

Thrive Stewardship Series: Consecration
Sermon on Romans 12 (10/24 & 10/25/15)
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My fiancé, Derrick, and I have been engaged for nearly a month now.

Soon after we announced our engagement here at McCabe, someone kindly joked with me about how my sermons will probably be all about love for a while. (And I don't think they specifically meant *God's* love!) I'm trying really hard not to do that...but, on occasion, something about the wedding, or about our pending marriage, *will* emerge in a sermon. And today is one of those occasions.

With this weekend being Consecration Weekend, I can't help but tell you about how *this* Consecration Weekend is different for me than any other Consecration Weekend I've been part of...and this marks the 10th such weekend I've experienced as a pastor. //

It is, indeed, Consecration Weekend. About a week-and-a-half ago, members and friends of McCabe received in the mail Estimate of Giving cards for our 2016 budget year. It's our hope that, since you got those cards, you will have prayerfully discerned what kind of financial giving you can offer to God through McCabe in the coming calendar year.

At the end of this sermon, we'll transition into a time of consecrating those estimates of giving – a time of dedicating our financial commitments, and our very *selves*, to God.

Many churches do something like this every year in the fall...and, nearly every church where I've served as pastor has had a Consecration Weekend. So, like many of you are, I'm used to this. I know how it works. This year was different for me, however, because, for the first time, my decision about financial giving wasn't just between me and God...it was between me, God, and my fiancé.

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Derrick and I are wading deep into the waters of wedding plans and we are getting increasingly more excited for The Big Day. We can't wait to celebrate with our family and friends – but, before that can happen, there is a *lot* to do! A *lot* to do.

We're getting married on January 16, so there's a list of stuff to take care of by then...and with not a whole lot of time to do it all. The “to do” list includes wedding-related details, for sure – but it also includes much more than that.

There are also conversations to be had about life plans – you know, things like bank accounts, insurance, and, of course, financial issues... including a household tithe to God through the church.

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Until rather recently, I'd been single my entire adult life. I've dated here and there, but none of my previous romantic relationships ever got serious enough for me to have conversations about these kinds of things before – at least not with anyone else.

In the past, when I've needed to make decisions about how to spend my money, I consider my income and expenses...and figure things out from there. On my own. *By myself*. Consulting no one else. When I began to sense this relationship with my now-fiancé could actually go somewhere long-term, I started to get nervous.

The whole “planning your life with another person” thing was really scary to me! And, even though I knew Derrick to be a man with a generous spirit, I had no idea how it would go when we talked about household finances. So I kept putting it off. Until, one day, *he* brought it up!

We had had a fun-yet-serious conversation about getting married someday and one of us made an off-hand remark about how exciting it was to think about...but that we hadn't even had conversations about things like money. At least not a conversation that dealt with specifics around income and how we might choose spend *our* money.

We had long before had “money talks” where we learned about each other's spending habits...and we were both comfortable with the other's ideas about money. The part that made *me* nervous was the conversation we would need to have about giving.

For me, giving a tithe – giving 10% of my income back to God through the church – is not optional. It's an absolute, must-do, all the time, no-matter-what kind of thing. Tithing is important for me as a pastoral leader and it's just as important for me as a follower of Jesus Christ. I don't want to be the kind of person who keeps all I have for myself.

Anyway, I was super-nervous to have a conversation with Derrick about how we would need to tithe as a household. Yet, lo and behold, when the conversation presented itself, I didn't even have to bring it up!

We got to talking about household finances and Derrick simply said something like, “Oh – and I assume we'll be tithing.” In that moment, I very well could have had an attack of relief. I was so grateful...I still am.

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Conversations about money are rarely easy. Years ago, I went through finance guru Dave Ramsey's class *Financial Peace University*, and it was amazing to me how so many of the couples in the class were kind of opposites when it came to money: one of them was a spender and the other was more careful.

This wasn't always the case, but often it was.

