

“Living Wonderfully”
Jeff Clinger
December 24th, 2006

John 10:1-10

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

This Advent Steve and I have been preaching messages inspired by or based off of some of the popular Christmas movies that are shown so often during this time of year and that have become such a part of our American celebration of Christmas in the last decade or two. On the first Sunday of the series Steve preached about “The Miracle on 34th St.” and the miracle that exists when people come to believe in the things that even common sense tells them they shouldn’t – he left us all with the challenge to believe and to see the miracles of God at work all around us, while at the same time opening ourselves up to the Miracles here on 35th St.

On the second and third Sunday, switching off with the Children’s Musical and the Cantata, I preached a message about the “The Christmas Story” and this films important lessons about the crucial role that community plays in the formation of individuals. This film challenges us all, during Christmas and always, to find ways to

live our lives in community, not just with other Christians, but with all of our neighbors in our greater communities.

And this morning as we gather to worship, Advent is almost over. All four of the outer candles have been lit on our advent wreath and in just a few hours we will begin gathering together again for our Christmas Eve Services. In the time that we share together this morning though I want us to take some time to look at another film that is truly a Christmas Classic, the 1946 film, "It's a Wonderful Life."

I imagine that the film is familiar to most of you, but for the sake of recap, the basic story is this... George Bailey, an investor and a family man, is hit hard by the loss of a loan and the scheming of Mr. Potter, a devious businessman. It is Christmas Eve; he is broke, and feeling suicidal. As George considers ending it all his guardian angel, Clarence, literally falls from the sky and ends up taking him on a journey. The journey shows George what Bedford Falls, his small hometown, would have been like, if he had never been born, if it hadn't been for all of the good deeds that he has done throughout the years. By the time they reach the end of their journey George realizes how good his life is and that he truly has lived and has a wonderful life.

As I spent time preparing for this sermon over the last couple of weeks I dug around online and found a lot of sermons that have been preached about this movie in different denominations and different places over the last couple of years. As I looked at these other sermons to see what had been done with them I was amazed to find that most all of them fit into one of two categories. Or maybe even that they all seemed to be one of two different sermons.

The first batch of sermons pretty much followed the story line of the movie substituting the listener for George Bailey. They asked the hearer to ponder what the world would be like if they had never been born. And for the most part they ended with the point that we all have gifts, that we have all impacted the lives of others, and that we have all lived wonderful lives.

The other batch of sermons did a pretty similar thing, but instead of substituting the listener they substituted Jesus for the character of George Bailey. These tended to be very salvation focused sermons. They asked the hearer to ponder what the world would be like if Jesus had never been born. And for the most part they ended with the point that without Jesus the world would be a mess and that we all must accept Jesus into our hearts to have a wonderful life because Jesus himself had lived the most wonderful life.

I saw some sermons that were really bad and a couple that were decent in each of these categories, but I wasn't overly impressed with anything. And while I'm sure that some great sermons have been preached taking both of these approaches, neither of them seemed appropriate for our time together on this fourth Sunday of Advent. This morning, as we look at and talk about the film "It's a Wonderful Life" I'm going to ask you all to use your imaginations with me for a little while. Ask yourself the question, what if?

What if... what if we are currently living our lives in that period of the film where Clarence is showing George what life would be like if he hadn't lived – if he weren't living? Does that make sense? What if we're not really living now, at least not the lives that God intends for us? What if the world around us, our own lives, the lives of our loved ones, the lives of strangers in our community, aren't reaping the benefits that they could if we were living the lives that God intended for us to live?

In the gospel of John, Jesus uses a parable to talk about what it might mean to truly be living. In the tenth chapter of John we find the following. *'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.'* Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, *'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'*

Thinking about the film "It's a Wonderful Life" and this parable of Jesus' over the last week I came to a realization. We are currently living in a time dominated by thieves; thieves who try to lead us astray, who try to convince us that life is about a whole variety of different things, things that ultimately kill and destroy. And while Jesus promised that he came so that all "may have life, and have it abundantly," there are way too many of us, myself included, who are not living that promised abundant life.

While Jesus offered the promise of abundant life, too many of us aren't living that life today. In the United States, a predominately Christian country, too many of us are

following the thieves of entertainment, of consumption, and of work rather than following the good shepherd. Please understand that this morning I preach to myself as much as to any of you. I know I don't do a good job of avoiding these traps, and I know that I have room to grow as a human being too. And I think it is important to acknowledge that we all have room to grow and that we can't make these changes in our lives over night. But let's take just a couple of minutes now to examine our lives as Clarence gave George the opportunity to examine his, seeing what the world looks like when we're not truly living.

