

***Thrive Stewardship Series: “Strength for Today”***  
**Sermon on Isaiah 40:26-31 & Acts 2:38-47 (10/3 & 10/4/15)**  
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As many of you are aware, I was away from Bismarck last weekend. I got on a plane Saturday afternoon with my boyfriend and one of his best friends and we headed for New York City. Six days later, on *Friday* afternoon, the three of us got off the plane in Bismarck...but, over the course of our time away, the man who had been my *boyfriend* became my fiancé. Needless to say, it was a pretty wonderful little vacation!

Now. While I would almost love to simply spend the next 10-15 minutes telling you everything about our trip, and sharing the story of how Derrick proposed to me, I'm not going to do that. Not really, anyway. There are, actually, more important things for me to share with you right now. But, since I'm guessing many of you are curious about some basic details related to our engagement and wedding, here's what you should know:

First of all, the wedding will happen here in Bismarck at McCabe, but we haven't quite set the date yet!

Derrick proposed to me on September 30, which marked exactly 10 months since our first date. We had gone to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan and, after spending a few hours at the museum, we went for a walk through Central Park.

When we arrived at one of Central Park's gorgeous fountain squares, Derrick pulled the ring out of his jeans pocket, got down on one knee, and asked me to marry him.

It felt like we were the only two people in the park – the only two people in the world, really. But, alas! we were not, in fact, the only two people in the park...and we are certainly not the only two people in the world. In fact, that's actually one of the things I love most about Derrick: he has a clear sense that this life is important – that *our* lives are important – but, at the same time, he knows there's a world of other people out there whose lives are just as important as ours.

While we were off having a grand time in New York with Derrick's friend – going to professional sporting events, Broadway musicals, shopping Times Square, and the two of us getting engaged – the world marched on. And, while I certainly don't want to rain on my own parade, the rosiness of our newly engaged lives stands in stark contrast to the pain and suffering others are experiencing.

In the last week, sudden deaths have occurred...cancer treatments have continued... politicians on all sides keep pointing fingers at one another, blaming each other for all sorts of national ills...a disturbed man terrorized a college campus in Oregon...

and Russia got involved in the ever-complex, increasingly violent conflict in Syria.

In the moments surrounding Derrick's proposal to me, he and I may have *felt* like the only people on the planet – but we know we are not. That said, however, this is perhaps the perfect weekend to acknowledge what it means to find unity and joy in the midst of world divided. Because this weekend marks the celebration of World Communion Sunday – a celebration that is all about unity in the midst of division.

But we'll get back to World Communion in a bit – so hold that thought.

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In June, we here at McCabe began a year-long sermon- and worship-related focus on *generosity*. Somehow, in some way, most every worship service through the end of May will center around a piece of what it means to be *generous*.

We believe in and we worship a God whose very heart and mind are defined by generosity...a God who gives us the gifts of life, love, laughter, challenge, and hope...a God who gave us Jesus Christ to be our Savior and Lord.

We who choose to follow Jesus, and to claim him as our Lord and Savior, we are called to be defined by the same things that defined him...and, as the Son of our living God, choosing to follow Jesus means choosing to be defined by *generosity*.

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Generosity as a concept applies both inside and outside of the church.

Whether or not a person is Christian – or part of any other religion, for that matter – *generosity* is a desirable and attractive character trait. We know what it feels like to be around people who are truly generous: they bless the world with wisdom and joy...they are kind, but, when difficult things need to be said or done, they do them with honesty and warmth.

Generosity is a way of *life* – it's an attitude reflected in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. That said, however, here in the church, when we think and talk about *generosity*, we often only think about how God calls us to be generous with our financial resources.

Well, I assure you this year-long focus on generosity *has* not and *will* not center specifically around financial generosity. By the end of this year-long focus, we will have looked at generosity from all sorts of angles, and as it relates to many aspects of life. But...

But today marks the start of a time when there *will* be a specific focus on financial generosity.

Toward the end of this month, we will be asking you to consider what portion of your finances you will give back to God through McCabe in the coming year. These gifts help support the ministry God calls us to here in our neighborhood, in our state, in our Conference of The United Methodist Church, and throughout the world. This time of year is meant to be both inspiring *and* challenging – for you all and for me as well.

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So. Today does mark the start of our fall stewardship campaign here at McCabe. In keeping with our year-long generosity focus, we probably could call it our “fall financial generosity campaign,” but, for now, we'll stick with “stewardship campaign.”

Each year in the fall, we take time to reflect on God's faithfulness in our lives and, in turn, we are then invited to consider what kind of financial commitment we might make to God through McCabe in the coming budget year.

(Of course, we are invited to reflect on God's faithfulness in our lives every moment of every day throughout the year. But, during our fall stewardship campaign, we make a special point to connect God's faithfulness to our own financial response in the coming year.)

