



University Christian Church – Austin

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The Measure of Giving

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2 Corinthians 9:6-15

One morning, in the year 1888, a Norwegian businessman and inventor reached for his morning newspaper. Flipping idly through the pages, he received the shock of his life: he saw his own obituary!

It was all a terrible mistake, of course. The businessman's brother, Ludvig, had recently died while in France. A careless French reporter had mixed the two of them up. The reporter had then gone to the newspaper's files and pulled out as this biographical information, but on the wrong man. ⁱ

But out of that cub reporter's blunder, the businessman gained a rare insight. He had the uncommon experience, that fine morning, of glimpsing what the world would say about him after he had died. And he didn't much like what he read.

Oh, the facts of his life as depicted in the article were accurate enough. All his impressive achievements were laid out in full detail. Yet the businessman was profoundly disturbed to read nothing of himself as a man of principle. His beliefs, his values, the things he held most dear, were all completely absent.

The article was all about his inventions, his factories, his patents, but most of all, it was about his earning one of the largest fortunes in Europe.

It was on the day he read his own obituary that Alfred Nobel began a new life. Decades before, laboring in a chemistry lab, he had accidentally discovered a way to convert the explosive nitroglycerin into a powdered form. That product he

had called "dynamite" from the Gk word, *dynamis*, that means "power." It had made him wealthy beyond his wildest dreams. As for fame, well, the little, out-of-the-way country of Norway had seldom seen anything like him.

But all this mattered little to Nobel, as he sat there scanning his own obituary. He realized, in that moment of fearsome introspection, that his entire life's meaning seemed firmly bound to blowing things to bits. One French newspaper headline read, "**The Merchant of Death Is Dead.**"ⁱⁱ

Now, having read of his own death, Nobel decided it was high time for a change. He began planning on how to give his money away. Among his life changes, he rewrote his will making provision for the famous Nobel Prizes rewarding each year those who had made the greatest contributions to humanity. When Alfred Nobel finally did die 8 years later - this time for real- he had accomplished what perhaps no other person in human history has managed to do: he had rewritten his own obituary.

Not only that, but we can well expect Nobel had achieved a new level of happiness in those 8 years before he died, reflecting the Scripture we heard this morning.....

"God loves a cheerful giver," written by the apostle Paul to the Corinthian Christian church. What a concept that giving things away will make us happy!

Anyone who's ever dug down deep enough to give a sacrificial gift, a gift that really cost something in money, time, or effort and then has watched the smile of gratitude grow slowly from the recipient's mouth, spreading from there to the cheeks in a broad grin (or maybe who has seen the tears of gratitude well up in the lower eyelids) knows what it means to be a cheerful giver. It feels wonderful to give things away, if by giving we bring joy.

A few years ago on a church mission trip to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, one of our missionaries discovered by accident – and to her own embarrassment- an ancient native American tradition, that is also a tradition of many cultures of the far east. She admired something one of the local native Americans owned. Immediately, the owner gave it to her!

If a guest at your home or an acquaintance in your presence admires some utensil or artwork or jewelry... you cheerfully give it to them. You make your most prized possessions, gifts – to whosoever visits.

All these societies so prize that sense of satisfaction that you get in giving, that no mere thing.. will stand in the way.

“God loves a cheerful giver.” The Greek word Paul uses that's translated as "cheerful" *hilaron* is related to our English word, "hilarious." I like "hilarious" better than cheerfulness, because cheerfulness seems so low-key, so ordinary. "Cheerful" is:

"looking on the brighter side,"

starting each day with a smile. You know, trite.

"Hilarious," on the other hand, is a great big, belly laugh that swells and expands until the whole body is shaking & rolling in the aisles with merriment.

Is Paul really saying that simply giving things away can fill our lives with laughter and joy? In a word, Yes! You bet your life he is!

Alfred Nobel had lots of money to give away, but it's not really the quantity that matters. Any of us can do it, even the poorest among us. The standard we are given as Christians, the measure of giving we find in the Bible is **proportionate giving**, giving based on a percentage of our income.

