The Apostle Paul writes, "God loves a cheerful giver." The original Greek word he used was hilaron for cheerful, which translates into English as hilarious. Actually I prefer hilarious, because it is a word that goes way beyond cheerful, as if we can't control some inner outpouring of emotion. It also tickles my funny bone and I can't help but try to spread some of the hilarity around as I begin this sermon on Stewardship, a topic generally considered to be "no laughing matter."

There's an old stewardship joke about the minister who encouraged the congregation to "Give until it hurts!" Unfortunately, the congregation had a very low threshold of pain. And then there's the one about a visitor to a church, who asked a congregant the question, "What do you stand for in this Christian church?" The congregant answered, "We stand for three hymns and the doxology."

In all seriousness, often humor challenges us to look at the heart of an issue. How much do we give and why do we give? These are not easy questions and there are no simple answers. What does it mean to be a Christian in today's society? What do we do after we say, "I believe... you know..., I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." Do we have an active responsibility to make a difference in the world? What does it mean to us collectively to give, and more specifically, what does it mean to you as an active disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ?

I'm pretty sure by now you have heard the standard Stewardship Sermon. It goes something like this. Everything we have comes from God: the air we breathe, the water we drink, life itself, our planet and the universe, God's love, his gift to us of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, eternal life everlasting, and the list could go on and on. Then why can't we just give back to God what is God's? Seems simple, doesn't it? I don't know about you, but the problem for me is that I always seem to fall short. I somehow forget that basic truth in the pressures of everyday living—and then there's my rational mind and academic training that get in the way. It takes a huge amount of faith. And where does that faith lead me to? I keep on searching: to be a better husband, to be a better father, to do the right thing, to make a difference in the world and ultimately it returns me to where I began: I'm searching to know God better.

I wonder what it is that God wants me to do. How much does God want me to give? The problem with trying to answer that question directly is that we never know enough about God to be able to say what he wants. Our assumptions just fall short; they lack the beauty, the mystery and the grandeur that only God can give. The only thing I know for certain is that God loves us.

That love for us is the most difficult for me to express when I try to describe it to my children. It's like trying to describe the most bountiful, most majestic valley whose breath, width and depth is infinite and immeasurable. It's a thing that keeps giving and giving, sustaining our bodies and souls. All of my words, my descriptions and images just fall short of what it is that I see and feel before me. But it is a love that is so strong, an act of giving so large that its example is there to show us the way.

Those familiar words, "am I my brother's keeper?" or "love thy neighbor," haunt me for obvious reasons; what is the limit of our responsibility for giving and caring for others? God's love for us
seems to be about giving and caring unconditionally. Unfortunately it doesn’t come with a rule book of numbers at Stewardship time.

Sometimes I try to listen to what the Holy Spirit tells me about giving. Well, to be honest, I’m afraid that I’m somewhat too cerebral as a Presbyterian to hear the number the Spirit has for me; or not Pentecostal enough. “Spirit, could you give me the exact number, round it off to the nearest dollar, tell me exactly what to do.” But if the Spirit answers, I don’t seem to be able to hear it.

I often think about what Jesus would say to us about giving? Would he challenge us to give everything away and follow him or was it just that rich man he was talking to? He’d probably tell us it’s not really ours anyway. This option never seems too attractive to any of us unless we truly want to follow in the footsteps of someone like Mother Theresa or any other universally acknowledged modern day saint. I worry that the loving Jesus I learned about in Sunday school would be more like that Jesus the iconoclast, with a capital "I". I know what he’d say: "we don’t do enough; we don’t love enough, give enough, care enough, heal enough, speak out enough and stand up enough.” With all of our failings, I often wonder if Jesus would even join our church today; I don’t know.

Then there’s John Calvin, he had a lot to say, volumes in fact, about time, money and being one of, “God’s stewards.” In a nutshell, he would tell us that no amount of giving can help our brokenness; neither money nor good works can buy away our sins or give us salvation. His ideas are very freeing to us today but for the early puritans, as some have written, his theory of predestination was one of the loneliest and most uncertain places to be.¹ Not wanting to get mired in a heavy theological discussion, especially with a few ministers in the sanctuary, I’m going to leave him alone and look elsewhere to challenge myself to think about giving.

For me, scripture always seems to be the place I return to start my journey. So, the place I want to take you this morning is back to a time in that part of the Bible where early Christianity takes root in the Roman Empire against all odds, back to today’s reading.

St. Paul is trying to build a Church. Let me set his world in context for you. The Roman Empire in the first century of the Christian era was the only super power of its time. The essence of its existence was global domination and conquest. It was a society that was all about itself and the power of the state. Its people were among the most self indulgent the ancient world has ever known; they wanted bigger, better and more of everything. The public baths may have made them the cleanest of the ancients on the outside, but coed naked bathing and the availability of every imaginable vice made them impure. It was a society of haves and have-nots, built on the backs of human slaves. Human life was not worth much and if someone died, they were easily replaced because it was all for the glory of Rome, a society in my opinion that was morally bankrupt and spiritually empty.

That’s the big picture. Paul’s ministry is more familiar to us. Christianity is not the official state religion, an anomaly in the ancient world where there was no concept of the separation between church and state. Paul can’t just tax people to raise money and he has to appeal to them to support the church and its mission in the world. It’s not much different than today in this respect.

