

Thrive Stewardship Series: “Hope for Tomorrow”
Sermon on Isaiah 40:26-31 & 2 Timothy 1:3-7 (10/10 & 10/11/15)
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A while back, I was talking with a couple I got to know in the years before I moved to Bismarck. The husband in this couple grew-up Catholic but, now, is basically an atheist, and the wife is the daughter of a pastor but she actually considers herself more connected to Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. Yet, wherever they live, finding a *church* community is important to them.

Knowing their unique perspectives, I asked what it is about church communities that's so important to them – despite the fact that their actual *beliefs* don't particularly reflect Christian faith. Their answer was simple: they said that, in the places they've lived, church communities are some of the last remaining *intergenerational* communities around. And they want that for themselves and their children. //

It might seem strange to many of us that someone would choose to connect with a church community when they don't profess Christian beliefs about God and Jesus Christ. But the fact remains that folks come to church – and connect with particular faith communities – for all sorts of reasons.

In fact, over the course of my ministry, I've often asked people what draws them to their particular church...and the responses I get typically have very little to do with the *beliefs* that are preached and taught in their congregation. Their responses usually have more to do with the community – the people they've come to know and cherish, the relationships they've built.

Of course, it's possible the faith aspect of church is *assumed* when people share what draws them to their congregation. But maybe not. I have known lots of people through the years who connect with a church community for a multitude of reasons – sometimes faith *is* a primary reason and other times it's just not. And, as a pastor, frankly, I don't care what your motivation is...I'm just thrilled you're here.

Because, whatever your reasons are for being here, simply being here puts you at the feet of Jesus and makes you part of the Body of Christ – part of the living Church here on earth.

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When I was a little girl growing-up in Sioux Falls, I was blessed to be living in the same town and going to the same church as one set of my grandparents. Plus, at church, I had a couple of “adopted” grandmothers who loved to greet me on Sunday mornings.

Alice and Helen were a couple of sisters who had never married; they always sat in the same pew every Sunday –

and their pew was just a little ways from my grandparents' pew.

Each week before the worship service started, I would sit with Helen and Alice for a bit, chatting with them before I went to see Grandma Hazel and Grandpa Loren in their pew. I don't remember much about Alice and Helen, but I *do* remember we were always excited to see each other. In fact, sometime in my early adolescence, Helen gave me a beautiful gold cross necklace as a gift and I wore it frequently.

Unfortunately, I lost that necklace several years later. I searched high and low for it, but never found it. To this day, I still feel a pang of sadness when I think about how I lost that precious gift. It was a symbol to me of the power of the church to build relationships between people of all generations, and who are not already bound by blood.

As I've had the privilege to serve as pastor to many churches throughout North and South Dakota the last 12 years, I've been able to see similar relationships form between people of all ages – and it is such a gift!

Here at McCabe, many of you do have blood ties to one another, or connections through marriage...but so many of you have become acquainted only because of this place – because, in some mysterious way, God called you to become part of the Body of Christ at McCabe United Methodist Church here in Bismarck.

We may have different backgrounds and different ideas about life and politics, but we have *this place* in common...and, in this place, we come together with the common goal of worshiping God and learning together what it means to share the love of Jesus Christ in this world.

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I know we heard the words of 2 Timothy chapter 1, verses 3-7, read just moments ago...but I'm going to read them again right now. They are words from St. Paul to Timothy – a mentor to a mentee – and they are words that remind Timothy his faith is a *gift*...a gift that was given to him by others...a gift that is to be cherished – and that is to be used well in this life.

When I read these words, I recall those who gave *me* the gift of faith – those who have blessed me with their hands and hearts, those whose faith continues to bless me: parents, grandparents, mentors, teachers, pastors, bishops, parishioners. As I read these words, think about those who have blessed *you* with the gift of faith. Think about them – and be thankful.

Again, St. Paul wrote to Timothy: “Night and day I mention you in my prayers.

“I am always grateful for you, as I pray to the God my ancestors and I have served with a clear conscience. I remember how you cried, and I want to see you, because

that will make me truly happy. I also remember the genuine faith of your mother Eunice. Your grandmother Lois had the same sort of faith, and I am sure that you have it as well.

“So I ask you to make full use of the gift that God gave you when I placed my hands on you. Use it well. God’s Spirit doesn’t make cowards out of us. The Spirit gives us power, love, and self-control.”

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In some way, each of us receives faith as a gift from others – whether those others are our parents, teachers, or friends who open our minds and hearts to the message of Jesus. Paul’s words to Timothy are for us, too: “I ask you to make full use of the gift that God gave you ... Use it well. God’s Spirit doesn’t make cowards out of us. The Spirit gives us power, love, and self-control.”

The gift of faith is a gift meant to bless not only ourselves, but to bless the world around us as well. The gift of faith brings us an abundance of “strength for today”...but, of course, it also brings “hope for tomorrow.”

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Last week we began our annual fall stewardship series. Our overall stewardship series theme is “Thrive: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow” and we began last week with a focus on “strength for today.”

Last weekend happened to be World Communion Sunday weekend, so, as we celebrated Holy Communion in each of our four worship services here at McCabe, we were reminded of the strength we receive, not only from the bread and cup of Communion, but also from our brothers and sisters in Christ – here and around the world. That strength helps each of us get through whatever *today* happens to bring.

