

It's a Wonderful Letter
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
December 14, 2008

READING

Reading from *It's a Wonderful Life*
Screenplay by Frank Capra; Directed by Frank Capra

GEORGE: What the...hey, what's going on around here? Why, this ought to be Martini's place. Look, who are you?

CLARENCE: I told you, George. I'm your guardian angel.

GEORGE: Yeah, yeah, I know. You told me that. What else are you? What are you? You are hypnotist? ...Why am I seeing all these strange things?

CLARENCE: Don't you understand, George? It's because you were not born.

GEORGE: Then if I wasn't born, who am I?

CLARENCE: You're nobody. You have no identity.

GEORGE: Oh, what do you mean, no identity? My name's George Bailey.

CLARENCE: There is no George Bailey. You have no papers, no cards, no driver's license, no 4-F card, no insurance policy... You've been given a great gift, George: a chance to see what the world would be like without you.

GEORGE: Now wait a minute here. Wait a minute here. Aw, this is some sort of a funny dream I'm having here. So long, Mister, I-I'm going home.

CLARENCE: Home? What home?

GEORGE: Now shut up! Cut it out! You're...You're crazy. That's what I think. You're...You're screwy and you're driving me crazy, too! I'm seeing things here. I'm going home and see my wife and family. You understand that? And I'm going home alone!

[After attempting to see family and friends, George meets Clarence once again]

CLARENCE: Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?

GEORGE: I've heard of things like this. You've got me in some kind of a spell, or something. Well, I'm going to get out of it...I know how, too. I... The last man I talked to before all this stuff started happening to me was Martini.

CLARENCE: You know where he lives?

GEORGE: Sure I know where he lives. He lives in Bailey Park.

CLARENCE: Are you sure this is Bailey Park?

GEORGE: Oh, I'm not sure of anything anymore. All I know is this should be Bailey Park. But where are the houses?

CLARENCE: You weren't here to build them. Your brother, Harry Bailey, broke through the ice and was drowned at the age of nine.

GEORGE: That's a lie. Harry Bailey went to war! He got the Congressional Medal of Honor! He saved the lives of every man on that [military] transport.

CLARENCE: Every man on that transport died. Harry wasn't there to save them, because you weren't there to save Harry. You see, George, you really had a wonderful life. Don't you see what a mistake it would be to throw it away?

SERMON

It's a Wonderful Letter
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

Dear George Bailey,

I did not originally plan to write this letter to you. A month or so ago I thought I would write to your wife, Mary Hatch Bailey, to recognize her steadfast love for you through all kinds of disappointments. Her story intrigues me because she never loved you for your accomplishments or because of your dreams, she loves you simply for who you are. That is a powerful and forgiving kind of love. It is a form of unconditional love. In the presence of that kind of love, we do not have to prove anything to anyone. We do the best we can because that's who we are, and we will be loved no matter what we do. I wanted to write a letter to Mary to recognize her love. That kind of love is not easy to find, and sometimes, for some people, even if they find it, it is even harder for them to believe.

I next thought that I would write this letter to your parents, Ma Bailey and Peter Bailey. It would be very difficult for you to be the man you are today without at least some good teaching from your parents, and having them be present in your life often. I am a fairly new parent and I will have a second child in March, so I began to wonder more what it would take to raise a child in order for them to develop into such a kind and compassionate adult as you. To see your story makes me wonder about your parents. What did they do? What did they teach you? What stories did they share with you? How did they tell you to behave? What consequences did they give you? Did you ever even need consequences, or were you such a good kid all your life? One thing is for sure, I envy your stability and your courage to speak your truth to Henry Potter, the scrooge of a town banker, in support of your own values and in support of those in your town who don't have much but are trying to live a good life.

Though I know your parents were good people, after ten years of working with teenagers I also saw some wonderful children come out of horrible families, and I saw some terribly messed-up children come out of what people would consider “good” families. So I certainly honor the parenting that was done with you, and I certainly believe there is a wealth of stuff to explore with your parents, but I also know that parenting is not the whole story. It is not a simple matter of cause from the parents and effect in the child. The child also has his or her own personality and desires and need for life exploration.

Let me back up for a moment. See, I’m making it a practice each year to write a letter to some character from some Christmas story. Last year I wrote a letter to the ghost, Jacob Marley, from “A Christmas Carol.” This year I knew I would write this letter to someone in the story of “It’s a Wonderful Life,” but I wanted it to be a minor character. You always get the attention in this story. You are always the focus. I suppose, since you are the main character, it would make sense that you get the most attention...but I had intended to focus on someone who usually doesn’t get much attention. I wanted to explore in more depth some minor aspect of this story and bring it to light, to make it larger. But my energy for writing kept returning to you.

