

Funeral – Herb Gerlitz  
January 6, 2011  
Zumbro Lutheran Church  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Clara, Brenda, Bruce, Glenn, Willard, family and friends, grace and peace to you from the one who was born for us, who died for us, and who now claim victory over every grave, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen

We've just gone through another Christmas season. We've heard the story of Jesus' birth and of God's great love in sending a Son. As a part of the season, we've been treated to reruns of the classic holiday movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. In case you don't know the story, Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, a restless young man from the town of Bedford Falls who has dreams of exploring the world. But life keeps getting in the way for George. His dad dies. His brother goes off to war. The Savings and Loan where he works has financial troubles. Given opportunities to leave Bedford Falls, George always makes the decision to stay.

As I see it, what really prevents George from spreading his wings is his own heart. George is a kind and tenderhearted man. In the midst of life's challenges, he keeps feeling a tug to stay home and do what's best—to do what's best for his family, what's best for his town, what's best for the Savings and Loan, what's best for pretty much everyone besides George. In process of staying in Bedford Falls, George makes other people's lives better. He's a banker, after all. He helps them buy washing machines and send kids off to college and build homes and carve out a life. And in the end, with a little help from his guardian angel, George is finally able to see that the life choices he has made have been rich and full...and enough.

I wonder if Herb Gerlitz wasn't a little like George Bailey. Oh, Herb was probably too humble to admit it, but he spent a lot of his time making other people's lives better. Herb was a talented man. He could have accomplished just about anything he set out to do. But he was also a kind and tenderhearted man. What really excited him was helping other people. Like George Bailey, Herb helped people buy washing machines and send kids off to college and build homes and carve out a life. In the end, I think Herb was also able to see that the life choices he had made were rich and full...and enough.

Herb's life started in the small town of Delavan, Minnesota. His dad was a rural mail carrier. He delivered the mail using a horse and buggy during the summer months and a sleigh during the winter months. His mom was a homemaker, occasionally working in the local factory to can vegetables. Herb was baptized at St. Peter's Lutheran Church. God made a claim on his life. God said, "Herb, you're a very special child to me. I've got plans for you, plans that someday you will do much good for others."

When Herb was growing up, he shied away from competitive sports. Instead he preferred to spend his time playing coronet in the school band. He also worked at the local grocery store, stocking shelves, sweeping floors, and bagging groceries. Herb was developing a work ethic. But more than that, he was learning how to care for people and serve them.

After high school, Herb ventured a little further away from home than George Bailey did. He attended Mankato Commercial College for a year. After that he ventured even further, doing clerical work for the Navy in Washington, D.C. Then, since the Korean War was going on, he enlisted in the Army. He got stationed at Ft. Knox in Kentucky. Herb once told Brenda that he spent his time at Ft. Knox counting money, and she actually believed him. I can see why she did. Herb was a banker, after all, that's what bankers do. While in the military, Herb was trained as a tank driver. He was fully prepared to go into combat. But thankfully the war ended before he was called overseas. It was probably just as well. Herb was kind and tenderhearted, definitely more of a lover than a fighter.

Herb eventually found his way back to Minnesota. He resumed his studies at Mankato Commercial College. One star-crossed night—October 14, 1954 to be exact—he attended a school dance. A young woman from Jasper, MN caught his eye, Clara Ellefson. It turns out that Clara was also attending Mankato Commercial College, but since she was studying to become a secretary, their paths had not yet crossed.

Now, the dance they were attending was not just any dance. It was at the Kato Ballroom. It featured Wayne King, also known as "The Walz King," a well-known local celebrity. Herb spotted Clara in the ballroom. He promptly made his way across the room and asked Clara to dance. She said *yes*. Soon they were waltzing together. Before

the night was over, Herb, ever the gentleman, asked Clara if he could give her a ride home. Again she said *yes*. And before you know it, these two were going steady.

Herb and Clara were married on June 9, 1956 at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jasper. The groomsmen had fun decorating Herb's car. There was only one slight hitch: they used shoe polish. It pretty much ruined the finish. The words "just married" got permanently burned into the paint. Still, Herb didn't hold it against them. He was kind and tenderhearted, after all, forgiving others just as God in Christ had forgiven him.

Herb and Clara were off to Wisconsin Dells for their honeymoon. Neither one had been there before. Would you believe that along the way Herb stopped to pick up a hitchhiker? Tell me, who picks up a hitchhiker on their honeymoon? Herb does. That's the kind of guy he was.

When they got back, Herb had a job waiting for him at the Savings and Loan in Rochester. He got busy doing what bankers do: helping people buy washing machines and send kids off to college and build homes and carve out a life. In short, he got busy making other people's lives better. Herb spent decades doing just that at the Savings and Loan, and then Olmsted Federal, and then Midwest Federal.

The family bought a house in southeast Rochester. Pretty soon Brenda came along, and then Bruce. Sadly, identical twins, Bradley and Brian, died at childbirth. And finally came Glenn. Herb was a great dad. He taught the kids how to fish. He attended the boys' football games. He helped them learn how to water ski. Pretty much every summer the family loaded up the station wagon and went on vacation together. There was always something for them to do.

After the kids grew up, there were grandchildren to welcome, and games to play with them, and school events to attend. Grandpa and Grandma enjoyed nothing more than being together as a family and sharing good times.

Brenda remembers a day when she and her dad were out fishing. They got up at 5:00 in the morning and headed out to a quiet cove. By the time they were finished, a strong gale had come up on the lake. The wind was howling. The waves were pounding. Herb, who couldn't swim, was already wearing a life jacket. But Brenda, who was an expert swimmer, decided she better put on a life jacket too. Suddenly Herb knew how

bad the storm really was. He would later comment to the family that it took lots and lots of prayer to get back across the lake and safely home again.

Maybe this is an appropriate metaphor for our journey through life. Unless our name is George Bailey, we all have times when we travel away from home. The question becomes, how far will we go in our little boat? What will we do with our lives? Whatever we end up doing, it always seems to go better when we travel with people we love, and when we treat each other in kind and tenderhearted ways. From time to time, a storm will come up, and we'll realize just how fragile life can be. Only by the grace of God will we get back across the lake and safely home again.

Herb Gerlitz was a man who had been across the lake several times. God had marked him in baptism and told him, "Herb, I've got plans for you." Those plans took Herb to a dance in Mankato, and a fort in Kentucky, and a Savings and Loan in Rochester, and a comfortable little home in the southeast part of town. There was work to do, families to help, children to raise—and let's not forget—love to share.

That boat kept sailing along for many rich and full years. But then late last Sunday night, God called Herb to come home. He had done enough. He had helped enough. He had loved enough. He had suffered enough. And when Herb answered the call, God was waiting for him with open arms. God was there to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, well done. I have prepared a place for you for all eternity."

Are we going to miss Herb? Sure we are. His death leaves a great big hole inside. It's important to remember that ultimately we do not belong to each other, we belong to God. It's also important to remember that this God we believe in is kind and tenderhearted—even more so than George Bailey, even more so than Herb Gerlitz. Indeed, because of what God has done for us in Jesus, we trust that not even death can separate us from God's love. Herb is living in the light and joy of that love even now.  
Amen