

“Looking Out”

October 18, 2020

A Wonder-Full Life series – Livestream

In the midst of a contentious time in our country, especially in politics, I noticed something as I was looking for information about *It's a Wonderful Life*. There is no shortage of articles – especially lists – of lessons from this film. In fact, it has the distinction of the #1 spot on the American Film Institute's list of Most Inspirational Films. Film critic Roger Ebert wrote, it's “a celebration of the lives and dreams of America's ordinary citizens, who tried the best they could to do the right thing by themselves and their neighbors.”

As I said when we started this series, I hadn't ever seen it in one sitting, but it's a film that gets better the more familiar we are with it. This year, it was especially timely. There's a scene of young George Bailey in 1919 in the middle of the influenza epidemic, then a recession in the late 1920's, and the reality that many people are facing - financial instability and living one crisis away from major difficulty. We hear things differently and notice things – and perhaps relate to these characters and the times they're living in more closely right now.

Even among news sources that tend to go opposite ways politically, commentators agree that this is a good film with something to teach us when it comes to morality, finances, and practical living. Here are a few lessons that might resonate. From David G. Allan: “Your life has purpose. Don't try to keep up with the Joneses. Our lives are full of wonder, it seems, by the mere fact of our interconnectedness.”

From Bob Welch: “Perspective changes everything. Richness and having lots of money are not one and the same.”

From Ron Edmondson: “It's not just about us. We need community. We seldom know the impact we have on others.” And my personal favorite: “Character speaks more loudly than cash.”

Today we see a stark contrast: Mr. Potter and the Bailey's – Peter and George (father and son). If we're honest, maybe we can see ourselves in them, too. There are times when we've been self-focused and eager for power – and when our actions and attitudes have caused others to be bitter and resentful. Mr. Potter doesn't seem to extend much grace to the people around him. Maybe we've struggled to be gracious sometimes.

And hopefully, we can recall moments when we've cultivated love and generosity – when our actions and attitudes reflect God's gracious way and when we've looked out for others rather than just looking out for ourselves. The Bailey's center of caring for

their community makes a difference in others' lives even as it comes at a cost to them. George gives up a lot for others and only sees the impact clearly when the angel Clarence shows him how he has affected his family and community.

We've looked back - becoming aware of how others influenced our thoughts and pattern when it comes to money and giving. We've looked in - thinking about our personal motivation for giving - what we value and why we give. We talked about paying attention to what we value and living with intention when it comes to being faithful stewards of all of God's gifts.

Today we look out - looking at the impact of our giving of money, time, energy, talents, and skills. And it's not meant to illicit a pat on the back for us, though I hope we're inspired by it. The deeper goal is to see the clear connection between generosity and transforming the world - between faith in Jesus and giving.

Hear more of Paul's advice to Timothy from chapter 6:

⁶ Actually, godliness is a great source of profit when it is combined with being happy with what you already have. ⁷ We didn't bring anything into the world and so we can't take anything out of it: ⁸ we'll be happy with food and clothing. ⁹ But people who are trying to get rich fall into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful passions that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have wandered away from the faith and have impaled themselves with a lot of pain because they made money their goal.

¹¹ But as for you...run away from all these things. Instead, pursue righteousness, holy living, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness. ¹² Compete in the good fight of faith. Grab hold of eternal life...

If we want to participate in the Kingdom of God, Paul tells Timothy to call the people to do good, to be generous, and to share. How do we set specific goals for the good we want to do with our time and money? God calls us to give as a response to God's giving to us.

Growing in generosity isn't simply about doing things for God and the church as much as it is becoming a part of what God is doing in the world - participating in God's Kingdom. So it's important to prayerfully consider our goals for what we hope to give to mission and ministry to which God is calling us.

I know someone is thinking, "I can't do it. I can't afford it. I don't have the time." But I'd encourage you to set a goal that you can reach - whatever income or ability or availability - and see what God will do. All of us have something to give. Paul says that the outcome of generosity is a good foundation for the future and the opportunity to "take hold of life that is truly life."

