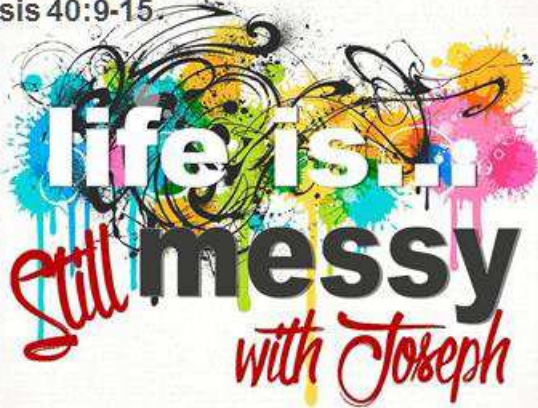




Centered and Soaring

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott
Genesis 40:9-15

October 4, 2015



We see something wonderful about the messy life of Joseph in this chapter. Joseph is in prison and wants to “get out of this place.” It’s easy to imagine Joseph being bitter about his imprisonment, just as we chafe when we feel boxed in and can’t get out. As he said to the cup-

bearer, *I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon.*¹ Yet, there is a reason why Joseph’s spirit soars in the midst of all that is going on around him and gives him the people-eyes to recognize the sadness of both the cupbearer and the baker and the generosity to help them. As Joseph said, *Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.*² We know that throughout all that has happened to him, Joseph continued to center his life in God. This is something we see over and over in the life of Joseph and throughout our own lives: the life centered on our Lord has depth and character and soars with the love and blessings of God.

When I was in college, I remember seeing a poster with a picture of our turning beautiful world as seen from space. The poster’s word said, “Jesus is the still point in our turning world!” I had no idea the expression was adapted from the works of T.S. Elliott. All I knew was that the poster was right! When you center yourself on Jesus all of the other issues in your messy life find a way forward. You are centered on Jesus and soaring with Jesus.

In the case of Joseph, he knows the experience of a messy life when he messed up and when others mess up. That’s why he said to the cupbearer, *and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon.* You will hear the rest of his story in the coming weeks. Suffice it to say, Joseph soars. He is brought before the Pharaoh and is elevated to be the Number Two person in all of Egypt. He rescues his family from famine and is reunited with his dad and his brothers. Even in prison you sense the generosity of his spirit as he serves the jailer and helps out the cupbearer and the baker. In other words, as Joseph centered himself on his God, his life soared with new blessing, with vision, faith, generosity and love. The key to a joyful life is to center and soar—be centered on Jesus and soar with Jesus! I love the picture showing gigantic mountains underneath conveying the huge sense of centered stability and

¹ Genesis 40:15

² Genesis 40:8

the colorful hot air balloons expressing the sense of soaring into the heavens and into life.

Ask yourself if you are following the biblical pattern of centered and soaring? Are you centering your life on our Lord, reading his Word, the Bible, on a regular basis, praying for people and joining in worship? Are you centered in the life of VPC in a small group and having a place to serve? It's what we call Worship + 2. Are you soaring? Are you trusting God to lift your spirit and direct your path as you take the adventure of life our Lord has for you? Is there a spirit of generosity flowing from your soaring heart to those who are around you? The Psalms teach us that we walk together in hard and pleasant places. Whether you are walking in a hard or a pleasant place at this moment of your life, know that our Lord is walking with you, offering encouragement every step of the way—just as we saw God's presence in Joseph's centered and soaring life in every situation.

This morning, we begin a four-week journey that dovetails our study of the messy life of Joseph with our discovery that he was both centered and soaring. November 1st will be Generosity Sunday as we offer our pledges of what we plan to give to God's work here at VPC, using pledge cards or using our online website. During this journey, each of us and each of our families will be prayerfully considering what our Lord would have us give. In our country today, we are seeing some mixed trends when it comes to pledging, as there are some people who have never done it and others who pledge every year. We know pledging is a double win. It helps us as individuals and families to clarify our priorities concerning what we give, and live on, what we save, retire debt with and pay our taxes. It helps our elders make wise plans for our church's life next year based on what we commit to give.