Most often mentioned in the Bible is the encouragement to TITHE, from the Old English word *teogothian* which means “tenth.” A tithe is not synonymous

with “gift” or “offering.” It is very specifically 1/10th of our income. The tithe has often been a good rule, a good **measure of giving**, to challenge those who would be tempted to hoard for ourselves & our family whatever we earn or otherwise receive. Is tithing an iron clad, one-size-fits-all rule? No, certainly not. For some, like Alfred Nobel and for some of us, giving a tithe, a tenth, is clearly too little, but can any- especially in our wealthy nation- really say it is too much?

There are two things I'd like to point out about hilarious giving: first, that it operates from abundance, rather than scarcity; and second, that it looks to the future, rather than fixating on the present.

Sometimes, in all our anxiety over finances, we miss the treasure that is close at hand. If you or I 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 treasures a-plenty close at hand. We need to realize that while our wants are limitless, our true needs are really quite minimal.

A week ago, our daughter Marie here & I were packing up a U-Haul trailer with her earthly belongings in it to move them from her college apt. in West Michigan to her grad school of next fall, U. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Marie was shocked that all her stuff wouldn't fit in that 5 X 8 trailer! Loads of things had to be left behind where neighbors & passersby would quickly pick up for their own use the items that she didn't have room to move. As the packing went on Marie said that it was so much easier to part with those items knowing that others would benefit from them.

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a writer in the field of spirituality, provides insight into what we experienced when he wrote, "Abundance is not measured by what flows in, but by what flows over. The smaller we make the vessel of our need...the sooner we get the overflow we need for delight."

So many of us are trapped on the same treadmill of consumption that wearies our national soul, as Americans. As soon as "our cup runneth over," so many of us go out and buy a bigger cup. Storage facilities are a boom industry. That means we are always living in an illusion of scarcity, always bemoaning the gap between what's in our cup and the rim when in reality we are, of all the peoples on this planet, throughout all of history, some of the most materially blessed

(yes, even those of us on fixed incomes...
even those of us trying to break into a career...
even those of us with children in college...
even those of us on food stamps!).

If you or I believe we live in a world of scarcity, it's a sure thing we'll find giving to be a chore, a threat, even an insurmountable challenge. Yet if you and I catch the vision of abundance, hilarious giving will be our joy!

The other observation I'd like to make is that hilarious giving looks to the future. Alfred Nobel never saw a single one of his prizes awarded; the terms of his will stipulated that they would not begin until five years after his death. The Nobel Prizes were his gift to the future to succeeding generations.

There's an old Jewish fable about an elderly man who spent all his spare time planting fig trees. "You're a fool, old man," the villagers would tease. "Why are you planting fig trees? You're going to die before you'll ever eat the fruit of a single one!"

"You are quite right," replied the old man. "Yet I have spent many happy hours sitting under fig trees and eating their fruit. Those trees were planted by others. Why shouldn't I make sure that others will know the same enjoyment I have had?"

Sounds pretty hilarious to me!

My colleague, Carlos Wilton, writes of an incident that took place in downtown Seattle though it could have been any city in this land. A man was out walking one day, just 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 wash over him. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out all his change. He dropped every last coin into the kettle with a smile.

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

Grinning like an idiot, he walked away with a bounce to his step. But about two blocks later, the bounce wore out. Suddenly it hit him! "What have I done?" he asked himself.

The man turned around, walked back to the old woman by the kettle and asked for his money back. He got it, and left again, walking very quickly this time, head down, looking neither to the right nor the left.

"For two blocks....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 (it is more blessed to give than to receive)...but, like most of us, he could not stand the uncertainty that goes with that much blessing. He wanted to continue the illusion that he is in control. He walked back, out of the realm of God and back into the well-worn grooves of his weary world." So sad....

But you know, my prayer for that man – and for the part of him that is in each of us- is that he will never forget the joy of those two blocks. When he pledges 6% of his income instead of last year's 4%, as he commits in his heart to

reaching a tithe, a tenth, 10%. He'll know that he is on the road... that his discipleship will be blessing him just as it is blessing others.

I expect that by now some of you may be thinking, “what would it take for me to become a hilarious giver?” Yes, that would be an important question to answer, wouldn't it? ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ "Nobel, Alfred Bernhard." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Deluxe Edition. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009

ⁱⁱ “Le Marchand de la Mort Est Mort”, *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Indebted to a sermon, HILARIOUS GIVING, by Carlos E. Wilton of Point Pleasant Presbyterian Church in a sermon he preached there October 29, 1995.