The first thief that too many people in America are following today is the thief that entices us and encourages us to entertain or amuse ourselves to death. In the mid-80's Neil Postman wrote a book called, "Amusing Ourselves to Death." In this book Postman essentially argued that as television replaced print as the primary form of cultural communication we lost the ability to think critically about the material being presented. Written material is made up of a series of assertions that build to make an overall point and eventually state a conclusion. When reading these materials we can agree or disagree with the point being made. On the flip side of this, television presents with theme music, lights, costumes, hairdo's, and more – a person cannot choose to agree or disagree with a fast food commercial, these commercials just are. It could be summed up as a difference between television exciting our emotions rather than stimulating our intellect as print does.

As media has continued to shift to more television based, we have in many ways lost the capacity to stimulate our intellect or to ask critical questions. And each day more and more Americans are spending more and more time sitting in front of flat screens –

televisions, computer screens, and other parts of technology that play music, flash lights, and condense anything they have to share down into short, few second sound bites. If it's not entertaining, we can't or won't focus on it or give it our attention. As we increasingly want to be entertained, with television, movies, video games, computer games, and more – we decreasingly ask the tough questions and engage the world around.

The second way in which we as a culture fall into the trap of following a thief, is in regards to our consumption – this is one area in which I particularly struggle. Studies continue to show, increasingly each year, that as a country we are eating ourselves to death. God has created us for and Jesus calls us to lives abundant, but we have gotten to the point as a culture where we too often live to eat rather than eating to live. In 2000, poor diet – including over-eating and lack of exercise was the second leading killer in our country behind tobacco related deaths. The margin between the two was not very big at all with poor diet contributing to 16 percent of deaths while Tobacco use contributed to 18 percent. The gap between these two has narrowed drastically as over the years too. In 1990 these numbers were 14 percent for diet and 19 percent for tobacco.

In 2005 between 25 and 29 percent of Indiana's population was listed as obese or overweight. This put us in a category behind only three other states in the country. And the thing is, we know the science, that too much food and certain kinds of food are bad for us. That doesn't seem to stop many of us, myself included, from overeating when we're stressed, tired, bored, lonely, and more. Our relationships with food are unhealthy and continually leading to our poor health and even death. Jesus promises the gift of abundant life – are we really living as if that is a reality? I am afraid many of us are not.

Finally, many of us are following the thief of work-a-holism. In our culture people are literally working themselves to death. A study out of Indiana University recently found that 63 percent of Americans are working more than 40 hours a week and 40 percent regularly work more than 50 hours per week. Outside of our weekly work schedules we work ourselves to death during the year. Each year more than \$21 billion dollars worth of vacation time goes unclaimed in this country. Each year American workers are taking 2.5 weeks less vacation than their Japanese counterparts and 3 months less vacation than our western European ones.

While there is already such a disparity between the number of hours we work and the numbers that our colleagues overseas work that gap continues to grow. Studies have indicated that American workers would like to be able to work more while most European workers would like to be working less. We are working more hours each week, and more weeks each year, but why? So we can afford our entertainment? To be able to buy our food? And as we work more and more we have less time to process news, think critically, and ask questions, we eat more and more meals on the run, and consume more and more food out of stress and anxiety – it is a complicated system this thing called life. And I think we have to ask ourselves, are we truly living, as God created and intended for us to be living?

Now let's step back to the film "It's a Wonderful Life" for just a minute. The title is it is a wonderful life... and maybe part of our problem is a misunderstanding what wonderful truly means. Dictionary.com defines wonderful in a couple of ways that can give us pause to think. First of all, it states that wonderful means excellent, great or marvelous. Additionally, it states that wonderful means admirable. Is this life that we've

examined above – a life of amusing, eating, and working to death an excellent life? Is it a life that is admirable? Not as far as I'm concerned...

And this is the world in which we're currently *not* living. All around the world people are hungry and cold and naked, people in our own neighborhoods are depressed, isolated, feeling alone, we yearn for connections, for a life that is worth living and we keep trying to find that life through entertainment and food and work and you know what folks – it doesn't seem to be working.

This weekend we celebrate the birth of Christ who grew up and lived in ways that challenged the cultural wisdom of the day, who came into this world and preached and taught so that all persons might have life abundantly. The gift of Christ that we celebrate this weekend is a gift that we all too often take for granted. Our tendencies to hide in the entertainment of the world, to over eat, to over work – they aren't living the lives that God created us for – they aren't living the abundant lives that God intended for us.

It just might be that the best gift we could give to ourselves, to our loved ones, and to the world at large this Christmas would be to find ways to begin truly living. May you, especially this Christmas, but always, find ways to honor God with your lives. Live for God, live for Christ, and don't live for those thief's that ultimately bring death, but seek to live a life truly full of wonder.