

†**Reading from the Gospels:** 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 and Matthew 5:1-12

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His name was George Bailey. You remember him. He was a young man who lived in Bedford Falls. He had high hopes and big dreams. He was going to see the world... build great buildings and bridges.

You see, Bedford Falls really didn't have that much going for it to keep someone like George Bailey pinned down. But, as life sometimes goes, we don't always get what we dream about and hope for.

Such was the case for George, who through a series of unique twists and turns, ends up heading the business of his late father, the Building and Loan. It's not much a business, yet it hangs on by the skin of its teeth... even surviving the Great Depression; and somehow, this measly little building and loan makes a difference in the community. People who would never have a home of their own, are able to obtain the financing to buy their own home. Small businessmen are able to keep their heads above water through the help of George Bailey and the Building and Loan.

That is, until that one day when George's Uncle Billy loses the deposit into the hands of the evil Mr. Potter and all of a sudden it looks like George's whole world is going to cave in.

The bank examiner is in town and if the audit shows a discrepancy George will suddenly be facing scandal and prison. He becomes desperate. And on a snowy bridge he contemplates ending his life because as Mr. Potter has reminded him, with his puny little life insurance policy, he's worth more dead than alive.

That's when George meets his guardian angel, Clarence, who asks George, "do you think killing yourself would make everything all right?"

George answers, "I suppose you're right. I guess it'd been better if I'd never been born at all."

"What'd you say?" Clarence asks him.

"I said I wish I'd never been born."

And with that, Clarence grants George his wish.

Can you imagine such a thing?

To have the opportunity to see what the world would be like if you hadn't even been born. That got me to thinking... I wonder what would the world be like if Columbia Presbyterian Church had never been founded at the corner of Kirk and Columbia. Do you think, like George Bailey, this church would have made any difference if it had never existed?

Let's consider that... in relationship to the words of Jesus Christ, those words of scripture we just heard that have come to be known as the Beatitudes. Throughout my life I've heard these verses referred to as the "BE" "ATTITUDES"... a comprehensive list of how we are to live the Christian life.

In other words, here's what you are to be...

be meek...

be someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness...

be merciful...

be pure in heart...

be a peacemaker...

allow yourself to be mistreated for righteousness sake.

Well, quite frankly,

I never measured up too well to that list. Still don't. Except for Jesus Christ himself, I don't believe anyone can actually measure up to all those things.

However, the gospel of Matthew was not written to any one individual.

The book was written about 50 years after the resurrection of Christ to a community in the midst of great upheaval: a new community of Christians struggling to find their way in a pagan world on the one side and their Jewish brethren on the other side who want nothing to do with them anymore. So the author of Matthew is sharing these words of Jesus in the hopes that they will be understood in a community context. This is how we, all of us, as a gathered community, as a new church, are to express our love and our faith in Christ to the world.

He must have gotten his point across. Because now you and I are here all these centuries later... hearing the same words. But what do they mean to us as a Christian fellowship... as Columbia Presbyterian Church?

What do these wonderful words say to us as a community of disciples? Well I would like you to consider that question by looking at it in the same way George Bailey examined his life had he not been born.

Let's think about it for a moment... Columbia Presbyterian Church doesn't exist... there is no red brick building with its towering steeple . . . there is no education building . . . there is no group of committed Christians worshipping here who together form a community of the meek, the righteous, the merciful, the pure in heart, or the peacemakers.

And if that's the case, then there isn't any Our House sitting where our activity's building should be. There is no place for the homeless children of our community to come and be nurtured as their parents work to turn their lives around.

It would mean that thousands of sandwiches were never prepared and many homeless men at the Central Presbyterian Church shelter never got a lunch to eat.

If this church never existed... 200 Haitian citizens would not have been given desperately needed hygiene kits when their country was decimated by the earthquake.

Jack and Dorothy Kelly would probably still need critical home repairs on their home because the 21 members of this church who helped them last year during the MLK service project wouldn't have been there to do the work. If Columbia Presbyterian Church didn't exist, the men at the Clifton Sanctuary Ministries wouldn't be looking forward next week to a Super Bowl party sponsored by the youth of this church.

And there wouldn't have been any youth to participate in the 30 hour famine sponsored by World Vision... and Hannah and Natalie, and Monica and Daniel and their adult sponsors would not have served a meal to the homeless women and children at Hagar's House. As a matter of fact, the staff at Hagar's House would have to work that much harder without the dozens of volunteers from this church who wouldn't be there to love and support that critical community ministry.

