

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JULY 3, 2011
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scriptures: Psalm 33:10-22; Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

“What Are You Looking For?”

The Christmastime movie, *“It’s a Wonderful Life,”* is the story of George Bailey, a young man who graduates from high school with visions of an adventuresome and wonderful life ahead of him. His plan was to see the world and to return to go to college, and, in his words, “find out what they know.” George wanted to build things—bridges, skyscrapers and the like. He thought that the most exciting sounds in the world were anchor chains, plane motors, and train whistles.

Through a series of events which touched his life, George Bailey never did see the world and do great things which would make him famous. His father’s death and his older brother’s offer of a good job with his wife’s father’s company— were two of the reasons that George never did leave “good old Bedford Falls.” Instead, George married Mary, they had three children, he kept the Savings and Loan going, and he build a subdivision of houses for working people so that even the average citizen could own a home. His older brother went to war and became a hero, while George stayed home to run the draft board and lead all kinds of volunteer activities to help the war effort. He was not allowed to enlist because he was deaf in one ear, due to a punctured ear drum which he got when he was young and dived into an icy pond to save his brother who went through the ice and would have drowned.

Then came the horrible Christmas Eve when Uncle Billy misplaced a bank deposit, the bank examiner arrived, and it looked like George Bailey would go to jail. Nasty old Mr. Potter make things worse by telling George he was worth more dead than alive. That’s when Clarence, George’s guardian angel was sent to the rescue. George was about to commit suicide believing that the world would have been a better place had he not been born, but due to Clarence’s fast thinking it did not happen.

Through the eyes of the guardian angel, George is made to see that all along the way he has been an important influence on the lives of many other people. The final scene of the movie is a heartwarming Norman Rockwell-like picture, the kind that director Frank Capra was so good at creating. George Bailey discovers that he has indeed had a wonderful life, even though it is nothing like the one he had planned for himself.

Jesus had some cutting words for his listeners. He said that they were children who sit around wanting something, but when they get what they want they are almost immediately wanting to try something else. It makes me think of one of my grandsons who when he was around five or six years old loved to do what he called “arts and crafts.” I had a large box full of paper, scissors, crayons, markers, stickers, glue, glitter, paint, and all the kinds of stuff which are supposed to spark creativity. For each arts and crafts session, I would spend time spreading out newspapers to protect the table surface. Then, I would lay out the materials, etc., and it would take some time to do it. The grandson would begin right away to create something or other. By the time I finished laying everything out, he would have finished his project— usually something involving a lot of glue and spilt glitter. (Why do kids like glue and glitter so much?) He’d say to me, “Grandma, can we bake cookies now?” or “Can we go outside now?” I had the feeling with him that I was always a few steps behind trying to catch up.

Jesus explained the problem. He said, look what you did with John the Baptist. John was a wild-looking man who wore animal skins, had a long straggly beard and ate weird food like locusts dipped in honey. He was formidable to behold and to listen to. John did not spare people’s feelings. He called them a “generation of vipers” and told them they better repent, or else! John was a Nazarite, not Nazarene which means being a citizen of Nazareth. A Nazarite was someone who was dedicated to God, and who did not cut the hair on his head, did not drink alcohol, and did not touch dead bodies. John the Baptist was probably thin, austere, and certainly not the kind of person people invited to their homes for a delicious dinner and friendly conversation.

For John the important message was “The Kingdom of God is at hand. The Messiah is coming. Get ready, this is no time to have business as usual.”

Jesus, on the other hand, often had dinner at people’s homes. In fact, it was not unusual for him to invite himself. He ate and drank with friends, and even with the ones considered the greatest sinners of all – the tax collectors like Matthew.

Jesus more or less told the people that they didn’t know what they wanted. They criticized John for not being “one of the guys.” And they criticized Jesus for being a “party animal.” What were they looking for? What kind of Savior would make them happy? They were like my grandson going from one thing to another without really knowing how to stick with something very long. The people of Jesus’ time were in reality looking for someone who they could make into their own image. What would the Savior of the world look like, be like? Well, he would have to be the one each of them could create for themselves. In other words, in their imaginings they were making idols. Instead of wanting to worship the Son of God who was there among them, they kept hoping that one who could pass their inspections would come along. They liked to worship the imaginary God of their own creation instead of the God who had created them. What they were looking for would eventually lead to their destruction.

