

When Paul describes a “cheerful” giver, he uses the Greek word *hilaron*, from which we get the English word “hilarious.” In some ways, I like “hilarious” better, for cheerfulness seems so low-key, so ordinary. “Cheerful” sounds like: “keep the sunny side up,” or “look on the bright side,” or start 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, laughing until our sides hurt.

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 and joy? 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 is not really the quantity that matters. Any of us can do it, even the humblest among us. The standard we hold up in the church is proportionate giving. That’s giving based on the percentage of income, giving that is on its way to a tithe (or even 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.”

**Hilarious giving projects a vision of abundance.** There is 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 for a way to steal his treasure. Every night, in 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 can never 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 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 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 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.

This is the vision of abundance. Do we inhabit a universe where the basic things that people need – from food and shelter to a sense of competence and of being loved – are ample in nature? Or is this a universe where such goods are in short supply, available only to those who have the power to beat everyone else to the store?<sup>1</sup> Scarcity or abundance? It’s all in our choice of how we look at life.

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a writer in the field of spirituality, has another slant on this question. “Abundance,” he writes, “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.”<sup>2</sup> Many of us are trapped on the same treadmill of consumption that wearies our national American soul. As soon as “our cup runneth over,” we go out and buy a bigger cup! That means we are always living in an illusion of scarcity, bemoaning the gap between what’s in our cup and the rim – when in reality we, of all the peoples, are the most blessed financially.

If you or I believe we live in a world of scarcity, it is 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!

**Hilarious giving also 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 succeeding generations. Hilarious giving is always making possible a future for others.

There’s an old Jewish fable about an elderly man who spent all this 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 bite into a single fig!”

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<sup>1</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: Wisdom for Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 124-125.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Martin Marty, in his newsletter *Context*.

“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!

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 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. The man turned around, walked back to the woman at 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,” writes Donel McClellan who tells this story, “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 is in control. He walked back, out of the realm of God and back into the well-worn grooves of his weary world.”

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. Christians around the world gather at the Lord’s Table to remember that ours is a God of abundance, not scarcity. We give thanks today that God, in order that we might live in this abundance and know great joy in life, gave an only Son who would die on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, and who would rise again so that we might know newness of life. The Resurrection affords all of us a second chance at life, a chance to rewrite our future, to live lives of hilarious giving and great joy. 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!

Source: Carlos E. Wilton as quoted in *Speaking of Stewardship: Model Sermons on Money and Possession*, William G. Carter, editor. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1998.) 69-73.

## Hilarious Giving

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The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

One morning in 1888, a Norwegian businessman opened his newspaper, flipped through the pages, and received the shock of his life: there, in black and white, he saw his own obituary. It was all a terrible mistake, of course. The man’s brother had died and a careless reporter, confusing the two of them, 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 died.

The man didn’t like what he read. To be sure, the facts of his life were described accurately enough; his inventions, his factories, his patents, his great wealth, 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. Decades earlier he had created an explosive called “dynamite,” and this weapon of destruction had made him wealthy and famous.

But on the day that he read his own obituary, Alfred Nobel began a new life. He realized that the world saw his life as founded on violence and war, on blowing things to bits. Nobel decided that this experience had given him a second chance, 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 peace. Today, Nobel is best remembered for his humanitarian work. 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 the sheer grace to see ourselves as we really are, to discern that something is wrong and to fix it. Alfred Nobel got 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 bring us joy! But it’s God’s honest truth. Anyone who’s ever dug down deep enough to give a 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.