This morning, I want to offer two observations about the concepts of being centered and soaring when it comes our generosity, and then to prepare us to meet our Lord at his table. The two observations I have concern the role of the head gift and the heart gift, which, in fact, combine in this phrase: The essence of giving aligns your head gift and your heart gift as Jesus moves you.

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What do I mean by a head gift? I mean with our heads, with our minds, we need to do some thinking. The Bible teaches many forms of giving. We give secretly to help a needy person. That's called almsgiving. We give to meet some need that concerns us in the church or in the world. That's called an offering. And we give proportionally, that is in proportion

to our income and resources, out of a sense of commitment and godly responsibility to support the Body of Christ.

“For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means.”

II Corinthians 8:3

We learn about proportional giving in verses such as, *For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means.*³ Another way to understand proportionality is the word “percentage.” The classic percentage for giving we see practiced by God’s people is ten

percent of one’s income, which is known as the tithe. As scripture says, “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house.”⁴

Proportional giving is a head gift because it requires the thinking of math. The average American gives just two or three percent of their income to their church. That tells us they are not typically starting with a percentage but they choose some dollar amount and that’s their pledge. No percent is consciously involved. That is a perfectly gracious way to give. On the other hand, proportional giving approaches the math differently. You begin not by choosing a dollar amount but by choosing a percentage you will give with joy: four percent, six percent, eight percent or the ten percent tithe. Then do the math to calculate your gift. Of course this is a genuine sacrifice for many of us. As King David said, *I will not offer... offerings that costs me nothing.*⁵

For our “head gift,” we do the math. The “head gift” also means we ask of ourselves, “Will the recipient of our gifts, such as VPC or whoever or whatever other recipient, use them well? I can say, having been on the inside of congregational leadership for my whole adult life and in this congregation for some time, that our pastors, elders and staff are as capable, thoughtful, thorough and wonderful as any I’ve known. Yes, we’ve made mistakes, some hard ones, but the full arc of the history of our congregation is amazing and wonderful. Our future is simply exciting. Ann Marie and I love to offer ten percent as our tithe here.

So again, the essence of giving aligns your head gift and your heart gift as Jesus moves you. We know that the head gift is, in essence, a math gift but the heart gift is what moves you to do the math and to give. Last week, Pete spoke about the Joseph Principle. This week we have The Hilaros Principle. *Hilaros* [pronounced hill-air-ah-ss] is the Greek word translated

³ 2 Corinthians 8:3

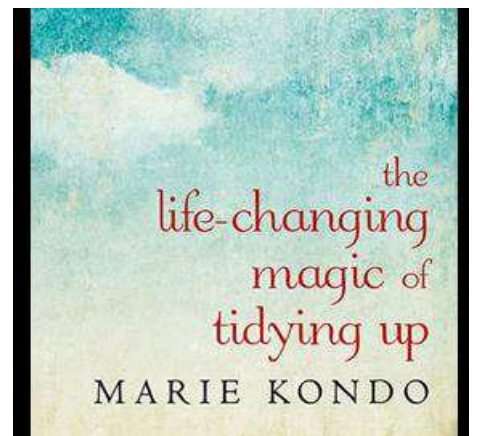
⁴ Malachi 3:10a

⁵ I Chronicles 21:24

“cheerful” in the Bible, “God loves a cheerful, a *hilaros*, giver.” Its just that “cheerful” seems like such an under-translation. *Hilaros* is the root of our English word hilarious or hilarity. *Hilaros* is a deep-seated joy rising out of the depths of you. If cheerful is a pleasant, “ha, ha,” then *hilaros* is a torrent of a HA, HA! It comes from deep within you.

