incredible things happen.*

This summer at McCabe, we've been working our way through the book of Acts as part of a sermon and worship series. We've called this Acts series a "Spirit-Fueled Adventure" because that's just exactly what the book of Acts is: a book of Scripture filled and *fueled* with stories of God's Spirit breaking-through in new a powerful ways.

The book of Acts is also filled with stories of *people* who were fueled by the Spirit – apostles like Paul and others in the early church who prayed that God's Spirit would make them brave enough to share the message of Jesus Christ with all they would meet...even if sharing that message put them in harm's way, or caused them to be at the mercy of religious and civil authorities.

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2 Batterson, Mark. *Draw the Circle*. 67.

Where that particular prayer is concerned, we've just heard a story from Acts chapters 25 and 26 about the apostle Paul being on trial for sharing the message of Jesus. Paul was a faithful Jew who had previously persecuted those who put their faith in Jesus Christ...but then, one day, he was literally stopped in his tracks by God and challenged to change his mind and heart. So he did!

That day, Paul was converted to faith in Jesus Christ and, from then on, he made it his life's mission to share the love and grace of Jesus with all he met...even to the point of sharing it with people who were deemed “unclean” by Jewish religious law.

This fact got him in trouble, multiple times, with Jewish religious authorities... and those religious authorities often sought the help of civil law enforcement to sort of put Paul in his place. In fact, chapter 25 marks the end of two years of imprisonment for Paul.

We have no strong details about what Paul did during those two years of confinement... not doubt he did a lot of praying. Praying for strength, praying for bravery, praying for God's Spirit to bless him with assurance no matter what would come next. And he knew another trial was coming.

If you were here last week, hearing today's reading may have felt a bit familiar... because, as far as the readings in our series go, Paul has now been on trial, defending himself and his ministry, for two weeks in a row! So if today's reading from Acts 25 and 26 seemed oddly similar to last week's reading from Acts 21 and 22, that's why. Paul was on trial in both readings... and, in fact, just like last week's reading, this week's reading also included Paul telling the story of his conversion *in the midst of his trial*.

When we're in the midst of any kind of trial – literal or figurative – it's important to remember we are beloved children of God who are called by God to serve holy purposes in this world. I have a sneaking suspicion that's part of the reason Paul chose to tell the story of his conversion when *he* was literally on trial.

The story of Paul's conversion – the story of how God stopped him in his tracks, changing his mind and heart forever – that story is the story of why Paul did everything he did from that day forward.

It was the story of how God reminded Paul he was a beloved child, challenged to live a very holy purpose in this world – the purpose of telling the world about the grace and love of Jesus Christ...grace and love that is offered to everyone.

It is no exaggeration to say that you and I are here, in this church, worshiping the God we know in Jesus Christ, because some 2,000 years ago the apostle Paul was converted. Every time we choose to tell others – in word or deed – of Christ's love, we are channeling the apostle Paul.

Though Paul comes across in Scripture as this larger-than-life, never-afraid-of-anything kind of biblical superhero, surely he prayed to God for bravery... just like every other early Christian prayed.

And when you start to pray, incredible things happen. When Paul prayed, the church expanded. And when we share the message of Jesus Christ today – in word and deed – God is continuing to answer prayers Paul prayed nearly 2,000 years ago. That's pretty awesome, don't you think?

*When you start to pray, incredible things happen.*

Some of you may be aware that a handful of our McCabe choir members went to the Spirit Lake Ministry Center this past week; they were there on a work mission trip they've been planning for nearly a year.

The Spirit Lake Ministry Center is a United Methodist outreach and mission outpost on the Spirit Lake Reservation and, over the last couple of years especially, McCabe has had a deepening relationship with the Ministry Center.

Through the generous donations of McCabe members – and, of course, through *prayer* – we've given the Spirit Lake Ministry Center nearly \$8,000 in the last year-and-a-half. This money went to purchase new convection

ovens *and* an eight-flavor beverage and ice machine for their kitchen and dining hall...important additions for their growing worship and meal ministries with the people of Spirit Lake.

