

Wesley United Methodist Church

November 10, 2013

"Hilarious Giving."

Luke 6:37-38, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15,

One day in 1888, a certain Norwegian businessman reached for the morning paper. Flipping 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 had died and a careless reporter, confusing the two of them, had composed 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 was dead.

He did not like what he read. To be sure, the facts of his life were described accurately enough, and all his impressive achievements were laid out in detail. Yet there was nothing there of his high principles--his beliefs, his values, the things he held most dear. Instead, the obituary focused on his inventions, his factories, his patents, and his great wealth. Decades before, he had created an explosive that he called "dynamite," and this weapon of destruction had made him wealthy and famous beyond his wildest dreams. The Norwegian businessman was the world-renowned Alfred Nobel. 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 as founded on violence and war, on blowing things to bits. Shocked, Nobel decided that his experience had given him a second chance, that it was an opportunity for resurrection and redemption. He began 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.

Thank God for second chances! Praise the Lord that there are some occasions in life when we are given sheer grace to see ourselves as we really are, to discern that something is wrong and to fix it.

Alfred Nobel was given a second chance, a second chance to use his money not for destruction but for joy, not for violence but for happiness. Stewardship gives 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 God's honest truth. 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 in the recipients, knows what it means to be a cheerful giver. It feels wonderful to give things away, for by giving we bring joy.

when Paul describes a "cheerful" giver, the Greek word he uses--*hilaron*--is related to the English word "hilarious." In some ways, I like "hilarious" better, for cheerfulness seems so low key, so ordinary. "Cheerful" sounds like: "keeping the sunny side up," "looking on the bright side," "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 belly laugh, it's rolling in the aisles with merriment.

Is Paul really saying that we have a second chance with our money, a chance to give things away that can fill our lives with laughter? You bet he is! I've had it with this grim, tight-lipped

attitude toward money in general, and stewardship campaigns in particular. Let's talk about the good news here!

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. That standard we hold up in the church is proportionate giving. That's giving based on a percentage of income, giving that's on its way to tithe, or perhaps all the way there or beyond. Even if you're on one of those infamous "fixed" incomes, you can still give a "fixed" percentage of what God has given you. It's the act of opening the hand instead of closing it that's important; of seeing a need, large or small, and joyfully declaring, "I can take care of that."

There are two things I want to point out about hilarious giving: first, it operates from abundance, rather than scarcity, and second, it looks to the future, rather than dwelling in the past.

First, that vision of abundance. There's an East Indian fable about a rich man who is traveling far from home. A poor man 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 poor man 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 poor man once again pretends to sleep, until the rich man goes down for breakfast, yet morning is the same as evening: the thief never finds 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, every night, while you went to get cleaned up before bed, I slipped into the bedroom 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. It's all in our choice of how we look at life. 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. Many of us are trapped on the same treadmill of consumption that wearies our soul. As soon as "our cup runneth over," what do so many of us do? Why, we go out a buy a bigger cup! Always bemoaning the gap between what's in our cup and the rim. Yet if you and I catch the vision of abundance, hilarious giving will be our joy.

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. Hilarious giving is always making possible a future for others.

There is an old Jewish fable about an elderly man who spent all his spare time planting trees. (The man in story could be my dad.) "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 bite into a single fig!" "You're quite right," said 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.

In a city some years back, a man walked 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 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 and pulled out his wallet and emptied every last bill into the kettle as well. Grinning like an idiot, he walked away with a bounce in 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 woman bell ringer and asked for his money back. He got it, and left again, walking very quickly this time, head down, looking neither left or right. 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; but like most of us, he could not stand the uncertainty that goes with that much blessing. He walked back, out of the realm of God and back into the well-worn grooves of his weary world.

In the days to come, I hope you will consider what it means to walk in the kingdom of God. I invite you to consider what it would take for you to become a hilarious giver.