Hilaros is a matter of the heart. I often think of the *hilaros* gift as the heart-melt gift. The core idea is that giving isn’t forced, it’s not a guilt trip, it’s not a requirement and it’s not just a simple cheerful ha, ha. It’s to be positively hilariously elated to be able to give money to meet the needs of God’s people through our church and to trust God to meet our own needs as well. Did you see the picture of the father carrying the dead three-year-old in the refugee crisis and ask how can I help those people? That’s heart-melt. That’s *hilaros*. Are you moved to support the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure or the Cropwalk to end hunger or our wonderful congregation? That’s heart-melt *hilaros*. If you discover a friend is suffering financially and you want to help a little bit secretly, that’s heart-melt *hilaros*. The essence of giving aligns your head gift and your heart gift as Jesus moves you. That’s *hilaros*.

A young woman from Japan by the name of Marie Kondo has become all the rage around the world with her simple book on tidying—The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up. You might wonder why she is so popular but just think of all of the stuff in your home! For Kondo, it’s all about deciding which of your possessions to keep and thereby which ones to discard, from your clothes to your books, papers and mementos and so on. Her key to deciding what to keep is so simple yet so brilliant. She has you pick up each item, such as a piece of clothing, and ask yourself, “Does it spark joy?” And if it doesn’t spark joy, out the door it goes!



As I read her work, I began to wonder how her approach might apply to other areas of life—like my garden or my hobbies or my work or people or even my faith. It makes for a lot to think about. And that’s when it hit me fairly hard, “The heart of the Christian faith is all about sparking joy.” Nehemiah said, *The joy of the Lord is our strength*⁶ Jesus said, *I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full*⁷. So, when you center your life not on yourself, not on all of the many things that press upon you, but you center your life on Jesus, there is this soaring joy that will permeate every other aspect of your life.

⁶ Nehemiah 8:10

⁷ John 15:11

So, what do you suppose would lie at the very core and heart of *hilaros*? Joy and gratitude! That's *hilaros*. If you have *hilaros* in your deepest being, if your generosity flows out of the depths of a melted heart and if it is aligned with your head, then when giving to the needs of God's church and of God's world, it sparks joy in you. There is a short, marvelous video I'd like you to watch that gets at the gifts of heart and head and the essence of *hilaros*. It was made in Thailand so you need to read the English sub-texts, but you'll get it just watching it. On Youtube it's titled, "Giving – Thai Commercial." Please watch it. The link is the following: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rS_EqmoRvns

There are three unforgettable scenes. First, the father showing *hilaros* to the boy and to the beggar. Second, his daughter looking at his hospital bill. We don't know the dollar amounts being listed except obviously they are huge. Third, we felt her awesome wonder that she experienced when she saw the zeros by every charge. "All expenses paid thirty years ago with three packs of painkillers and a bag of veggie soup. Dr Prajak Arunthong." We felt the joy sparking across their lives. We felt *hilaros*.

Between today and November 1st, Generosity Sunday, I invite you to be in serious prayer about what the Lord would have you give. Do it in conversation with your husband or wife if you are married as you consider your shared *hilaros*. May your head giving—the percentage math of a generous mind—be in alignment with your heart-giving, and may it spark joy in you as Jesus moves you!

As we prepare to meet our Lord at his table, recall those two scenes in the video. The daughter looking at the bill with gigantic numbers that force her to put the family restaurant up for sale. And then, the daughter stunned to see all of the charges zeroed out. Joy sparked in your own heart as you watched it! Consider that in your life and mine we owe the most impossible debt to our God, a debt we can never pay due to our own sin. Yet, in the words of Elvina Hall's hymn, "Jesus paid it all, All to Him I

owe; Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow."

God looks at your bill and sees only zeros. "All expenses paid 2000 years ago by the broken body of Jesus and the blood of Jesus." As you receive Holy Communion this morning, the bread in remembrance of Jesus

body broken, the cup in remembrance of his blood shed for you, open your own deepest heart to Jesus. Receive him. Center yourself in him. Then soar with him. Ask him to pour his soaring *hilaros* and sparking joy into you and through you into the lives of countless others. Amen!



hilaros