

One day in 1888, a certain Norwegian businessman got a terrible shock over his breakfast. He reached for his daily newspaper, turned a few pages in, and saw there his own obituary. It was of course a mistake. It was in fact his brother who had died. But the paper had mistakenly put this man's obituary in the paper, which proved to be a very salutary lesson for him because there, as he read it, he had an experience that, of course, you don't normally get. And he saw what others had made of his life. And it was accurate. There, all his achievements and his successes had been listed, but none of what he thought of his beliefs and what was really important to him. He'd actually made a terrific invention early on in his career, he'd discovered dynamite. And a great thing was made of that in his obituary, and how this discovery had made him an extremely wealthy man.

And that man was Alfred Nobel, who, of course, is famous for other reasons because having read his obituary, he realized that he wanted to be remembered for other things, so he had a second chance. And he took it as an opportunity, a chance for redemption, and he began giving all his money away. And part of what he gave away, of course, was the provision he made in his will for the Nobel Prizes, which are still awarded every year for contributions towards humanity and peace. That was a rare opportunity he had to rewrite his own obituary, and he took it. Thank God for second chances. He got a wake up call and he was granted the opportunity, was Nobel, to see how other people saw him. And it caused him, as I say, to make big changes in his life.

For example, it caused him to use his money, not for destruction, but for joy. Not for violence, but for happiness. Alfred Nobel became a cheerful giver, to coin a phrase from our reading from 2 Corinthians, a reading I've chosen especially for today, as we kick off in church, our Stewardship Campaign for 2022. St. Paul says, "God loves a cheerful giver." Seems on first hearing a strange phrase. How can giving things away make us happy? I'll confess, I, myself, I'm not a great gift giver. This does seem odd to me. My wife will confirm that I'm not naturally a very generous person. It's not my first instinct. But on occasions, I have felt good about digging deep, giving something that comes as a sacrifice.

And that has, I would recognize, brought a smile to my face, as well as to the recipient. I have a friend who says that making millions didn't actually bring him much pleasure, but when he gave away his first million, then he felt really joyful, and then he felt he'd really succeeded. Giving the money away brought him more pleasure than earning it. The word St. Paul uses to describe a giver is cheerful, is actually the Greek word 'hilaron', from which

we get our word hilarious. And I think we should go with hilarious in this context. Cheerful is a bit pedestrian. There's something of a cheesy grin about cheerfulness. But hilarious, that's much more of a guffaw, a big belly laugh, so much more than a chuckle. It's a rolling in the aisles with merriment.

Is Paul really saying that giving can fill our lives with joy like that? I think he is. I must admit, I don't really enjoy preaching about money and giving, probably as I've said, because generosity does not come naturally to me. But I am learning more about this hilarious giving. There is good news here, that I, and all of us, need to discover. So let me share two points about what Paul might be talking about here in this hilarious giving.

The first is this, that hilarious giving comes from abundance. There's an East Indian fable about a rich man who was traveling around in India, and he was noticed by a poor man, who saw him as an opportunity. He saw his fine clothes and his bag of money, and he decided to travel with him and find a way to steal his treasure. But every night, as they made their way through the countryside, they stayed at inns along the way. And the poor man would unroll his bed early and pretend to sleep. Then, as the rich man left the room to do his ablutions to get ready for bed, the thief would get up, rummage through his bag in search of his treasure, before hearing the man, the rich man coming back, and rushing back to his own bed, thinking that he was just about to lay his hand on the rich man's treasure.

Every morning, the poor man would again be pretending to sleep when the rich man got up and went down for breakfast. And again, it'd be the same routine as the evening. The thief would rummage through the rich man's bag, but never find the treasure. Day after day, this went on until they finally reached their destination. And as they were parting their way, the thief's curiosity got the better of him. And he said, "You did know that I was trying to steal your treasure, didn't you?" The rich man said, "Of course I did. I knew from the first night that we spent together." "Well, where did you hide the treasure?" said the poor man. "Well, it was very simple," said the rich man, "every night, while you went to get cleaned up before bed, I slipped into your room and put the treasure in your pillow. And then every morning, after you'd rifled through my belongings, I got it back."

