

I'd like to begin my sermon this morning with a story – a true story about two lakes. The first lake is located in the northern part of Israel. It is Lake Genessaret, or what we more commonly call, the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is truly a lake, not a sea. It is thirteen miles long from north to south and is fed by the Jordan River in the north end. At the south end, the lake empties into the Jordan as it continues its meandering journey south. The land around the Sea of Galilee is the most fertile in all of Palestine and the sea itself literally teems with life – fish, birds and other wildlife. Connected as it is to the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee provides a kind of life blood for all of Israel, and significantly it is shaped almost exactly like a human heart.

The second lake is in the southern part of Israel. Like the Sea of Galilee, this lake is fed by the Jordan River in its northern end. Unlike the Sea of Galilee, this lake tries to hold on to the water it receives; there is no outlet. The dry heat of the climate causes the captive waters of the lake to evaporate as quickly as they pour in from the Jordan River, leaving salty brine instead of living water. No fish can survive in the lake, for it is five times as salty as the oceans. Indeed, the lake has no life at all, which explains its name: the Dead Sea.

Two lakes, both fed by the same river. One gives as generously as it has received; it is teeming with life. The other receives, but refuses to give; it is lifeless and dead. I can't help but wonder whether our Lord Jesus, who was baptized by John in the Jordan River just before it emptied into the Dead Sea and who carried out most of his ministry around the Sea of Galilee, had these two lakes in mind when he uttered the words the Apostle Paul quoted in his farewell sermon to the Ephesians: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Jesus wasn't saying that it is not a blessing to receive. Anyone who has ever received a gift knows what a great joy it is to receive. Watch children eagerly open their Christmas presents, and you'll see expressions of excited joy on their faces. Oh, yes, it is indeed a great blessing and joy to receive! But it is an even greater blessing and joy to give. For if we seek to hold onto what we have received, we discover that like the Dead Sea our joy evaporates over time, leaving us feeling dry and lifeless. But if we learn the secret of freely sharing what we have received with others, we discover that like the Sea of Galilee the joy of receiving is multiplied many times over. Giving completes the circle of grace, and as we grow in the grace of giving, we discover ever-increasing joy and blessing. Jesus is right: it is more blessed to give than to receive.

That's why the special offering that Paul was collecting for the Jewish Christians in Judea from the gentile churches in Corinth and Philippi and Ephesus was so important to Paul. It was not just that the Jewish Christians were in need – they were in deep need, having suffered from a prolonged famine. But Paul also knew that the new converts in Corinth and Philippi and Ephesus were in need, too – in need of learning the deep spiritual truth articulated by our Lord Jesus Christ: that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Paul wanted the gentile Christians to experience for themselves the joy of giving and the joy of learning that we simply can't out give the Lord. For even as the Sea of Galilee is generously sharing its waters with the Jordan River, the Jordan River is simultaneously pouring more water into the sea. Far from running dry by giving all its waters away, the Sea of Galilee grows more full of life the more it gives. That's the way God's grace works. Listen again to Paul's words to the Christians in Corinth:

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you

have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (literally, “a *hilarious* giver”). And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us.

“God loves a cheerful giver.” The Greek word translated as “cheerful” is *hilarus*, from which we get the English word, “hilarious.” Paul is saying that God loves *hilarious* givers – those who enjoy giving so much that they gleefully exclaim, “Yippee! Let me do it again!” According to Paul, giving in the spirit of Christ is like a little child being tossed up into the air by a grown-up. As the child is released into the air she giggles with glee, and as soon as she is back in the grown-up’s hands she shouts, “Do it again! Do it again!”

That spirit of trustful glee we see in the little child being tossed into the air is at the heart of the real spirit of giving. There is a truth about human nature that we often forget: that happiness is a by-product of letting go and giving ourselves and our possessions away in love. We often mistakenly believe that we will become happy by accumulating more and more things. We live in a consumer-oriented society that promises us that we will find happiness if we buy this new outfit or the latest model car or the newest high definition big-screen TV. But we are just fooling ourselves. For, you see, we can’t be greedy and happy at the same time. The only way to find real and lasting happiness is to loosen the tight grip we have on ourselves and our possessions and learn to share – in the same way that Scrooge only found happiness when he quit hoarding and began sharing.

Recent research conducted by the University of British Columbia and Harvard Business School confirms this. Research teams analyzed survey data from 136 countries,

and discovered that *prosocial spending* is consistently associated with greater happiness. Then, to test for causality, they conducted controlled experiments within two very different countries (Canada and Uganda) and discovered that “spending money on others has a consistent, causal impact on happiness.” They sum up their findings in these words: “In contrast to traditional economic thought—which places self-interest as the guiding principle of human motivation—our findings suggest that the reward experienced from helping others may be deeply ingrained in human nature, emerging in diverse cultural and economic contexts.” The fact that there is a causal link between generosity and happiness is not just a principle we find in scripture; it’s written into our own genetic code. As human beings, we are hardwired to be generous. It’s literally part of our DNA and we can’t be truly happy or fulfilled apart from participating in generous activities.

That is why Henri Nouwen described the Christian spiritual journey as a journey from a posture of clenched fists to open hands. As we open our hands and hearts and learn to share what we have received with others, we discover the incredible joy of becoming what Richard Foster, a Quaker theologian, calls “unimpeded conduits” of God’s grace freely flowing in us and through us.

Richard Foster knows from his own experience what that means. He tells of one Christmas when he was 11 or 12 years old that he decided to give a special gift for a boy he knew. The boy had asked for a bicycle for Christmas, but his parents were too poor to give him one. On impulse, Richard decided to give his own ten-speed bicycle to his friend. Foster writes, “As I road on my bike to deliver the gift, I remember singing with new meaning the worship chorus, ‘Freely, freely you have received; freely, freely give.’ What joy and peace I experienced as I peddled and sang!”