The spender didn't want the careful one to worry so much, but the careful one felt like they *needed* to worry because the spender never did! As a single person, I just had that kind of fight in my own head. I'd overspend on things and then the careful part of my brain would have a panic attack when I looked at the month's credit card bills.

That occurred month after month, year after year, until, finally, the careful part of me got so sick of the panic attacks that she said, "Enough! We are going to fix this overspending problem and we're going to fix it *now!*"

It just wasn't worth the stress. Dave Ramsey's class helped me start budgeting, sticking *to* the budgets I'd set, and, after years of work, I paid off my last debt about a year-and-a-half ago. So, now I'm in the "saving more and planning for the future" part of my financial plan. And it's not just up to *me* anymore! Which is exciting and scary at the same time.

But, really, those of us who choose to follow Jesus are never on our own when we make decisions about *any* part of life. Just as in a good marital partners seek each other's wisdom in the decisions they make, likewise, as followers of Jesus, we seek God's wisdom and guidance in all areas of our life – including our spending and financial giving.

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As Christians, 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.

The financial gifts and commitments you make to McCabe 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.

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This Consecration Weekend marks the end of this year's fall stewardship series here at McCabe and, for our stewardship series this year, we took a cue from something that's happening here in the Dakotas Conference – the regional United Methodist body of which McCabe is part.

Our stewardship series is called "Thrive" and, as a series theme, it was developed by the Dakotas Conference. It was developed for a particular reason, but it also works beautifully as a general stewardship series.

As you can read in the bulletin insert about *Thrive*, *Thrive* is actually the theme for a Conference-level Capital Campaign for congregational development.

The *Thrive* campaign is about building a large funding pool to start new United Methodist churches in the Dakotas and to revitalize existing congregations...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.

In fact, our McCabe leadership has strongly considered building into our general budget a line item for the *Thrive* campaign. Yes, we have our own McCabe ministry and missions to support already...but, as I've said in recent weeks, faithfulness to Jesus Christ always involves blessing others.

Thriving in this life is about looking beyond ourselves, using our resources to bring “strength for today and hope for tomorrow” to our community and to the world.

And we have so many opportunities to do that in this life: through our financial giving...through the time and energy we spend serving in and through the church in various ways...through things like Shoebox Christmas that allow us to offer gifts to children and youth living in poverty.

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Our surrounding culture so often teaches us to think only *for* and of ourselves. But that's not what we're about here in the Church.

It *cannot* be what we're about...because we worship a God whose very heart is defined by generosity and care for others – a God who gave us Jesus Christ to be Lord and Savior...a God who blesses us each moment of every day with the gift of the Holy Spirit – a holy presence closer to us than even our very breath. Such great, good news should define who we are and how we live in this world.

In fact, that's what today's reading from Romans chapter 12 is all about...and St. Paul makes that clear in the first few verses of this reading when he writes,

“Dear friends, God is good. So I beg you to offer your bodies to him as a living sacrifice, pure and pleasing. That's the most sensible way to serve God. Don't be like the people of this world, but let God change the way you think. Then you will know how to do everything that is good and pleasing to him.”

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St. Paul's letter to the Romans is considered by most New Testament scholars to be Paul's “masterpiece.”¹ Paul wrote this particular letter in the middle to late 50's of the first century. It's important to understand the timing of this writing because, when you think about it, that's only about 25 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

1 N. T. Wright. *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary on Romans. 395.

Keep in mind that Christianity did not start until after Jesus' death and resurrection around the year 30 of the first century. So, when Paul wrote Romans in the mid-50's, Christianity as a religion was still *very new*.

By extension, the Church as the body of Christian believers, was a *very new* community.

It's also important to keep in mind that Christianity began as a movement within Judaism. Jesus himself had been Jewish and so were his first followers – during his lifetime and after his death and resurrection. Christianity began when the first Jewish believers in Jesus started looking beyond their fellow Jews to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with non-Jews...or “Gentiles.”