And sometimes in all our anxiety about money and finances, we can miss the treasure that's so easy, well, it's so close at hand. If we are ever going to be hilarious givers, we somehow must stop chasing after the treasure, which is just beyond our reach, and realize that we have plenty

of treasure close at hand, if we care to search for that. It's hard to catch this vision of abundance. Abundance isn't measured by what flows in, but what flows over. The smaller we make the vessel of our needs, the sooner we can get that vessel to overflow. Too many of us get trapped on a treadmill of consumption, so that when our cup runneth over, what do we do? Enjoy the overflow of abundance in our lives? No, we go out to buy a bigger cup.

That means we're always living with the illusion of scarcity. Always bemoaning the gap that's between the cup, and what's in the cup and the rim. If we believe we live in a world of scarcity, then giving will always be a chore, a threat, even an insurmountable challenge. But if we catch the vision of abundance, then hilarious giving can be our joy. I'd like to just pick up on a theme from last week's sermon when I was talking about God's amazing grace. I was making the point that our faith rests not on our own efforts or achievements or works, but rather on God's gift of grace. The call on us is not to earn or to win our salvation, but to respond to the grace that God has shown us in Jesus Christ.

And we see that theme reappear in today's reading. Paul, at the end of the passage, talks about the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. And he concludes, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift." All talk of giving comes as a response to God's abundance, self-sacrificial giving. St. Paul knew that God doesn't deal in half measures. He writes in Romans of God's love being poured into our hearts. Not trickled or sprinkled but poured. In Ephesians, he talks about the immeasurable riches of his grace, in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. God deals in abundance. Our goal, this Stewardship Campaign, is love. And we're looking to respond and to share to God's abundant love for us. The most famous verse in the Bible begins, "God so loved the world that he gave." We want to do our part in creating a community here in La Jolla, where people find love and share love, which is the greatest treasure of all.

The second thing about hilarious giving is that it looks to the future. Alfred Nobel never saw a single one of his prizes offered because it was stipulated in his will that the prizes would be awarded beginning five years after his death. The Nobel Prizes were his gift to succeeding generations. Hilarious giving is about making a future possible to those who come after us.

There's an old Jewish fable about an elderly man who spent all his spare time planting fig trees. "You're crazy," said his neighbors, "why are you planting fig trees? You're never going to live long enough to taste the figs." "Quiet right," said the old man, "yet I've spent many happy hours

sitting under fig trees, eating the figs on the branches. And those trees were planted by others. Why shouldn't I make sure that other people enjoy the things that I have enjoyed?" And our reading begins with a similarly horticultural note, with a reference to seeds and sowing. "The one who sows sparingly," Paul says, "will reap sparingly. But the one who sows bountifully will reap bountifully." As they say, "Live for today, garden for tomorrow." We may not always see the bounty of the harvest, but that shouldn't stop us from being bountiful sowers. Here at St. James, we benefit from the abundant generosity of generations that have gone before us. And I trust that we too will do our part securing the future of St. James for generations to come.

We want to see the worship that goes on here continue, for years, for centuries to come. And we offer worship here, giving of our best. And we'd love to see that continue with us and our successors giving of their best in their worship of God, who spared nothing in giving to us. Some might say it's a bit hilarious, if not ridiculous, to be investing in a world class pipe organ, when we could have had a perfectly adequate one for half the price. But we want to do our absolute best in our worship of God, to offer him our utmost. We want to continue to attract the best musicians to lead us in our worship, so in 100 years time, magnificent worship will still be happening in this place. To use a very apt metaphor, we've pulled out all the stops to leave a magnificent legacy. Isn't it hilarious? We want to be a community where people are loving God and learning to love each other and are inspired to love and serve their neighbor in 100 years' time.

To make that happen, let's all strive to be hilarious givers, giving out of abundance as we look towards the future. Amen.