

# **New Consecration Sunday**

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Good Shepherd, Rocky Mount  
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## *Where Are You Going, And What Will You Give To Get There?*

What does it mean to be great? What are the values that direct our lives? What are the virtues that must be nurtured and cultivated if we are going to find fulfillment and purpose? Those are pretty much the questions from the Gospel for today. And, despite the fact that I've been invited here to talk to you about money and stewardship, this gospel lesson is not a bad place to start.

Because, one way or another, when it comes to money, we are all with James and John. We want our money, and our efforts and our commitment to bring results. We want this discipleship-thing - our church membership - to pay off in some kind of way. Often, we're not really sure what way that is. "But, Jesus" - this is James and John's point - "What's the use of hanging out with you if it's not going to get us somewhere?" Now,

that's certainly a question worth thinking about. Where do we - where do you - want to get? Where are you headed? Where do you want your life to go?

When Scott asked me to be your Stewardship Preacher I thought, "O well, I guess this is as good a time as any to talk about money. We're all talking about it, anyway. What's the stock market doing? What are the unemployment figures for this month? Are the great American people out there buying things - fulfilling their chief and most important roll for the welfare of the nation - being "Consumers" - or are they saving their money and worrying about their credit card balance? We don't need a James Carville to tell us that despite Afghanistan, despite Healthcare it's still "The Economy, Stupid."

These are tough times and that needs to be acknowledged. I'm sure that Rocky Mount has had more than its share of foreclosures and businesses that have collapsed or pulled up stakes; of seniors putting off retirement and young people still searching for that first job; of parents telling their children that they can't afford music lessons or sports tickets this year because it looks like Daddy or Mama might lose their job. These are tough

the ground we thought was firm is slipping away?

Well, I think where we want to go is Home. In times of crisis and uncertainty - in fear and doubt - when times get tough -- we want to go HOME. So, whoever decided that this Stewardship Sunday ought to be a "Homecoming Gathering" was right on! Ultimately, we all want to get Home. So, where is that for you?

It's not so easy to answer. Just thinking about myself, I've lived in fourteen different places in my life - and I'm hardly a trend setter. I know people my age whose children are now living in Kazakhstan, in Spain, in Liverpool, and Melbourne. It's a Global Village. So, where is Home? Can it really be found in a house, or in a place of childhood, or a section of the country where your family first put down roots? I hope such a place does exist for you. You're lucky if you have some place like that. But, more and more, for many of our people, that's not the case --- and maybe that's OK.

Because, the Bible and our Christian faith wants to tell us that Home is never a place in this world. Home is always ultimately to be found in our relationship with God. Home is something that we receive as a blessing from the creating, sustaining, redeeming God that constantly wants to make a dwelling place within us. On the one hand, this Home is God's absolute free gift, and on the other it is a life that we have to work at making day by day, moment by moment. And, the greatness or the poverty of our home depends solely upon how much we open ourselves to receive the Life and Blessing of God.

Now, I want you to know, just as a quick aside, that sometimes we get the idea that blessing and blessings are things. If we listen to TV evangelists too much we'll get the idea that God's blessing is a big house, and four cars in the garage, and a good job, and getting the breaks, and all kinds of special preferment in this world. That's just wrong. God's blessing is always God himself - God herself - God in God's self. There is only one blessing. It is the Spirit of God's well-being alive and active in our life. And, we're meant to pass on that Spirit -- to incarnate that life and power and peace of God in this world.

So, just to make sure we get this, our Home, our Blessing, our Greatness (back to the Gospel) is always a spiritual reality that comes from our relationship with God. And, it is the ultimate task of our one precious life to nurture, and deepen, and strengthen that home within us -- and then to make it visible -- to give some evidence of that inner spiritual life to the world around us.

From the beginning of human history people have asked one simple question: What Way of Life is Best? And, the answer has always had two parts. First, that way of life is best that flows from within. What is imposed from without is just some kind of slavery -- maybe to a boss, maybe to rules, maybe to all the stuff we collect and think we can't live without. No, our true life always comes from within and we must nurture that life with prayer, and joy and thanksgiving. We've got to clear away the clutter and the obstacles that are not real life and let the living Spirit of God bubble up inside you. But, second, and this is equally important, the life of the Spirit cannot be lived alone. That way of life is best that is lived in Community. The very nature of God - and, therefore, the very nature of life - is to be in relationship. God constantly pours out life in generosity and abundance, in healing and hope, in faith and trust, in beauty and kindness, and love -- and

says, "take hold, join in, be part of the great dance that goes on and on throughout the ages and into Eternity.

This relation-building love stands in stark contrast to the communities we make for ourselves - communities that are too often marked by fear and anxiety, division and distrust, ugliness and quarreling, and a sense of scarcity and greed. Just flip through the cable news channels for a couple of hours and you will know exactly what I mean. There is a pervasive sickness in our nation and in our world - much deeper than the current recession. It is a feeling among the great majority of people that their lives do not count - that their needs go unanswered by systems of faceless power. And, that they, in their turn, can do nothing to meet the complex problems that mar the present and threaten the future. It's a sickness unto death that will lead us further and further away from Home. Because it is still possible to bless the world. It is still possible to bless the future. It will always be possible to stand against the temptations to greed and grab and to build and support communities of light and hope.

That's what our parish churches are - communities of light and hope, places of relationship and love. They are communities of support and encouragement where the truth can be told without judgment or condemnation. They are places of inspiration and vision where the long buried call of our true life can be heard. You can always tell a good church. Even as you open the door, it feels different. It's like stepping into a truer, richer, deeper, more vibrant reality. The whole place throbs with it. Here, in churches just like this, ordinary men and women open their hearts, say their prayers, and somehow the love of God fills them and the mercy of God restores them. Here, young people, dressed in white, lead the procession and seem transfigured. The glory and the beauty of God streams out from them, and we know that the future will be all right in their hands. Here, in our parish church, little children are the ones who so often show us the way. They tell us the story of our faith better than any sermon; that unless we become as little children we won't find that Home and we will never enter the kingdom of God.

Where else in the world do you find this kind of community? Where else in the world could you find greater substance for your life. I, at least, cannot express the half of the depth and richness of life that I have received in ordinary parish churches - nor be

sufficiently grateful for all the virtues of others who surrounded me in congregations just like yours. These are places of courage and generosity where ordinary people become truly great because they have finally found a place where they could give themselves away in love and service. The world is transform by just such people, and places, and congregations just like yours. Here the life of God is made visible in the world. Here the true community of God's Kingdom has its start. This doesn't happen just by giving your money. This happens only if you're willing to give yourself.

So, what about it? When you get that pledge card today don't just write on it what you wrote last year. Sit down and think about where you what to go - and what you want to get out of your one precious life. Think about what you might be called to do to make visible the spirit that's within you. Think about the power that is here in this community to bless the world, to bless the future, to bless your life in the fullness of your inner being - and then decide how much you want to be a part of it.

One way or another, God is calling us Home. wouldn't you like to be on the way?

Wouldn't you like a fore-taste of that life right now? Wouldn't you like to be part of a people who are already building that marvelous dwelling place right here at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Rocky Mount, North Carolina? You can - but only if you will pledge yourself - only if you will be generous with your one precious life - only if you find your greatness in service with and for others -- only if you get past your money, and your stuff, and your clutter, and your fears - to let God in ... so that you can have a life that is really worth giving away.