As such, in the first many decades of Christianity's existence, there were *Jewish* Christians and there were *Gentile* – non-Jewish – Christians. One body of believers in Jesus...but a body divided because the believers came from very different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Imagine the marriage of two people from different religious and cultural backgrounds: the couple themselves finds unity in the love they share, but, in the course of their marriage, they will have to come to terms with how their different backgrounds may cause them to clash at times. And, on occasion, their cultural clashes could challenge the very foundation of their marriage.

It is also not wholly unlike our own United States of America: as a nation, we are *united* in a commitment to democracy and to a belief that all of us humans are created equal. Beyond that, there is much that is different between individuals and groups...and, sometimes, those differences seem to threaten our union as a country.

And, of course, no matter what kind of division is at stake, depending on which side you or I happen to fall, we are *very* skilled at always blaming the other side for our ills – whether those ills are marital, national, or, even, unfortunately, here in the Church.

No matter the relationship, no matter the organization, it is our human tendency to blame others for whatever is – or *seems* – wrong. This tendency to blame others for problems, rather than owning our own part in things, goes all the way back to Creation and the story of Adam and Eve. But that is a matter for a different sermon!

What is important for us today, as we reflect on Romans chapter 12, is to know that Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians during a time when the Roman government was being particularly cruel to the Jews who were living in and around Rome.

It's also important for us to remember that Paul wrote this letter hundreds of years before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. So, really, not only did the Roman government not like *Judaism*, it also didn't particularly like Christianity at the time of Paul's writing.

What all that meant for the *Christians* in Rome was that, within the body of Christian believers, there were Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians who were at odds with how to get along together...even though they shared common faith in Jesus Christ.

Gentile Christians with Roman cultural heritage were perhaps inclined to dislike Jewish Christians because the Roman government disliked Jews...and Jewish Christians were perhaps inclined to dislike Gentile Christians because the former religious life of the Gentile Christians was deemed “unclean” by Jewish religious laws.

Yet, somehow, because these folks all now believed in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, they were mysteriously linked together in this new thing called “the Church,” the Body of Christ on earth. And, in his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul needed to teach them what that meant and how it could look. //

The surrounding Roman culture was teaching that Jews and Gentiles could not and *should* not get along...yet Paul knew the Church had to be different. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians had to learn to prove to themselves and to their surrounding culture that they could be different.

They had to prove they could defy the world around them. And they had to prove this because Jesus Christ himself had defied the world. In his sacrificial death, and by his glorious resurrection, God proved once and for all that, in Jesus, everything *is* different.

That everything *can be* different. That, by the power of Jesus Christ, and with the strength of the Holy Spirit, even the deepest divisions can be healed. That there is *hope* in all things. Somehow.
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Friends, we are so often encouraged by our surrounding culture to be selfish...to think only about what's best for *us* and for our particular family unit. In some circumstances of life, this is necessary – but, as Christians, it should never be the way we operate *generally*.

As Paul wrote at the beginning of Romans chapter 12, we are not meant to be “like the people of this world.” We are to “let God change the way [we] think” And, in all things, we are to offer our very selves “to God as a living sacrifice, pure and pleasing.” That's what it means to be “consecrated.”

To be *consecrated* is to be set apart for God's purposes in this world...it's to offer ourselves as living sacrifices...it's to show the world that we are not living just for ourselves. The gifts and commitments we offer today are signs of that living sacrifice.

So, I invite you now to come forward to offer your gifts, your commitments, and your very *selves* in consecration to God's purposes.

You may come forward by the center aisle. If you have a monetary offering to give, please place it in one of the offering plates near the altar. If you have an Estimate of Giving card, please leave it on the altar rail. If you simply have yourself to offer today, please come forward. All are welcome to pause for a moment in prayer at the altar rail before returning to your seat by the side aisle.

And, if you're here today with others in your household, I'd encourage you to all come up together.

As we offer our gifts, our commitments, and ourselves before God, may we find joy and peace in the offering. The altar is open. Please come.