This year at McCabe, our stewardship campaign is called “Thrive: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow.” This theme was actually developed by the Dakotas Conference of The United Methodist Church – the regional United Methodist body of which McCabe is part.

You may have noticed we have a couple of *Thrive* posters hung near our main building entrances, and you'll hear more about this *Thrive* concept over the course of the coming weeks.

The title and subtitle of this campaign are based on the hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” which, incidentally, happens to be one of my absolute favorite hymns! The theme of the hymn is God's providence – God's presence, guidance, and strength for all seasons of life.

The words of the refrain echo this theme: “Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see; all I have needed thy hand hath provided; great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!”

Each verse reflects this theme in its own way, with verses one and two speaking this text: “Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father; there is no shadow of turning with thee; thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not; as thou has been, thou forever wilt be ... Summer and winter and springtime and harvest, sun, moon, and stars in their courses above join with all nature in manifold witness to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.”

Then, the theme for this *Thrive* stewardship campaign comes straight out of verse three: “Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide; strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!”

As we start this *Thrive* stewardship campaign, today we're focusing on how God provides us “strength for today” – and this theme is so present in the words we heard read from Isaiah chapter 40 when the prophet Isaiah said to God's people:

“You say, 'God pays no attention to us! He doesn't care if we are treated unjustly!' But how can you say that? Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The Lord is the eternal God, Creator of the earth. He never gets weary or tired; his wisdom cannot be measured.

“The Lord gives strength to those who are weary. Even young people get tired, then stumble and fall. But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will be strong like eagles soaring upward on wings; they will walk and run without getting tired.”

*“Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The Lord is the eternal God, Creator of the earth. He never gets weary or tired; his wisdom cannot be measured. The Lord gives strength to those who are weary. Even young people get tired, then stumble and fall. But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.”*

Strength when you are weary...strength when life gets messy...strength when you are lost in grief or fear...strength when the circumstances of this world get overwhelming and you don't know where to turn for support...strength when hope seems distant and you don't have the energy to imagine how things could be different.

Strength for *today* – whatever today has brought you.

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Many of us likely know the phrase “there's strength in numbers.” This phrase usually gets employed during circumstances with which you feel too small to deal on your own. If you know you have others supporting you in the midst of such circumstances, you find comfort and, of course, you find *strength*.

Though this pales in comparison with personal and global problems for which a person may need “strength in numbers,” I happen to be engaged to a life-long New York Yankees fan who usually finds himself surrounded by people who *hate* the Yankees. What this means, of course, is that Derrick usually has to defend the Yankees a little bit to fans of other teams...but he can handle it and he proudly wears Yankees fan gear *anywhere* and at any time.

Since he often has to defend his love for the Yankees, it was really fun to watch what happened when we were all in New York this past week: he wore Yankees shirts and hats nearly every day of our trip and he was *constantly* getting stopped by random other Yankees fans to talk shop about recent games and to commiserate about how they had lost three of the four games in their recent series with the Boston Red Sox.

Derrick was with his people when we were in New York and other fans loved joining forces in support of their beloved Yankees. The iconic “N – Y” symbol on a hat or t-shirt was all it ever took to inspire these connections...and I was reminded how important it is to feel like you're not on your own in this world.

Again, a sports fan being surrounded by other fans of their team pales in comparison to other circumstances where “strength in numbers” matters.

But we *all* know strength in numbers matters. And I couldn't help but think about the celebration of World Communion Sunday this weekend as I watched Derrick connect with so many other Yankees fans in New York City.

See, for Christians, Holy Communion is one of our most tangible reminders of both unity *and* strength: because it is literally bread for our journey...food from heaven that nourishes both our bodies and our spirits...and, most importantly, *we celebrate Communion with others*.

In fact, in our United Methodist tradition, we *always* celebrate Communion with others. Because we are not fully Christian if we do not keep in mind our connection to our brothers and sisters in faith. And this weekend's celebration of World Communion Sunday reminds us that, as we receive the bread and cup of Communion, we share it not only with other Christians at McCabe...but that we share it with other Christians around this whole wide world.

As we celebrate Holy Communion on this World Communion Sunday weekend, we are reminded that, as important as our individual lives are, God's love and mercy extends to *all* people, in *all* corners of this planet.

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It is so appropriate for us to begin our *Thrive* stewardship campaign on the celebration of World Communion Sunday...because it is the holy meal of our faith: Communion unifies us...it blesses us...and it *strengthens* us to go into the world together to share the message of Jesus Christ. What good news!

So, as we prepare to celebrate this holy and joyful meal together, I pray each of us will find in it strength for whatever today brings...and I pray it will nourish us to offer love to God's world. May it be so. Amen.