

Thrive Stewardship Series: “Thrive!”
Sermon on Isaiah 43:15-19 & Ephesians 3:14-21 (10/17 & 10/18/15)
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[Sing:]

“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!
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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Two weeks ago, we began our annual fall stewardship series. If you're someone who has been part of this church – or just about any church – for a while, you know that many churches do a stewardship series each year around this time. And, of course, the stewardship series is often crassly known as “the time of year when we talk about money in church.”

Because money is critically important to how we *do life* in this culture, and because our faithfulness to God and our Christian discipleship is meant to invade every part of life, it would be totally appropriate to talk about money with some relative frequency throughout any given year.

Of course, we don't tend to do that in the church because we actually want people to show up to listen to what we have to say! And we know there are some topics folks can only tolerate focusing on in church on rare occasions: *money* is one of those topics.

Anyway, so we're nearing the end of our fall stewardship series. And the title and theme for this series is “Thrive: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow” – a theme based on the hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” That hymn happens to be one of my very favorites and, as my life has had ups and downs over the last 10-15 years, I've grown to appreciate ever more the message of this hymn.

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness” is all about God's providence – God's presence,

guidance, and strength through all seasons of life. The more life I live, the more I appreciate how God has brought me through stale or rough seasons...into more vibrant, joyful ones.

The assurance of God's presence brings an abundance of strength for whatever today brings...but, knowing God's past action in my life also brings hope for a bright tomorrow when I'm unsure or fearful. In fact, that right there is a running theme throughout the Old Testament of our Bible: recalling God's past actions in order to find hope for the future.

We can hear this clearly in today's reading from Isaiah 43: "I am the Lord, your holy God, Israel's Creator and King. I am the one who cut a path through the mighty ocean. I sent an army to chase you with chariots and horses; now they lie dead, unable to move. They are like an oil lamp with the flame snuffed out."

In other words, through the prophet Isaiah, God was saying to the people, "I know you're struggling right now, and I know you're having a hard time looking ahead with joy...but remember when I delivered you in the past? Remember when I brought you through one of the most challenging times in your life? I did it before, and I will do it again."

But, then God also asks the people not to dwell too long on the past – because the future will bring with it something brand-new, something so glorious they may not be able to anticipate it on their own: "The Lord said: 'Forget what happened long ago! Don't think about the past. I am creating something new. There it is! Do you see it? I have put roads in deserts, streams in thirsty lands.'"

Sometimes in life, it takes holy imagination to look beyond our current circumstance and to think about what's possible in the future.

In the time of the prophet Isaiah, the people of ancient Israel needed God to remind them to *imagine* – and we need that reminder, too, sometimes. Whatever our current circumstances happen to be.

And, as we are in the midst of our stewardship series, I know that, very often in this life, *money* is a cause of abundant struggle *today*...and that, when we struggle with money *today*, it can be hard to find hope for *tomorrow*.

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This past week, members and friends of McCabe received in the mail an Estimate of Giving card for our 2016 budget year. 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 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.

Next weekend we will celebrate Consecration Weekend. During Consecration Weekend, we invite you to bring your Estimates of Giving with you to worship. In each of our four weekend worship services, there will be a time of consecration – a time when we will bring our Estimate of Giving cards forward to place them near the altar in dedication. //

Financial giving is meant to be a joyful sacrifice, a gift back to God in thanksgiving for God's providence...thanksgiving for the strength God offers for today – thanksgiving for the hope God offers for tomorrow. And I know financial issues can be very tricky.

For some of us, considering what we will give financially is fairly easy: our incomes are adequate or more than adequate for our daily needs, plus we have enough beyond that to save a little and to spend some on recreation and entertainment. Those of us in that kind of financial situation should have an easier time being *joyful* in our giving.

For others of us, just making it through a week – or even through a day – brings about financial struggle and considering any kind of charitable giving brings anxiety or fear that we won't have enough.

Whatever your financial situation is, as you consider how you might give back to God through McCabe, a question you may want to keep in mind is this: *What would it take for me give with a sense of joy?*

Ever since I became a full-time pastor – back in the summer of 2003 – I have given 10% of my income back to God through the churches I've served. And let me tell you, some months I gave that 10% joyfully...while other months I gave it only out of a sense of obligation as a pastoral leader. The bills had stacked up...I had overspent on who knows what... or I just wanted to pay-down my school loans a bit more.

But, even those months when I gave my tithe a bit begrudgingly, God proved faithful...and, in the end, I've always had enough.

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Our capacity to give – and the amount we are able to give – varies from person to person. That is always the case. But, no matter who we are, or how much money we make, financial giving should be a joyful sacrifice. (Most of the time, anyway!)

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All that said, with our stewardship series theme in mind, I believe 100% that our willingness to *give* – to give our time, our talent, our financial resources –

our willingness to give of ourselves has everything to do with whether or not we will *thrive* in this life.

Think about plants and flowers: they grow by taking in the right kind of nutrients, in the right kind of environment...and then you know they are thriving when they green-up, when they flower – blessing the world around them with life and beauty.

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

As a Conference-level capital campaign, *Thrive* 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.

Our McCabe leadership is already considering what we might build into our 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.

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.

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I'm so grateful to the Dakotas Conference *Thrive* team because, when they planned the theme for this 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.

As part of the worship series the Conference *Thrive* team developed, they've incorporated a song by the Christian band Casting Crowns. The song is called “Thrive,” so it has clear connections to this series!

We're going to listen to this song as a way of closing out today's message. While the song is playing, if the Spirit moves you to hum or sing along, feel free to do so. Like the passage from Isaiah 43, this song invites us to use our holy imaginations; it invites us to ask God's Spirit to bless us with strength and hope – that we might truly *thrive*.

[Listen to or watch “Thrive” by Casting Crowns.]

We truly were made to *thrive* as children of God, and as builders of God's kingdom here on earth. So may we be strengthened by the power of God's Holy Spirit, that we might go forth into the future to *thrive* – to share the glory of our God wherever we go.

Let us pray...

Most holy God, give us a faithful imagination: help us see the future you have for us. Keep us rooted in your steadfast love. Implant into us hearts for those who do not yet know you; give us a commitment to reach them and to with them the message of Jesus Christ. Bless our efforts to trust in you and to do your will in this place. May we offer our best to you, O God, and may you use us to accomplish your Kingdom purposes. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.