Thankfully, feeling strength for whatever *today* brings, usually goes hand-in-hand with “hope for tomorrow.” Actually, “strength for today” and “hope for tomorrow” are kind of a “chicken and egg” sort of combination:

I’m not sure which comes first. Does “strength for today” give birth to “hope for tomorrow” or, when we have a sense of “hope for tomorrow,” do we find “strength for today”? I think it’s okay that I don’t know how to answer that...and I don’t think the answer matters.

Like *faith* in general, “strength for today” and “hope for tomorrow” are gifts we receive...gifts for which we are thankful...gifts meant to inspire us to be generous in all sorts of ways.

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In June, we began a year-long sermon- and worship-related focus on *generosity*. Throughout this year, we’ll look at generosity from all sorts of angles, as it relates to

many different facets of life. Last week, as we began our fall stewardship series, we began a time of intentional focus on how God calls us to be generous with our financial resources.

This week, members and friends of McCabe will be receiving in the mail an Estimate of Giving card for our 2016 budget year. The financial gifts you make 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. When we give of our finances, we are giving back to God *through* the church – and that giving is a sign of thanks, a token of gratitude for the many gifts we receive from God...gifts through McCabe and in *all* of life.

When you receive your Estimate of Giving card, I hope you'll spend time in prayer and sincere reflection over what God is calling you to give. On October 24 and 25 – two weekends from this weekend – we will celebrate Consecration Weekend.

That weekend, we will invite you to bring your Estimates of Giving with you to worship. During each worship service, there will be a time of consecration when we will bring our Estimates of Giving cards forward to place them near the altar in dedication and thanksgiving. Again, this will happen not next weekend, but the next. So these next two weeks will be both inspiring and challenging for all of us.

May we be blessed by God's Spirit with openness and courage as we prepare to make financial commitments for the coming year.

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

Thrive is actually the theme for a Conference-level Capital Campaign for congregational development. It's about providing a large funding pool to start new United Methodist churches in the Dakotas and to revitalize existing congregations.

The campaign was officially kicked-off late this summer after representatives from churches all over the Dakotas voted to move forward with it during our Annual Conference session in June.

Thrive is a campaign to raise \$3.2 million dollars toward a larger \$6.7-million dollar plan for congregational development...and each United Methodist church in the Dakotas is being invited to consider making their own financial commitment toward the *Thrive* goal of \$3.2 million dollars.

Our McCabe leadership has already begun considering what we might build into our own general budget in order to contribute to this important Conference campaign. Yes, we have our own ministry and missions to support already...but faithfulness to Jesus Christ always involves blessing others.

If we think only of ourselves – in life and in the church – we fail to use well the gift of faith given to us by countless others...that gift of faith which provides “strength for today” and “hope for tomorrow.”

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If you are curious to learn more about the Conference *Thrive* capital campaign, we will have more details about it in upcoming bulletins. Plus, I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

All that said, I'm so grateful to the Dakotas Conference *Thrive* team because, when they planned the theme of the capital campaign, they developed a companion worship series that works beautifully as a general stewardship series – which is exactly what we're doing here at McCabe right now.

The title and subtitle of this *Thrive* series are based on the gorgeous hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” Each verse of this hymn speaks to God's providence – God's presence, guidance, and strength through all seasons of life.

Like I did last week, I'm going to read the words of this hymn. As I read them, think about God's providence in your life...how God has held you and found ways to bless you through it all. If it helps you focus, you might want to close your eyes as I read. The verses say:

“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 hast 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 ...

“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!”

Then, between each verse, the refrain echoes these words: “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!”

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Most of you have likely noticed the parking lot construction project that's been happening over the last couple of months in the south part of our property.

If you've been around McCabe for a while, you may know that parking lot is a long time coming...and that it's been something of an ongoing struggle for years.

Where we now (almost) have a parking lot, there had been a little house that, over the years, had gotten very run-down and that had become quite a safety concern for the neighborhood.

Years and years ago, leaders at McCabe had approached the owner of the house, asking if they'd be willing to sell it to us if ever they decided to sell it.

(Parking is at quite a premium in this neighborhood and even a dozen extra parking spots from that lot could make a significant difference for us on Sunday mornings and during other busy times.)

For years, the owners hemmed and hawed, struggling to decide whether or not they'd like to sell, period – but, also, whether or not they'd like to sell to *us*. Church members and previous pastors worked hard and well to build a relationship with the seller. And they got close to selling it to us multiple times...but to no avail. Until this past year.

All of a sudden, the seller was ready to sell. To *us*. And, of course, we bit right away. Money had been raised for the purchase a few years ago and church leadership had already approved the purchase...whenever it became an actual possibility. The purchase process wasn't easy, but, ultimately, it went through.

Before the house was torn down, our local fire department used it multiple times for training exercises over the course of several weeks. It felt good to know the house would serve a community purpose before the space became more parking for us.

A lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into the purchase of that property over the last many years. So did a lot of prayer. In fact, our Tuesday morning Bible study group – Sojourners – literally prayed circles around that little property about eight months before we ended up buying it.

The faith and work of so many is now resulting in more parking space: not the most inspiring result...but more parking lot space means more space for more people – for those of us who are already part of McCabe, and for those who have yet walk through our doors...

those who have yet to hear the message of God's love in Jesus Christ...those who have yet to encounter this wonderful community of believers here...those who have yet to realize that here, through this place, we find strength for today and we find hope for tomorrow. // //

In this time of stewardship and generosity, may God's Holy Spirit break open our minds and hearts – that we might use the gift of faith to bring blessing to the world...and may that blessing extend from generation to generation. Amen.