Paul is struggling to build a church community. The larger message he brings is the same one we bring today; it’s the good news. It is the story of God’s love for us as expressed in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is so powerful, so true, and so hopeful a message about how to love and how to give that it is both the point of our beginning and the end.
of all our journeys. God’s act of love and grace, in freely giving us his only son, is the act of supreme sacrifice that has been told and retold for nearly two thousand years and celebrated in today’s Christian churches throughout the world.

The reading today is Paul’s second letter of appeal for the collection, and this is our second week of appeal in this Church also. There is a strong mission component to his message but ultimately it’s about giving. According to Paul, “the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” Ancient allegories always seem to be agrarian in nature because it made sense to them, but today, we’d say it much more straight forward, something like, “You get out of something what you put into it.” I can almost hear echoes of my parents and teachers in the secular world saying this. But for me, that translation is too selfish and too limiting. Keep in mind that Paul is talking about giving as noted on either side of this verse; it’s a reassurance. I believe the real message is, if you buy into this system of giving, then this larger system of giving buys into you. In some sense it is, I think, the foundation for our idea of a social safety system, of people helping each other.

Paul goes on to say, we don’t have to do the actual work, we just have to supply the resources and it will be multiplied. “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.” In agrarian economies, resources were commodities, but today it is money, our pledge of support. Paul is also clear that this is something you should want to do and not because you’re pressured to do so. There is no litmus test anymore. “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” For me, it is the most mature, most liberating way of thinking about giving beyond the explicit covenants of the Old Testament.

And here’s what happened; the early Christians gave generously and helped each other. By the year 250 of the Christian era, Christianity had become a state within a state and a crisis had occurred in the Roman Empire; Christianity had become a real threat. What was their crime? They took an oath to be good, not to defraud anyone and to help each other. There was one other thing, they weren’t worshipping Caesar either. Christians could be arrested for just being; it was a capital offence. The emperor wanted public sacrifice so he rounded up as many Christians as he could and made martyrs of them. The end result is this persecution fails. What’s the appeal of Christianity? Every person is made in the image of God. People are recognized as having individual value, hope, and salvation through our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. And because they helped each other, they formed a collective social safety system.

I’ve read that it was bad wine that conquered the Roman Empire. Yes, overindulgence contributed to it, but it was really a paradigm shift, a change in values that conquered the greatest military empire in the world. Emperor Constantine makes Christianity the official religion of the Empire in a little over a half a century later and the Roman Empire moves from one of military conquest to a spiritual one.

So where does this all lead us today? It brings us back to those difficult questions I asked in the beginning. What does it mean to be a Christian? What is the Church’s role in today’s society and how does this relate to giving? I often hear, “doesn’t government take on this responsibility of a social safety net and what can the Church really do? Well, the truth is that the safety net has lots of holes. Sometimes it looks like a doughnut hole to the elderly; just ask my parents whose medicine costs exceed their property taxes. Sometimes it’s a hole that’s so large an entire city can fit into it; just ask the folks in New Orleans. Sometimes that safety net doesn’t
count when you’re not a citizen; are they God’s people also? The Church does play a vital role in filling those holes, but our work is more than just this.

The work of the postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida is not widely known outside academic circles but his ideas about the role of religion in today’s society are profound. He says, “Religion is responsibility, or it is nothing at all.” It’s that same responsibility that I feel the early Christians had. That connection between faith and this sense of responsibility has challenged me to look at the very core of what we really stand for. The enormous responsibility I felt when I became a father has made my faith grow and in turn has broadened my sense of responsibility for giving and caring in the world. It is my desire for my children, God’s children, to grow in their faith, to give them a sense of this responsibility. It is also important that their faith be a source of comfort and support. This is why our Church School and youth programs are so important to me. Our young people need all of the help they can get especially in the light of events like Columbine.

This responsibility of the Church today goes beyond just caring for people who fall through the cracks of our social safety system. It is as much as possible to speak out for what’s right. It leads me to advocate values and ethics with regard to how we treat the poor, the underprivileged, and the voiceless, for proper social and economic justice and for proper government and private resources. Our pledge of money provides the resources that exemplify for all to see how we care for each other and how we treat each other. It is an ethic and ethos that constantly challenges government, business and institutions to morally do the right thing. And somehow, this noble reason alone also seems to be too limiting. I believe it needs to be underpinned with a true sense of spiritual clarity, a supreme faith in God and the life God wants us to lead, the contributions God wants us to make in the world. We have a responsibility to make a difference when we say, “I believe.”

When I’m searching for answers to the tough questions of how much God wants me to give and whether my extra effort of giving will make a difference in this world, it always comes back to just this: I think of how grateful I am that this church is here. I’m grateful to be able to come here on Sunday and renew myself in faith, to try to find God’s presence and guidance in my life. I’m grateful that the Church is here for my family. I’m grateful that we try to be of help to each other, especially in difficult times. I am grateful for the spiritual and pastoral care our ministers provide. And I am grateful that we reach out beyond our immediate circle to others in need in the community and to the world through our Mission giving. If I didn’t give, this church wouldn’t be here for me or you or these others. So I give, and I do it with money as well as time and talent.

I realize that for some of you, what we are asking for today is a difficult aspect of your faith, making a financial commitment as a proportion of your income. So I would like to leave you with one last thought as you give serious consideration about how much you’re able to give and whether you’re able to increase your pledge. I once read that to the world, your extra effort of giving as an act of faith and grace may make a difference to only one person, but to that one person that act of kindness may mean the world. "And they will know we are Christians by our love." Amen.

Hymn to follow: 2223 They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love
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1 The feelings of loneliness and uncertainty, created by Calvinism, come from the Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought, “Protestant ethic thesis,” p.520.

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