I love that story. Can't you just picture the little boy peddling his bike and singing at the top of lungs: "Freely, freely you have received; freely, freely give"? Can't you just picture his face, hair flowing in the breeze with a grin as wide as the heart inside him?

Foster experienced for himself the incredible joy of being an hilarious giver and an unimpeded conduit of God's grace. Now, let me be very personal. I want to be such an unimpeded conduit of God's grace. I'm not there yet. There is much that prevents God's grace from freely flowing through me. Sometimes it's my own hoarding tendencies... Sometimes it is the fear that if I give too freely there won't be enough for me or my family's needs... Sometimes I think it is just because I am by nature cheap (my wife, Shirley, jokes that it's a Gale family trait)... But I don't want to be that way. I want to become more generous, more giving. I want to excel at generosity and become an unimpeded conduit of God's grace. In wanting to excel in generosity I am really taking to heart Paul's advice to the Corinthians: "Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in your love for us – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking" (2nd Corinthians 8:7).

But how? How do we excel in generosity? Well, if we are going to excel in anything, we have to practice. If you want to excel at golf, you have to practice... a lot! If you want to excel at playing a musical instrument, you have practice. It follows, then, that if we want to excel in generosity we also have to practice (I know I do). Adam Hamilton, a United Methodist minister in the States, makes the exact same point in his book, *Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity*:

When we give generously, we become more generous. That is how generosity works. In the beginning, we may be hesitantly generous. We may be reluctant. But something happens to us in the midst of our giving, and we find ourselves

becoming more generous... the more we give, the more generous our hearts become. (page 89)

That's why I practice generosity. I want a more generous heart, and I want to cultivate the habits of the heart that nurture generosity. And so I practice, and keep practicing...

I practice saying an affirming/encouraging word to someone each day...

I practice giving more generous tips when I am in restaurants...

And I practice giving more generously through the offering at worship...

PAR is a great way to practice generosity.

Let me emphasize that going on PAR is purely voluntary... But for those who choose to go on PAR it can be a helpful way to practice the habits of the heart of a generous steward. It's sort of like the automatic debit that comes out of my bank account each month to pay my monthly dues at the YMCA – knowing I have already paid, encourages me to get there for my regular workouts and become more physically fit. I know I need regular exercise for my heart – I had a heart attack and bypass surgery back in 2000. Going on PAR is like a different kind of exercise regimen that strengthens our hearts to become more and more generous.

“But,” you protest, “If I give through PAR, I won't have anything to put in the offering plate when it is passed around on Sunday mornings.” Well, that concern has been addressed in the program. Cards are available so that you can have a symbolic gift to put in the offering plate each Sunday: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow! This card is a symbol of the gift I/we have made by Pre-Authorized Remittance.”

*(Please note that if you are presently giving to the church through weekly offering envelopes and decide to switch to giving monthly through PAR beginning in 2017, you should notify Mary Johnston in the church office by **Monday, November 27th**. The last week of November, Mary will be preparing 2017 offering envelopes for distribution beginning the first Sunday in December, and she uses a different*

numbering system in her software program to track those who give through offering envelopes and those who give through Pre-Authorized Remittance.)

I began my sermon with the story of two lakes. I would like to close my sermon with the story of two people who, each in their own way, express what it means to excel in generosity. The first story is about a woman who decided, with some reluctance, to go on PAR. She decided to specify a monthly deduction from her bank account equal to the amount she had been giving through her weekly offering. “I figured that was a stretch for me, since I wasn’t always in church, whereas the automatic debit would come out of my account as if I were in church every Sunday.” I filled out the form and sent it in, and in the meantime I kept giving through my offering envelopes like I always did while I waited for everything to be set up through my bank and the church. Several months later I received my tax statement from the church showing my charitable receipt for my donations to the church. I was startled to learn that my givings to the church had doubled. I’d been on PAR all along and never knew it. And what startled me even more, I never missed it! I laughed out loud at the little joke that I had played on myself, and I decided right then and there to double the amount I gave through PAR. After all, if I didn’t miss it, I didn’t need it. But there are hundreds of people who benefit from the ministries of the church who do.” That woman was discovering what it means to be an hilarious giver.

The second story took place in the city of Chicago. A man drives into a run-down section of Chicago on business and leaves his brand new sports car parked at the curb while he goes into a nearby office building for a scheduled meeting. When he comes out of the building, he finds a small boy gazing at the car with wonder in his eyes. The man asks, “Do you like my car?” The boy replies, “Mister, I think that is the most beautiful

car I have ever seen.” The two just stand there for a few moments silently admiring the car. Then the man says, “My brother gave me that car as a birthday present.” “Wow!” exclaims the boy, obviously impressed. Then he asks, “Do you know what I wish mister?” The man thought he knew but politely asks, “No, what do you wish?” After a few moments, the boy replies, “I wish I could be a brother like that.”

The good news of the gospel is that we all have just such a big brother in Jesus Christ. He has given us so much more than the keys to a shiny new car. He has given us the keys to the Kingdom of God when he offered his very life for us by dying on the cross. And through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, he gives us the capacity to be brothers and sisters like that to one another. The motto of the Canadian Blood Service is true: “It’s inside you to give.” Won’t you experience for yourself the joy of giving and what it means to be an hilarious giver? Won’t you resolve in God’s grace to become less and less like the Dead Sea and more and more like the Sea of Galilee?

*Sermon preached by Rev. Herb Gale
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