

## McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 2 of 2017 Stewardship Series: The House of Grace

### ***Prevenient Grace: The “Porch” That Draws Us In***

Sermon on Psalm 139:1-18 & Ephesians 2:8-9 (10/14 & 10/15/17)

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In the month of October, we're exploring the many ways God's grace moves in our lives. “Grace,” defined, is “unmerited favor.” *Grace* is not payment due for services rendered... if you have to earn it, it's not grace. Rather, *grace*, is pure *gift*.

The verses we heard from Ephesians chapter 2 are kind of ‘theme verses’ for this *House of Grace* series. Those verses teach us that *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 attitude toward us is love. *Faith* allows us to experience that saving love.

During this *House of Grace* series, we'll be exploring three particular “movements” of God's grace, as understood by one of our Methodist forefathers, John Wesley. Those three movements of God's grace are called “prevenient” grace, “justifying” grace,” and “sanctifying” grace.

Today's message about the first movement of God's grace – *prevenient* grace – will be presented through three acts: specifically, through three *stories*... three *McCabe* stories. The first story is one I've shared the last two weeks – a story 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.”<sup>1</sup>

“Prevenient” grace, is the grace of God that is active and moving in our lives long before we're alive or aware of it. Prevenient grace is the way God works to draw us into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

If you've been with us in worship the past couple of weeks, you are, by now, becoming familiar with that piece of our McCabe history I just read – a piece of our early history that was researched and written by longtime, faithful McCabe member Barb Egan.

We are clearly having fun capitalizing on the image of one of our first pastors sharing the message of Jesus' saving love in front of a saloon, while standing on top of a beer barrel! But, of course, the barrel-standing is not just a stunt to grab your attention... the barrel is a *symbol*.

A couple of weeks ago, in a women's Bible study here at church, one study participant asked if we know whether Rev. Bull's beer-barrel-preaching

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1 From the historical document researched and written by Barb Egan in late 2016.

actually drew people to become part of the newly forming church. When she asked, I wasn't sure what the answer was. But, re-reading that history, it seems the beer-barrel-preaching *did*, in fact draw people to the church. Hear that piece of our history again:

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The first line of that section states that Rev. Bull's barrel-standing-outside-the-saloon antics “gained enough of a following to conduct church meetings on the upper floor of the fire hall.” Who knows if any “drinkers and gamblers” joined in on the church meetings, but those “drinkers and gamblers” certainly knew they were *welcome* to join – *and* one of them even began an impromptu offering, “passing the hat” to help the new church build their first “meetin' house.”

What a powerful witness we have in our early history! Since the very beginning of our life as a congregation, McCabe has been a place where *all kinds of people* have encountered the saving love of Jesus... and they have encountered the saving love of Jesus from an attitude of welcome – dare I say, from an attitude of *grace*.

After all, the saloon owner had kicked-out *three* Methodist leaders before Rev. Bull came along. Those other three had preached from an attitude of condemnation and, as you can imagine, the saloon owner didn't want potential customers chased away by words of condemnation preached outside his business!

But, Rev. Bull was different. While surely, he was not encouraging drunkenness and gratuitous gambling, Rev. Bull was “cheerful” and his preaching was “energetic.” That’s the kind of thing that *draws people to you* and to your message.

It’s *grace*. *Prevenient* grace. The grace of God at work before we are even aware of God’s action in our lives.

So, the first story – the first *act* – depicting God’s prevenient grace in our lives is that barrel-standing story from our early McCabe history. The *second* story is also a story from McCabe’s history... but this story is a bit more personal – because it’s about my family... and it’s about Pastor Mark’s family.

In 1945, my mother’s parents, Loren and Hazel Wheeldon, moved to Bismarck. Soon after moving to Bismarck, they began worshiping at McCabe Methodist Church. Soon after moving to Bismarck, they also had their first child – my Aunt Laurel.

In 1948, they had their second child – my mom, Nancy. My mom *loved* growing up in Bismarck. She has such fond memories of McCabe *and* of the home they eventually moved into, about 10 blocks east of here, near Hillside Park. This home has a basement apartment and, for a time, the tenants in that basement apartment were a couple of other long-time McCabe members, Jay and Ahlfield Ehrmantraut.

Ahlfield – or “Al” as most of us know her – moved into my mom’s family’s basement apartment in January of 1959.

Al’s sister’s family had been living in that basement apartment before her, but they moved *out* and she moved *in* about six months ahead of her marriage to Jay. In June of 1959, Jay and Ahlfield got married and Jay joined Al in the basement apartment of my mom’s family’s home.

(In somewhat related news, my mother recalls having Jay and Al Ehrmantraut serve as her youth group or Confirmation leaders at some point in her early youth here at McCabe.)

Well, in 1962, my mom's family moved from Bismarck to Rapid City, South Dakota. And, of course, at some point Jay and Al Ehrmantraut moved out of that basement apartment into a home of their own. In November of 1966, Jay and Al had a son named Mark.

In July of 1970, Nancy Wheeldon married a man from Michigan named Mark Hallenbeck... and, in August of 1978, they had their first child, a daughter named Jenny.

Over the course of the lives of these two children – Mark Ehrmantraut and Jenny Hallenbeck – they each, eventually, discerned that God was calling them to become a pastor in the United Methodist Church. They both went to seminary and served in a couple of churches in the Dakotas.

In 2014, Jenny was appointed to be the Senior Pastor here at McCabe, her *mom's* beloved home church... and, then, in 2016, Mark was appointed to be the Discipleship Pastor here at McCabe, *his own* home church.

