

I love the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life." I've already watched parts of it this year, twice. Number 11 on the list of the top 100 movies of all time!

I know, it's old, it was black and white and it's been colorized, it's schmaltzy, but it always makes me feel good. So a spoiler alert, if you have never seen Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed in, "It's a Wonderful Life", I'm giving away the ending:

At the end of the movie all the town's people gather at George Bailey's house. George is in a financial crisis. Mary, George's wife bursts in after searching for George throughout the town of Bedford Falls.

Mary sweeps everything off the table and then all the people who've been helped by George over the years place money on table to help him. One of the Bailey's children plays the piano and they all sing with Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

And Bert the police officer arrives with George's brother Harry who toasts George as the richest man in town. And Bert the police officer happens to have an accordion, because police officers must have carried accordions back then, and everyone sings along to Auld Lang Syne.

And they are joyful because they realize they are helping their friend who has always been there to help them. They have shared the gift of their love and kindness for each other.

That is a great gift indeed. But that's a movie, right?

This week I was amazed to see a similar scenario played out by a flash mob in Nampa, Idaho. Amanda and Clint Kofoed are a young couple with four young children. Amanda was diagnosed with cancer and the family has no insurance. As they were being

interviewed by a reporter in a coffee shop about their plight, a friend walked up to their table and left a one hundred dollar bill, then another person left a hundred dollar bill and another and another; and the video cut away to outside the coffee shop and you see a line of more than two hundred people lined up down the block and across the street who gave the couple money until they had over \$13,000 in front of them.

One of Clint's childhood friends had organized the flash mob. He is a Praynkster, P-R-A-Y, nkster, an organization that helps out people in need. They base their work on biblical verse, Philippians 4:4-5, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near."

And coincidentally that is the same verse welcomes this Third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday. "Rejoice, I will say it again, rejoice! the Lord is near."

Looking at the faces of Clint and Amanda and those of the people, the friends and strangers alike who were rejoicing with them, it was hard to tell who had received the gift. The young couple was in tears, but the donors, many of whom were crying, were joyful that they could make a difference. It wasn't about a gift of money; it was about love.

I think about John the Baptist in his prison cell in today's gospel, anguishing whether this was how his ministry was to end. Had he had done all that God had asked of him? Had his ministry really prepared the way for the one who was to come? Or had he failed?

Then he started to hear stories of Jesus gathering the people, ministering to them. And he starts to wonder if Jesus is the one? So he sent his followers to ask.

Jesus' answer is for John to look and see that the ancient prophets' words, the words of Isaiah, were being fulfilled,

*the eyes of the blind are opened,
the ears of the deaf are cleared;
then will the lame leap like a stag,
then the tongue of the mute will sing.*

And though he was in prison, John, facing his own uncertain future, he received the gift of knowing that he had fulfilled his calling; he had done all that God had asked. And he knew in his love for God that God loved him, too.

Theologian Henri Nouwen described the difference between joy and happiness is that, while happiness is dependent on external conditions, joy is "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, imprisonment, war, or even death - can take that love away." Therefore, joy can be present even in the midst of sadness.

Even in the darkness of his prison cell, John received a gift of joy; unconditionally loved by God and no one could take that away.

In his 2014 Gaudete Sunday homily, Pope Francis said that Gaudete Sunday is known as the "Sunday of joy," and that instead of fretting about "all they still haven't" done to prepare for Christmas, people should "think of all the good things life has given them"; that God has given them.

And sometimes it takes troubles, the worst of times like the fictional George Bailey experienced or like our patron saint John the Baptist experienced, or like Amanda Kofoed is experiencing with her cancer, or like many you may have experienced; and I know a lot of you have experienced difficult times this year; to

realize that you are loved by the people around you: your family, your community, we clergy, and most of all by your God who created you and Jesus Christ who redeemed us all; and that is where you receive the true gift.

So if the commercials on the Internet and TV and radio; if the billboards and the signs in the stores tell you that happiness is a new car or an impossible to find toy or a diamond ring or a cup of coffee or a crunchy glazed ham, or whatever; okay. Fine. These things might bring you some happiness.

But cars get dented, toys get broken, diamonds get lost, a cup of coffee gets drank, a crunchy glazed ham eventually gets eaten; the happiness in these things is short lived.

But love and the joy that comes to the giver and the receiver, that's what is important and will last forever.

My sisters and brothers, the loving Word of God appeared as a helpless infant in a manger who grew in wisdom and age and favor before God and man, who relieved suffering and gave words of hope that to the people and brought joy to John the Baptist. If Jesus could not free his body, he had freed John's soul to be filled with joy.

I pray that it is the gift of joy that you most cherish in these final weeks of Advent. Whether you are the giver or the recipient of worldly things, receive the gift of the joy and love of those around you and of God through his greatest gift, Christ our Lord.