Part of the reason, I think, that my energy and attention keep returning to you is because we have been rehearsing your story the past several weeks here at our church. We have been preparing to perform a re-enactment of the 1947 radio broadcast of your story, a broadcast that came out a year after the movie. We are going to perform the re-enactment later this afternoon and this evening. So your story has been on my mind a lot for the past several weeks.

Another reason my energy and attention keep returning to you is that both you and your story are incredibly compelling. Your story is over 60 years old, yet we return to it every year. I suppose this is merely a drop in the bucket compared to the length of time the birth story of Jesus or the faith story of Hanukah have been around, and we often tell those stories every year, too. But even though your story is old, is a little more modern, and maybe that makes it easier to relate to.

This tradition of hearing your story reminds me of my childhood when I sat around at Christmas time listening to my grandparents and relatives tell the old family stories about great-grampa Charles coming over on the boat from Germany to Ellis Island, or listening to my great-aunts, Mae and Mavis, and how they grew up on the farm in northern Wisconsin. Your story, George, feels to me like one of those family stories, like the story of my grandfather.

But I find myself being drawn back to your story for other reasons as well. I am intrigued by the difference between how others see us and how we see our selves. It is clear from your story that you see yourself as an explorer, an adventurer. At an early age you were a member of the National Geographic Society, and you proudly – if somewhat naïvely – proclaimed that someday you would have a couple of harems, and maybe three or four wives! You have plans to see the world. You have travel brochures for Italy, Baghdad, and Samarkand.

Then, because of various life circumstances beyond your control – the death of your father, your younger brother getting married, the stock market crash in 1929 with a run on your bank that took all your honeymoon money – you had to stay in town and were not able to leave Bedford Falls. But you didn’t stay just because you had to, or just because you were a victim of circumstance.

Each one of us, at some point in our lives, or perhaps even at many points in our lives, are victims of circumstance. A good friend moves away. A mother or father dies too young. We were born into an abusive family. A cousin commits suicide. The financial tide changes and we

lose a job. We continue regular check-ups with our doctor, and then suddenly one year the doctor makes a diagnosis of a terminal illness.

So many things in life are beyond our control. So many things occur at random and affect us in painful ways. So many things are beyond our power to change or even find compromise. Our only choice is one of reaction. It is appropriate to grieve, to be sad, to be angry. Sometimes we can be sad or angry for a long time, and even that can be appropriate. But I've been a participant in a life where that goes on too long. Continuing to be sad and angry over an extended period of time eats away at the soul and empowerment and beauty, because everything is seen in that negative light.

So I envy you, in your ability to be dissatisfied, and yet find contentment and love within that dissatisfaction. And eventually, that dissatisfaction becomes smaller and smaller.

But rather than prolonged anger or sadness, you respond over and over in your life with such a sense of duty and responsibility that it is transformed into compassion. See, I don't believe that your only choice is, or was, to stay in Bedford Falls. You could have left when your father died, and just because Henry Potter intended to take over the bank was no reason for you to stay. No one would have faulted you for leaving, not even your best friends, not even your family.

Yet, you decided to stay. Yes, it was your decision. No one forced you to stay. Not your mother, not your uncle, not the Board of the Savings and Loan, not even Henry Potter. Maybe at the time you felt you were a victim of circumstance and that you had no choice. It makes perfect sense to me. Your father worked hard to create a good-hearted business that gave poor people a chance at living a decent life, and you wanted to carry on that legacy. It makes sense to me that at the time, when you were only 22 years old, you saw no other way out.

But even in very dire conditions, we do have options. We may not always have our ideal as a choice, and our options may be very difficult. Sometimes the circumstances in life beyond our control make our options very narrow. But I believe it is important that we understand we do have options – most of the time in life, our options are the choices between our responses. The difference in how we understand our choices is the difference between feeling like a victim, and feeling empowered. Even though you may not have seen it at the time, and even though it may have taken a very special event for you to change your view, I don't believe you were a victim of circumstance. I believe that your many decisions to stay in Bedford Falls were based on love.

An essential ingredient in any good story is an image of transformation. Since I believe a primary purpose of religion is to transform lives, I see a strong parallel between faith and literature. One powerful piece of your story is the transformation you go through from the time when you believed you are worth more dead than alive, to the time when we see you vitally aware of your connections to people around you.

The two ways you saw yourself are at least two of the ways each one of us see our selves. It's like the classic metaphor of our conscience: the little angel on one shoulder and the little devil on the other shoulder. Usually we use this image to represent a moral decision about an external action. That is, if we want a piece of clothing, the devil on one shoulder might whisper, "Awww, go ahead and steal it – you really want it, you really need it, and you'll get more out of it than anyone else. Just because you can't afford it doesn't mean you can't have it...so go ahead and steal it." On the other shoulder, the angel might whisper, "I know you want that item, but you need to pay for it. You don't need it that bad, but if you want it, be patient and save up for it. You have a good job. Lots of people worked hard to make it, and the least you can do is pay the fair share to cover expenses."

