

One day in 1888, a certain Norwegian businessman reached for the morning paper. Flipping through it, he received the shock of his life: he saw his own obituary.

It was all a horrible mistake, of course. The businessman's brother had died and a careless reporter, confusing the two of them, had written an obituary for the wrong man. But because of that blunder, the businessman got a rare and disturbing glimpse of how he was viewed by the world, of what the world would say of him when he did die.

He did not like what he saw. To be sure, the facts of his life were correct, and all his impressive achievements were mentioned. Yet there was nothing there of his principled lifestyle—his beliefs, his values, the things he held most dear. Instead, the obituary focused on his inventions, his factories, and his great wealth. Decades before, he had created an explosive he named “dynamite,” and this weapon of destruction had made him wealthy and famous. The Norwegian businessman was the world-renowned Alfred Nobel.

But it was on the day he read his own obituary that Alfred Nobel began a *new* life.

He realized, reading about his own death, that the world saw his life centered on violence and war. Shocked, Nobel decided that this experience had given him another chance. He began by giving his money away. He made provision in his will for the Nobel prizes, rewarding those who had made the greatest contributions to humanity and peace. Today he is best remembered for humanitarian work – for the Nobel Peace Prize. Alfred Nobel, in effect, rewrote his own obituary. (story cited by Carlos Wilton)

Thank God that there are some occasions in life when we are given the grace to see ourselves as we truly are, to discern that something is wrong and to change it. Alfred Nobel was given another chance to use his money not for destruction but for honor, not for violence but for joy. Friends, giving offers all of us that same second chance.

“God loves a cheerful giver,” writes the apostle Paul to the Corinthians. What a concept—that giving things away will make us happy! But it’s the gospel truth. Anyone who’s ever given a truly sacrificial gift, a gift that really costs something in money, time, or effort, and then has watched the smile of gratitude in the recipients, knows what it means to be a cheerful giver. It feels wonderful to give things away, if by giving we bring joy.

When Paul describes a “cheerful” giver, the Greek word he uses – *hilaron* – is related to our English word “hilarious.” I agree with the minister Carlos Wilton when he says he likes “‘hilarious’ better, for cheerfulness seems so low-key, so ordinary. ‘Cheerful’ sounds like: ‘looking on the bright side’ or ‘starting each day with a smile.’”

“‘Hilarious,’ on the other hand, is a great big belly laugh that swells and expands until the whole body is shaking. ‘Hilarious’ is not a chuckle, but a guffaw; it’s rolling in the aisles with merriment.” It’s LOL- laugh out loud. That’s the side of giving we’re looking at this morning.

Is the Apostle Paul really saying that the chance to give things away can fill our lives with laughter? Yes he is! I’ve about had it with this grim, tight-lipped attitude toward money in general, and giving in particular. Let’s stop approaching this as if we’re headed to get a root canal. In fact, it has been said that “when we tell people to give until it hurts, we discover that the pain threshold of many people is very low!” (John McMullen)

Carlos Wilton points out that “the hilarious side of giving operates from abundance, rather than scarcity.” Hear him tell about that vision of abundance:

There’s an East Indian fable about a rich man who is traveling far from home. A thief notices his fine clothes and his bulging money bag, and decides to travel with him and look out for a way to steal his treasure.

Every night, in the humble inns along the roadside, the thief unrolls his bedroll early and pretends to sleep. Then, as the rich man leaves the room to get washed up and ready for bed, the thief rummages through his belongings in search of the treasure sack. But he never can find it. As soon as he hears the rich man's footsteps, he leaps back into his bedroll, certain he's just moments away from finding the treasure. Every morning, the thief once again pretends to sleep, until the rich man goes down for breakfast, yet morning is the same as evening: the thief never can find the money bag.

Day after day this goes on, until the two men finally reach their destination. As they are parting ways, the thief's curiosity gets the better of him. He admits to the rich man what he's been up to. 'How have you eluded me for so long?' he asks. 'Did you guess that I was out to rob you?'

'Yes,' said the rich man, 'I guessed that the very first night.'

'Then where did you hide the treasure?'

"It was very simple," replied the rich man. "Every night, while you went to get cleaned up before bed, I slipped into the room and put my treasure in your pillow, and every morning after you had rifled through my belongings, I got it back."