If this church didn't exist... Project Take Charge would have times when their food pantry shelves were empty... and families, who were just trying to make ends meet, would be turned away.

If Columbia Presbyterian Church had never been organized, then 20 disabled and elderly people from our community would not have a food co-op to help them make it through each month... because they wouldn't have Bob Reardon making bi-monthly trips to the Food Bank to bring the food and supplies they so desperately need to make ends meet.

Decatur Emergency Assistance Ministry wouldn't have the support of our church if Columbia

wasn't here ... we wouldn't hold our food drives for their food pantry. There wouldn't be any offerings taken to support that important ministry.

If this church wasn't at this corner, hundreds of people over the past few years wouldn't find the support, the prayers, a listening ear and a compassionate welcome at the doors of a church that welcomed them.

If this church had never been founded, there would be children at the Thornwell Home for Children who never would have been touched by the love and generosity of our Covenant Sunday School class...

There wouldn't be Presbyterian Women here to sponsor a child through the Christian Children's Fund... or to collect socks for the Open Door Community... or stamps for Mission Haven... or volunteer at Villa International.

If Columbia wasn't here... Sandy Love's neighborhood children would never have received the blessings and love of this community who have embraced them with open arms.

If there had never been a church here, Columbia Theological Seminary wouldn't have had a place for countless interns to experience the work and mission of ministry or a close by location to hold baccalaureate and convocation services as well as so many educational programs that have been held in this church over the years.

There wouldn't have been Sunday School classes that shared the power of the words of Jesus Christ with so many generations who grew up at Columbia.

There wouldn't have been times of fellowship.

There wouldn't have been a church home, or a vegetable garden for our Mizo families

There wouldn't have been Girl Scout and Boy Scout programs... or a place for AA meetings... or a place for neighborhood groups to gather.

If this church wasn't here, there wouldn't be the sweet sounds of this choir lifting its combined voices in praise to God.

I could go on and on...

but can you now begin to imagine what impact this church has made on the lives of so many countless people in our surrounding neighborhoods. Decatur would not be the same place had we not been here as a community of Christians who together share what Christ calls us to do and be as recorded in the gospel of Matthew.

To steal the words once again from the movie . . .

"You see, Columbia Church, you really had a wonderful life. And it would definitely be a mistake to throw it all away."

Of course, we have no intentions of throwing it all away. As a matter of fact, I am actually quite excited about what is going on in the life of this wonderful church. God has so much more in store for us as we seek to follow Jesus Christ; sharing his love and compassion and hope with each other and with our neighbors.

It's true that we might not be the largest church in Decatur... we might not have all the latest gadgets to use in our worship... we might have to watch our budget very carefully . . . but that's okay.

Because here you will find a community where we love each other . . . where we are concerned for each other and care for those who come to our door . Because here you will find those who

hunger and thirst for righteousness. You will find those who are merciful... who are pure in heart and who are peacemakers. You will find people who make a difference in the lives of so many here in our little corner of God's Kingdom... and I thank God for each and every one of you.

I've always been proud to say that I am a pastor at Columbia Presbyterian Church.

Well... guess what? Believe it or not, next week is our Stewardship Dedication Sunday.

Now that was sneaky of me, wasn't it?

But don't worry . . .

I'm not going to stand up here this morning and plead and beg for you to give all that you can.

Because, quite frankly, you already do that. As you just heard, this church has been generously giving for over 60 years for the hopes and dreams, the work and mission of Jesus Christ, and for the spiritual nurture of everyone who has been a part of this church. And there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that each of you will continue to give of your time, talent and money to ensure that there will always be a Columbia Presbyterian Church.

This will actually be the 12<sup>th</sup> time I've stood here as we've looked forward to a new church budget a 2011 budget that will be created out of what you share with Jesus Christ.

Is it important to share out of God's blessings to you? Yes, it is.

Have you always responded to God's call to share ? Yes, you have.

Do I believe that you will do everything you can in the coming year to continue to support the work and mission and spiritual journey of this church? I certainly do.

I believe that with all my heart.

You see, Columbia Presbyterian Church . . . you really do have a wonderful life!

Let us pray:

Treasure too, You have entrusted,

gain through powers Your grace conferred;

Ours to use for home and kindred,

and to spread the gospel Word.

Open wide our hands in sharing,

as we heed Christ's ageless call,

Healing, teaching, and reclaiming, serving You

by loving all.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.