In your story, though, the persuasion of the little devil has more dangerous and painful consequences. You listen to the voice that tells you how worthless you are. You listen to and believe the words from Henry Potter that, because of your life insurance policy, you are worth more dead than alive. That voice of shame becomes so strong and seductive that you are willing to give up all your life's work in the Building and Loan, all your friends and family, and give up your love and your wife and your children, to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge.

I hear so many people who listen to that voice. Some are so desperate they want to kill themselves. Most don't go quite that far. Most people just live their lives, quietly beating themselves up, over and over again, believing that they are no good, or believing that they couldn't possibly be much help to anyone. It is a hard and painful place to be. And sadly, long before being in that place kills the body, being in that place kills creativity, it kills any feeling of purpose. It kills the soul.

I wish there was a way to let people know how valuable they are. I wish we could hold up a mirror to people, for us to see how other people see us. Sometimes, I suppose, that could be quite painful. But so many other people, as Henry David Thoreau once said, "lead lives of quiet desperation." Perhaps it might be useful someday to share this letter, out loud, with others. Maybe that would be one way we could share with people how valuable they are.

The advantage you had, George Bailey, is that you didn't just have a small little angel whispering in your ear about one small moral dilemma. You were so fortunate that you had a real angel visit you, and show you the value and meaning you and your life had for so many other people.

Your story is such a vivid reminder of the connections we have with each other, how each one of us touches the lives of others, and the consequences of our actions. It may be that most of us never saved a life, as you did with your younger brother when he was nine. It may be that some people are not as idealistic as you are, or who work in jobs that are far more disheartening than yours. But I can share with you a little of what I've observed here in this church recently.

As I mentioned, we've been working on a radio broadcast re-enactment of your story, and yesterday we had a five-hour rehearsal for it here at the church. For a long time during the rehearsal I just sat looking at all these people around me, doing so many different things to make one big thing work. Some people only had one or two lines during the whole show. Some squeezed in the time for the show between family and work and all kinds of other events with their children. Some people were singers. Some made music. One guy even transcribed and wrote the music. One guy directed it. A whole crew of people diligently created sound effects. A whole bunch of children spent a beautiful winter Saturday indoors with a bunch of adults, just sitting on chairs most of the time, waiting for their turn to speak. And one guy revised the script and directed the show, and spent a lot of time and money and energy to make the whole thing happen. And he had an assistant who took care of a whole slew of details and schedules.

And all this was just this year. They did something similar last year with a whole different batch of people, and the year before that, and the year before that. I just sat there in amazement. I wondered about all the things all those people had to rearrange in their lives to make this happen. I wondered how all our actions affected other people in all our lives. Who had to make special arrangements for childcare? Who had to cancel or postpone a weekend getaway to the north shore? Who had to adjust visiting times for out-of-town family? Who had to put off writing an important paper? And who, even in that context of rehearsing a story about

our inherent value and meaning, who might have been feeling they weren't very important or needed or wanted?

The whole experience made me wonder more deeply about our church in general. I wrote earlier that I feel one of the purposes of religion and faith is to transform lives. In this season of gratitude and confession and thanks, I know my life and my family's life would be very different if this church had not called me to be their minister. From the time I was a seminary student, and then a chaplain resident, and then a stay-at-home dad for a year, my life has been transformed. Not only am I able to provide for my family and help buy a house, but my life has been transformed by all the people here, by all the stories I've encountered, by the faith I've seen in action.

I am not surprised, but I am impressed by the deep desire here in this church to be awake, to grow and be aware of how we affect each other's lives and how we affect the world. We are doing all we can to acquire new land to build a new church. Our Board is looking at governance structures, long-range planning and liberal evangelism. Our seven ministries are discovering ways to get reorganized and revitalized. This includes the Social Justice Ministry, which is beginning to explore new ways to engage the world outside the church walls with more vision, broader participation, and possibilities about partnerships in the community.

George, I remember one point near the end of your story when you return to the bridge where you were about ready to commit suicide. You got your wish to see what the world would be like if you had never been born. And you didn't like it. None of your friends knew who you were, one person had died, one person had been put in prison, your children never existed, and your wife was scared to death of you because she had never met you before in her life. So you ran back to the bridge pleading to Clarence, your guardian angel, to get you back to your old life. On the railing, at night, in the snow, you said, "Clarence, please! I want to live again. I want to live again. I want to live again."

George, I can tell you one thing for sure: in addition to my love for my wife and children, my involvement with this church truly encourages me to live, to be awake, to see the value in every one and everything we do. And though I was not here a few years ago, I've heard the people in this church say to each other, in various ways, "We want to live again." It is a good time to be here. It is a good time to be alive. And look, I believe another angel just got their wings.

[Sound of a bell]