We the people of the United States of America can learn from this story about Jesus. We need to look at our lives like Jimmy Stewart was forced to do in his role of George Bailey. We need to see that what we have here is a “wonderful life.” It really is! If you do not feel grateful for the gift of life with which God has blessed you, what a shame that is. Is our country perfect? Of course not! Do we have problems? You better believe it! Right now the United States Congress is trying to figure out a solution for one of our biggest problems– the horrible national debt.

In 235 years our country has had many big, big problems to solve. And each

time there have been men and women of valor and intelligence who have put everything they have into solving the problem at hand. In so doing many of them have sacrificed a lot. I read a biography of John Adams, our second President; and recently saw a miniseries on his life from before the Declaration of Independence through the time of his presidency. The sacrifices he and his family made were so amazing! The salary of the President and the appalling condition of the White House living quarters, caused Abigail Adams to tell her husband that she needed to return to the farm to run it in order to assure that there was enough money for their family to live on. The statesmen of those days did such hard work, and it must have been so frustrating.

People today are so impatient, aren't **we**? We want instant everything! But when John Adams was in France and his wife and children were back in America on their Massachusetts farm, news was always slow in coming. One of the children could be deathly ill, and he would not hear about it until the child either survived or died. Think about conducting diplomacy in that manner. Today we are accustomed to the fact that the Congress can carry on business while the President is at a summit of world leaders thousands of miles away on another continent. And if an important bill is passed which needs the President's immediate signature— there is technology which can make that happen.

We Americans are going to have to find a way to regain our patience and our self-sacrificing attitude toward being citizens of this great country. We are going to have to save our nation by being the people our country needs. The pioneers who crossed a vast wilderness of treacherous rolling rivers and impassable mountains were brave. With nothing but a will to make a better life in a great new land they were not the self-pitying kind of people. They worked their fingers to the bone, shared each others joys and sorrows- and there were plenty of them— and they led the way for so many others who came after them.

We Americans are going to have to get used to the idea that life is a process. A young person cannot expect to go from high school into the kind of job his grandfather has after forty years. Working at McDonalds is a privilege! A couple cannot expect to start out with everything their parents have earned through their own sweat and tears of twenty or thirty years. People have to get used to the idea that real life is more like what George Bailey ended up with in Bedford Falls, than it is the kind he dreamed of having.

What will our future in this country be like? I don't know, and you probably don't know either. There are lots of questions. Will churches be counted on to do even more than they already do because the government will not have the funds? Will people have to work longer and retire on less? Will the cost of higher education become so high that a great percentage of our young people will not be able to go to college? What about health care and Social Security?

One thing I do know. The challenges will be difficult for a lot of people, the kind of people who sit on the street corner thinking about some perfect world but doing nothing about the world as it is. Hear again the words of Jesus.

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

“We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn.”

Let's vow not to be like them! On this great weekend of celebration of independence and freedom, let's dedicate ourselves, our **own** selves, to being better Christians and better Americans. Let us determine to put Jesus Christ first in our lives. Then, let us determine to develop again our individual and distinctive American

character. We ask God to make us like the Pilgrims who made worship of God and living by his Word the model for their lives. And we ask God to give us the proud spirit of the immigrants who have come to this country, bringing their skills and determination to have a better life. We ask God to give us courage in facing the unknown, like those who lived out on the prairie— with the danger of drought, fire, grasshoppers, illnesses, and threats of attack.

Friends, those people are in our blood. We can be like them. We can be people of good and honest character. You might protest and say, “I’m just a common person. What difference can I make?” Abraham Lincoln was just a poor, common, self-taught, gangling, homely man from farm country in Illinois who became one of our most important Presidents. Wilbur and Orville Wright were just two guys who worked in a bicycle shop who used their spare time to invent the airplane. We are descended by blood and by nationality from a long line of regular Americans: Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, Helen Keller, Jane Addams, John Steinback, Henry Ford, Christa McAuliffe, Mark Twain, and the passengers on Flight 93 on September 11, 2001. You can add hundreds to the list.

What are you looking for? We have a Savior, his name is Jesus. We do not need to make him into anyone else, for He alone is all we need. We have a country. It is a good country, but it will only stay good as long as its people are good, and as long as we remember that it is God who rules the nations of the world. Let us vow to be the good people the United States of America needs! In the words of Todd Beamer, “Let’s roll!” God bless us all and bless our good land. Thanks be to God!