

McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 1 of 2017 Stewardship Series: The House of Grace

“The (Meetin’) House of Grace”

Sermon on Matthew 7:24-27 & Ephesians 2:8-9 (10/07 & 10/08/17)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

As I begin this message, let's first hear a word from McCabe United Methodist Church's history...

“In the 1870’s, Bismarck, Dakota Territory, was a small but growing frontier town with eighteen saloons supporting its rough and tumble lifestyle. By the time Rev. James W. Bull arrived in 1879, the saloon keeper, not ready to hear any words of criticism or correction, had already driven out of town two Methodist evangelists and a Methodist preacher.

“Rev. Bull, though, had better luck, thanks to his cheerful personality, energetic preaching style, and powerful singing of hymns. Preaching on the streets and sometimes standing on a beer barrel in front of a saloon, Rev. Bull gained enough of a following to conduct church meetings on the upper floor of the fire hall, at the same time soliciting donations for the building of a church. Even the men-gathered-in-front-of-the-saloons helped.

“The story goes that in one instance, when Rev. Bull spoke of building a church, one of the gamblers in the gathering said, 'No Methodist meetin’ is done ‘til it takes a collection. Come on now, let’s give’em a lift to start their meetin’ house. Let’s pass the hat.'

“Rev. Bull also solicited donations from neighboring communities [and states], raising about \$4,000, in all. Thus, he was able to purchase lots at Fifth and Thayer ... Rev. James Bull served as pastor from 1879 to 1882, McCabe’s formative years. The church he and his parishioners built was dedicated debt free in 1889.”¹

¹ From the historical document researched and written by Barb Egan in late 2016.

If you were here, worshiping with us last Sunday, you've already heard those words from our history as a congregation. Those words from our early history were carefully researched – and beautifully written – by one of our longtime, faithful members, Barb Egan.

If you were here with us last Sunday, you also experienced a rather interesting worship service because we heard a report from a team of outside church leaders – the Missional Church Consultation Initiative, or “MCCI” team.

This MCCI team had been on-site with us last weekend at McCabe, listening to individuals and groups, hoping to create a report of “prescriptions” we would eventually vote “yes” or “no” on... and those prescriptions would help launch us into a new life cycle of fruitfulness for God's kingdom.

However, for a variety of reasons, the direction the MCCI team had hoped to go with us changed significantly as the weekend progressed. Instead of *prescriptions*, they added a step and offered us a set of four *recommendations* our Leadership Team will be considering this Tuesday at our monthly meeting.

If we work through these four recommendations faithfully and thoroughly, the MCCI team is confident they will be able to come back and we will be fully prepared to receive the kind of *prescriptions report* they'd hoped to present to us last weekend. This change of plan was both disappointing and sobering.

With all that in mind, last Sunday, we were also shaken awake to the fact that, as a congregation, McCabe United Methodist Church has been in decline for *years*. Our worship and membership numbers, as well as the numbers of children and youth in our midst, have been steadily going down for *decades*.

New people have come to be part of our church, for sure, but the numbers of new people have not outweighed those who have left, through death or for other reasons. I'm confident it's no fun for any of you to *hear* that unfortunate information... and, as one of your pastors, it's certainly no fun to *say* it.

Friends, that decades-long decline is the entire reason for the MCCI process and report. (By the way, we have copies of that MCCI recommendations report available if you'd like to grab a copy!)

With the significant change of direction when our MCCI team was here, last weekend was pretty tough and, in the days since, I have felt a decent amount of shame and have had no small amount of self-criticism rolling around in my brain.

But, early this week, I read something by Christian writer Jen Hatmaker that has helped... something that connects well to this *House of Grace* stewardship series we're starting this weekend. In her book entitled *For the Love: Looking for Grace in a World of Impossible Standards*, Jen Hatmaker wrote this:

“Condemnation is a trick of the enemy, not the language of the heavens. Shame is not God's tool, so if we are slaves to [shame], we're way off the beaten path ... If your inner monologue is critical, endlessly degrading, it's time to move back to grace.”²

“Condemnation is a trick of the enemy, not the language of the heavens ... If your inner monologue is critical, endlessly degrading, it's time to move back to grace.”

“Grace,” defined, is “unmerited favor.” Like today's reading from Ephesians chapter 2 says, *grace* is the gift of saving love that we experience through faith in God. We experience God's grace, not because of anything we've done to earn it, but because God's very posture toward us is love. *Faith* allows us to experience that saving love.

Weeks ago, as Pastor Mark and I thought about this stewardship series centering around the concept of God's *grace*, he mentioned the little story Jesus offered in Matthew chapter 7 – the story about building your house on solid rock, rather than on sand.

² Hatmaker, Jen. *For the Love: Finding Grace in a World of Impossible Standards*. 61.

It seems like common sense: homes need firm foundations in order to remain standing for years to come. Some among us likely know the pain and difficulty of discovering that the home you live in *does not* have as firm a foundation as you thought it did.

It takes a lot of hard work to fix a shaky foundation. Far better to start well.

What if we thought about *God's grace* as the firm foundation of our lives? I think about parents who raise their children in such a way that the children know, without a doubt, they will *always be welcomed home with a loving embrace*, even when things fall gloriously apart. (Perhaps especially when things fall gloriously apart...) *That is grace.*

Grace is unmerited favor. *Grace* is undeserved gift. *Grace* is lightness to a heavy spirit. *Grace* is God's eternal attitude toward us... and thankfulness for God's *grace* is why we give back with our time, our talent, and our treasure. In fact, *when* we give our time, talent, and treasure to God through McCabe, we are expressing thanks for the *grace* we experience here.

It makes me think about that piece of our McCabe history... that piece of our history wherein one of our first pastors, Rev. James W. Bull, preached in front of a saloon – from on top of a beer barrel.

Before Rev. Bull came along, the saloon owner had chased out three Methodist leaders because their attitude had been one of condemnation... and the saloon owner was not interested in having words of condemnation preached outside his place of business.

Rev. Bull, however, was different. As Barb wrote in that history piece, Rev. Bull drew in the saloon owner and many, many others with his “cheerful attitude, energetic preaching, and powerful singing of hymns.”

That sounds like *grace* to me. Rev. Bull stepped-up onto a beer barrel to share the message of Jesus' saving love... and the drinkers and gamblers who heard him were so compelled by his message that they even “passed the hat” to invest in McCabe's first church building! Listen again to that piece of our history:

“Rev. Bull gained enough of a following to conduct church meetings on the upper floor of the fire hall, at the same time soliciting donations for the building of a church. Even the men-gathered-in-front-of-the-saloons helped.

“The story goes that in one instance, when Rev. Bull spoke of building a church, one of the gamblers in the gathering said, 'No Methodist meetin' is done 'til it takes a collection. Come on now, let's give' em a lift to start their meetin' house. Let's pass the hat.'”

It is not an exaggeration to say that we are here today, worshipping God in this place, because of the investment of those “drinkers and gamblers” nearly 150 years ago.

Through Rev. Bull's message, they experienced the powerful good news of Jesus' saving love... and they wanted to invest in “the meetin' house” that became McCabe United Methodist Church. A “meetin' house” whose firm foundation is God's grace.

I'm so thankful to those folks nearly 150 years ago who first invested in this *meetin' house of grace*. I'm so excited that, here and now, we have the opportunity to experience God's grace through this “meetin' house”... and I'm so excited that, here and now, we all have the opportunity to further invest in this “meetin' house of grace.”

Thanks be to God for a firm foundation of grace. And thanks be to God for this “meetin' house” where, week after week, we *experience* that grace.