"Sometimes, in all our anxiety over finances, we too miss the treasure that is close at hand. If we are ever going to be hilarious givers, we've somehow got to stop chasing after treasure in every imaginable place, and realize that we have plenty of treasures close at hand." (Wilton)

Yes, we're talking about a vision of abundance. Lynne Twist, former executive of the Hunger Project, gives an insight that may help us here. In one of her books, she reflects on what it is in life that gives money so much power. It comes from what she calls "the great lie

of scarcity.” We are taught, in our world, that “there’s not enough. There’s not enough to go around. Everyone can’t make it. Somebody’s going to be left out. There are way too many people. There’s not enough food. There’s not enough water. There’s not enough air. There’s not enough time. There’s not enough money.” The false belief that we live in a world of scarcity becomes a driving force in our lives!

But when we name scarcity a lie, and recognize that God is able to provide us with everything we need, then, we are able to share abundantly in every good work. Giving, then, is a litmus test of faith. That is why Jesus had more to say about money than any other subject except perhaps God’s love and kingdom. Jesus says that how you and I relate to and use our property and money is not peripheral to our relationship with God, but central to it. Trusting and serving God with our resources is a primary sign of authentic faith.

We connect to each other through our giving. While today I’m primarily talking about giving our financial resources, I’m also referring to giving our time and talents.

Now, let me answer the question I suspect most of you have been asking throughout this sermon. Why am I preaching a sermon on giving in January instead of the fall? That’s when stewardship season occurs. Maybe someone needs to show the new Interim Pastor a church calendar!

I do so because connecting to each other by giving is something year round. Here’s some good news, something hilarious, in the sense of not laughing at, but laughing with, that’s happening right now. In the midst of an interim, transition time in our church 45% of our 2019 pledgers have raised their pledges over last year’s and there are 21 new pledgers. That is remarkable!

While less than 40 pledgers from last year have not yet pledged this year, we still have good hope that a number of those will. We hope to come close to our goal of 300

pledgers for this year, and notice we are interested in the number of pledgers more so than the amount pledged. It's making the commitment to pledge that counts most,

Another thing that's hilarious about all of this giving is that again, in the midst of an interim time, about 1.5 or 1.6 million dollars has also been pledged to our Interior Renewal Campaign which is well under way, as you can clearly see if you simply step out this side door. While this campaign is already 95% or so subscribed, it will be opened in March to the entire congregation so that those who wish can joyfully connect to this new opportunity for ministry and mission.

So what the Stewardship Committee would like you to do with regard to all of this is: if you haven't pledged yet to the annual campaign, please do so. If you've already pledged for 2019 and can raise it, again, please do so. And if you wish, in March, pledge to the Interior Renewal Campaign.

However, seeking to meet the church's annual budget is not our primary reason to give. Rather, we want to stress the joy in giving and in connecting with each other in doing God's work.

As the minister Karl Travis puts it: "If you are motivated to think about giving because your church is in rough financial waters and you're wondering how to increase its budget to pay the light bill, fair enough. But take note; if that's your theological pitch, you're likely to remain in the dark. People need to speak first of joy, and grace, and ... spiritual discipline and benefit. Stewardship is to be an exuberant, excited, doxological proclamation that the God who set us in this abundant world refuses to turn his back on us. Or close his hand. We live amidst unparalleled bounty. Our stewardship context is about stepping into the generous heart of God where we might learn to be likewise."

“The good news is that there is much more joyous and far less anxious motivation for talking about giving than the need simply to subscribe to the church budget. If we actually believe this, our congregational efforts will not begin with our lamentations about what the church could do *if only*. They will begin with the grace-full declaration about the joy of emulating our selfless God.”

Then, giving ceases to be a chore, a threat, or even an insurmountable challenge. Yes, if you and I catch the vision of abundance, hilarious giving will be our joy!

In downtown Seattle a few years back—a man was walking down the street just a few days before Christmas. He came upon one of those Salvation Army kettles. As he approached the volunteer ringing the bell, he felt an unaccustomed spirit of generosity come over him. Smiling, he reached into his pocket, pulled out all his change and dropped every last coin into the kettle.

The man turned to leave, but then he stopped. He pulled out his wallet and emptied every last bill into the kettle.

He walked away with joy. But about two blocks later, it suddenly hit him! “What have I done?” he asked himself.

The man turned around, walked back to the volunteer and asked for his money back. He got it, and left again, walking very quickly this time. (Story told by Donel McClellan)

“For two blocks” writes one minister (Donel McClellan), “that man walked in the Kingdom of God. For two blocks he was free of the burden of his possessions. For two blocks he put other people above himself. For two blocks he was self-giving and generous. For two blocks he was blessed; but like most of us, he could not stand the uncertainty that goes with that much blessing. He wanted to continue to think that he was in control. He

walked back, out of the realm of God and back into the well-worn grooves of his selfish world.”

Friends, I hope you will consider what it means to walk in the realm of God. I invite you to consider the hilarious side of stewardship. What would it take for you to become a hilarious giver?

Amen.

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