Paul knows that we can be weighed down by the love of money if we're not careful. It's not money itself, but the love of money that can take hold and steer us away from generosity and true joy. And when that happens, we struggle to claim the abundant life that Jesus Christ offers.

There's a difference between just living in our culture and living a Christian life—what Paul calls “truly life.” He's writing as an older mentor to younger Timothy. When we see young adults ready for the real world, we encourage them to dream big dreams and succeed. Many times, we hope that they can be happy, healthy, and wealthy.

But Paul's lesson to Timothy is that happiness doesn't rest in possessions. And if we don't check ourselves on what makes for a meaningful life, our culture's values of acquisition, consumption, and accumulation of possessions will keep on keeping on in us. Generosity, not consumption, is a key value of a meaningful life. Generosity is a spiritual discipline.

To take hold of life that is really life means to gain a new perspective on life. Eternal life is an alternate reality that we have to take hold of. True life is an alternate reality. For Paul, the coming of Jesus Christ interrupted the present time with the eternal. And still that happens when we place our faith in Jesus Christ. Our perspective is different. We realize that things are passing; we are not. I thought about that truth a lot this week as my family experienced the death of two loved ones – both of them special to me; both of them people of faith and joy. Professor Christian Eberhart writes, “The love of money provides temporary satisfaction, but the love of God lasts forever.”

Our culture where competition and self-interest thrive would say that acts of self-sacrifice are limiting. But real life comes through self-giving. Generosity and good works come from faith lived out. Paul calls Timothy to stay focused on God's ways. And we need to listen just as much today.

Pastor James Harnish offers some wisdom as we consider our life as stewards – managers – of God's gifts. He says, “Charity is measured in the difference it makes in the one who receives it; stewardship is measured more in the difference it makes in the steward - the one who is giving.” So how do our money practices - earning, giving, spending, and storing/investing - how do they impact the Kingdom of God? Looking out helps us see the impact, but we're also called to hear the challenge: whom are we looking out for?

I offer you some snapshots of giving. This is not an exhaustive list, but just some images that remind us of what George Bailey learned - that our giving matters and our lives are connected to our community and beyond.

SHOW SLIDESHOW: impact of giving – some older pics and some new

- Putting together back to school blessing bags or treats for our 80+ friends (and delivering them!)
- Being a part of committees and team – and working together to accomplish goals for the work of ministry – even getting up in a really high lift or cleaning out the Memorial Garden pond
- Learning together in Bible study (even over Zoom!) or during VBS or GriefShare
- Using our skills like cooking or making a bed for Family Promise, or sewing to make masks or to create something special like dolls for the youngest Family Promise guests or a small stone that touched our hearts and gave us hope as we were at home
- Serving others with resources like snack mix for Kids’ Food Basket or a meal at Supper House or supplies for Ross Park teachers – and giving our time in a classroom
- Putting our feet to the pavement for Missions like Disaster Relief within our state or the CROP Walk to help our community and the world
- Supporting ministry with your gifts so that our sign can be a blessing to our community and so that we can offer a bike and chalk night in our parking lot

Here’s what these pictures don’t show – writing cards, spending time with others (ministry of presence), praying for others, and so much more that goes on, but certainly doesn’t go unnoticed. Our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness matter every single day. Even today as we present Bibles to children and youth, we’re making an impact on their lives – even an eternal impact. Taking hold of life that is truly life - being generous, sharing, practicing gratitude and being content - and looking out for one another knowing that we’re called to care for each other as beloved children of God.

I’ll be praying and praying for you as we consider our faith commitments for the coming year and celebrate the ways that we can be stewards of Jesus’ dream and workers for God’s Kingdom – looking out for what God is doing and looking out for others in Jesus’ name.

Thanks be to God. Amen.