A *grandchild* of McCabe and a *child* of McCabe came to be appointed to McCabe as a pastoral team nearly 60 years after their respective families lived in the same Bismarck home.

I have no explanation for how that came to be *other than God's prevenient grace*... God's grace, actively working in our lives long before we're aware of it.

We heard Psalm 139 read a bit ago. In that psalm are these words: “*You are the one who put me together inside my mother's body, and I praise you for the wonderful way you created me.*” Another translation of the Bible says those words this way: “*For it was you who formed my inward parts. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*”

These words of Psalm 139 are the very definition of *prevenient grace*. God knitting us together in our mother's womb. God, present and actively engaged in creating us, long before we are aware of God or are aware of God's desire to be in relationship with us.

So. Prevenient grace story number one was the story of our beer-barrel-standing pastor, Rev. James Bull. Prevenient grace story number two was the story of God's mysterious work bringing a child and grandchild of McCabe to be serving as your current pastoral team. And prevenient grace story number three is something that has just come to a sense of fruition in the last couple of days. (By the way, I have permission from the necessary parties to tell these stories!)

Some of you likely recall the Neighborhood Block Party we held last year.

We put time, financial resources, and *people* resources into creating a fun event with carnival games and big inflatables for kids on our west parking lot... plus a car show on our southeast parking lot. There was free lunch for anyone who wanted to come and many of our McCabe people were present with open arms and hearts to welcome all who attended.

One of the families that attended that Neighborhood Block Party was a man named Roderick, a woman named Sandrine, and a little boy named Rodney. They had so much fun at that Neighborhood Block Party, they came to worship the next day... they *kept* coming to worship... and, eventually, Sandrine even joined our staff as a part-time custodian.

Sandrine and her family are originally from Africa. And, over the course of this past year, we've learned that she has another son, Yan, who was still living in Africa – in Cameroon.

Sandrine and Yan had been living apart for nearly 7 years and they were both getting very eager to be together again. However, the process for getting Yan to The United States is long and can be challenging to navigate – especially if English is not your first language... and if finances are any kind of struggle.

Well, over the past many months, Sandrine and her family saved up a significant chunk of the money it would cost to get Yan his Passport and plane ticket from Cameroon to The United States. In addition to the money they saved, some McCabe Bible study members and others gave their own money to the cause.

After weeks and weeks of waiting to hear from the ambassador in Cameroon that Yan's Passport application had been approved, about two weeks ago, Yan talked with Sandrine on the phone early one morning – from Africa to Bismarck! – and he told her he'd had a dream that the ambassador would call that day with good news. Lo and behold, he did!

So, they scrambled to get his Passport and, with the help of one of our members, Sandrine got Yan's plane ticket booked. And, late this week, we got word that Sandrine and Yan were reunited, here in the US...

A year ago, our Neighborhood Block Party drew a family to McCabe. That family became involved and, with the fierce support of many McCabe folks, a mother and son are now together again – from across the world – for the first time in seven years.

How else do you explain that but God's grace? God's *prevenient* grace? Grace that draws us and compels us in ways we can't see or explain.

Our United Methodist forefather, John Wesley, illustrated the movements of God's grace by using a *house* as an analogy. And he said that, in this “house of grace,” *prevenient grace* is like the porch that welcomes you, that draws you toward the house.

I picture this “house of grace” being a somewhat sprawling, two-story with a lovely wraparound porch decked-out with comfortable furniture – some couches and chairs... surely a porch swing. Comfortable seating that seems to be just waiting to be sat in.

On this “prevenient grace” porch, maybe someone would bring you a glass of lemonade if the day is warm, or a cup of hot chocolate if there's a chill in the air. Then, maybe that person would sit next to you on the porch swing to hear about your day with all its ups and downs.

Prevenient grace is the welcoming, compelling, “porch-like” grace of God that draws us into relationship *with* God – and with God's people – before we have a clue what's happening.

Prevenient grace is found in a Neighborhood Block Party. Prevenient grace is found in a family home with a basement apartment. And, of course, prevenient grace is found in the words and attitude of a pastor, nearly 150 years ago, standing atop a beer barrel, preaching to the masses about the saving love of Jesus Christ.

In many ways, these barrels themselves, here in our worship space – like Rev. Bull's barrel nearly 150 years ago – are symbols of *grace*. They are symbols of prevenient grace. The grace of God that is actively at work in our lives long before we are aware of it. The grace that draws us into relationship with Jesus.

In the 1870's Rev. Bull stood on a beer barrel outside a saloon in Bismarck, and he *drew people to God* with his message of Jesus' saving love. *That is grace*. Prevenient grace.

And, as a celebration of God's prevenient grace, we have root beer barrel candy available for you to take after worship. Eat them with care: we certainly don't want anyone choking on a symbol of God's grace! Or, instead of eating your root beer barrel, you may choose to place it somewhere that will remind you of the prevenient grace of God that helped *you* to know the saving love of Jesus.

Perhaps seeing that little root beer barrel will encourage you to look for ways to be an instrument of God's grace for others.

After all, the good news is that God's prevenient grace *does* work like the gracious *porch* that draws us and welcomes us. Very often, we experience this grace through the warmth and hospitality of others.

See, friends, the same God who knew us and formed us in our mother's wombs, calls us to *share* that grace with others, so all might step onto the porch and discover the saving love, and the abundant life, that is found within the house of God's grace.

And so, as we seek to live ever more into the abundant life offered to us through the grace of Jesus Christ, let's join together in a prayer of surrender to God – the Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition.

Let us pray...

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.