We've invited their directors – Pastor Mike and Libby Flowers – to preach and be with us during worship on a couple of occasions. And, last year, we also gave them more shoeboxes than we've ever given before for Shoebox Christmas. All of that helped lead to our choir deciding about a year ago that this summer was a good time for them to do a mission trip at the Spirit Lake Ministry Center.

While they were there this past week, they removed old siding on the home of an elder in the tribe...they also scraped and repainted one of the larger guest cabins on the Ministry Center property – one of the places where mission teams stay when they are there to do work.

On Thursday, Pastor Mark and I drove up to Spirit Lake and spent about six hours working alongside our choir members, adding our voices to a hymn sing, eating a couple of meals, and chatting with some local folks who joined us for dinner and the hymn sing. It was a *great* day!

And, when we arrived, we were blessedly surprised to learn that, thanks to all we've done these last couple of years, they were naming one of the cabins after McCabe! It was, in fact, the cabin we scraped and helped to repaint on Thursday. God certainly seems to be calling McCabe to keep deepening our relationship with the Spirit Lake Ministry Center, so I would invite you to join me in praying about that.

I've been praying about it for a while, as I know many others at McCabe have as well...and, of course, when you start to pray, incredible things happen.

Since early May, we've been encouraging folks to pray a particular prayer at 6:10am or 6:10pm every day. In that prayer, we ask the Holy Spirit to breakthrough – to help us share God's love in bold, new ways “with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond.”

And, of course, all summer, we've been encouraging our McCabe folks to do prayer walks throughout our community: to pray for the people and the places they see as they walk. If you look at the prayer walk map in the Great Hall gathering space, you can see how our community and our immediate neighborhood has been covered in prayer this summer. And, again, when you start to pray, incredible things happen.

Well, in addition to our choir members being a “living prayer” through the work they did at the Spirit Lake Ministry Center this past week, we had a fascinating opportunity to be a “living prayer” right here in our neighborhood!

As many of you are likely aware, there was a peaceful protest in this neighborhood on Thursday as part of an ongoing protest against the pipeline that is planned to go through the Standing Rock Reservation.

I'm not going to talk about the pipeline or about the protest, per se. It's not really my job to do that and I trust that we here at McCabe have varying opinions on that subject. But here's what I know: for almost four months now, we've been praying on a daily basis for God's Spirit to breakthrough in our neighborhood... and, for almost three months now, we've been prayer-walking our community – including our neighborhood.

What if all those prayers helped create the right neighborhood environment for a *peaceful* protest this past Thursday? I'm not saying our prayers *made* the protest peaceful – after all, it was planned to be a peaceful protest. But surely all of our prayers didn't hurt.

I mean, think about it: we have literally bathed ourselves and our neighborhood in prayer these past four months. How can that *not* have made a difference on Thursday?

We've all seen images from many different kinds of protests around our nation and world that were anything *but* peaceful: images where protesters and law enforcement became violent toward one another. We've all seen those images. But that's not what happened here on Thursday.

In fact, I watched a video from Thursday of the protesters doing a circle dance out on Boulevard – right north of our building – and, during this dance, the protesters invited law enforcement to join them.

Wouldn't you know it, but partway through the video I watched, I saw two McCabe members dancing alongside one another: one of them a protester, the other an officer. They were dancing and smiling and it made me cry tears of joy – tears of joy like I'd cried when I learned about the new “McCabe” cabin at Spirit Lake Ministry Center.

What if all our prayers from these past four months made a difference on Thursday?

When you start to pray, incredible things do, indeed, happen. Incredible things happened for Honi the Circle-Maker...incredible things happened for the apostle Paul and the early Christians...and incredible things can – and *do* – happen for us today, right here in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond.

Thanks be to God. 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.*