

## Praying it forward

There's a story about a middle-aged woman named "Carol" who was hit by a bus in New York City; she died and went to Heaven, and approached the Pearly Gates. Frowning, St. Peter asked her to have a seat while he looked something up in the *Book of Life*.

Just then, Jesus walked up. "What's going on, Peter?" He asked.

"Lord, I think we've made a mistake," St. Peter said. "This woman wasn't due to come here for another 30 years. What'll we do?"

Jesus smiled and said, "Well ... I see that she's spent her whole life working with the poor, transients, the unemployed, immigrants and other underprivileged people. Let's just send her back to live out the rest of her life. That way she can serve the needy all those years before returning here for her just and eternal reward."

Jesus went over to Carol and said, "This is your lucky day! It seems that you're not supposed to be here for another 30 years. We're sending you back to earth!"

And so Carol found herself on the street in New York City, just having missed being hit by that bus.

“This is incredible,” she said to herself. “I’m going to live for another 30 years!”

“One thing’s for sure,” she thought, “I’m not going to waste those 30 years hanging around all those smelly homeless people and foreigners who can’t even speak English!”

“I’m going to get myself ready to enjoy those years ... and maybe snag myself some rich, young man.”

So Carol went on a shopping spree, buying beautiful designer dresses, a luxurious fur coat, an expensive purse and the finest perfumes. She went to a spa to tone up her skin, had her hair colored and styled, and even went to a plastic surgeon to ... improve ... her looks.

She left the doctor’s office and was walking across the street when a bus seemed to come out of nowhere ...

And so – once again – Carol found herself before at the Pearly Gates.

Indignantly, she marched straight past St. Peter and got right in Jesus’s face.

“What’s the meaning of this, Lord?” she demanded. “You said you were sending me back to earth to live another 30 years!!! And yet ... here I am ... in less than a week!!!”

Jesus stared at her blankly for a few seconds, did a double take, and said:

“Carol? Is that you? I didn’t recognize you ... ”

...

Now this is the type of story we like to tell to make one another smile ... and maybe even laugh out loud.

But it’s also an example of bad theology.

People don’t die and get sent back to Earth.

Nor do people like Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life* become angels when they die ... and then have to earn their wings.

But the movie does offer some tidbits which can help us improve our own lives.

Now ... without giving away the plot ... of this 63-year-old movie ... there were things that George Bailey did in his life which we can take aboard and maybe even try to emulate.

Several times in his life, George put aside his own ambitions to help those around him: his brother, his uncle, his friends ... and even immigrants that had little money and could barely speak English ...

The original title of the story which later became tonight's movie was *The Greatest Gift*. We often associate that with the soldier or police officer who gives his own life to save another's. And, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave up *His* own life here on earth so that *we* could have eternal life.

But this gift ... played out on a smaller scale ... happens all the time.

For example, way back in 1784, Benjamin Franklin loaned some money to his friend Benjamin Webb.

“I do not pretend to give such a Sum,” he wrote to Webb; “I only lend it to you. When you [...] meet with another honest Man in similar Distress, you must pay me by lending this Sum to him; enjoining him to discharge the Debt by a like operation, when he shall be able, and shall meet with another opportunity. I hope it may thus go thro' many hands, before it meets with a Knave that will stop its Progress. This is a trick of mine for doing a deal of good with a little money.”

This concept became known as “paying it forward” ... as opposed to “paying it back.”

Many people took hold of this philosophy, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lily Hardy Hammond, and even football great “Woody” Hayes.

The term was popularized, by Robert A. Heinlein in his book, *Between Planets*, in 1951:

“The banker reached into the folds of his gown, pulled out a single credit note. ‘But eat first — a full belly steadies the judgment. Do me the honor of accepting this as our welcome to the newcomer.’ His pride said no; his stomach said YES! Don took it and said, ‘uh, thanks! That's awfully kind of you. I'll pay it back, first chance.’ ‘Instead, the banker said, pay it forward to some other brother who needs it.’”

Heinlein both preached and practiced this philosophy; now the Heinlein Society, a humanitarian organization founded in his name, does so.

Likewise, the mathematician Paul Erdős, in one of his visits to Harvard University, met a promising young math student on the verge of expulsion for inability to pay his tuition. Erdős paid the young man's tuition in full. Years later, the man offered to return the entire amount to Erdős, but he refused, insisting that the man find another student in his situation, and give the tuition to him.

Many others have taken up that challenge, including novelist Catherine Ryan Hyde, who wrote a book by the name *Pay It Forward*, which became a Warner Brother's film by the same name.

It led to the "Pay It Forward Foundation," various grass-roots campaigns and even a challenge made by Oprah Winfrey, who gave 300 people \$1,000 and instructed them to help others with the money.

In our own situations, we are often asked to give. I don't know about you, but my mailbox is stuffed this time of year with requests for donations to all sorts of – mostly – deserving organizations.

And most of us do give ... whether it be gladly or with a grumble ... but I think it's important to think of it as "paying it forward."

In my own giving, I think of it not only as *paying* it forward but *praying* it forward.

I offer prayers for those people and institutions to which I give. I pray that they will use my gift wisely and that it will meet a need which only it ... and those like it from others ... can meet.

Recognizing that it often takes quite a bit of time for change to happen, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote: "Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seeds you plant."

This feeds right into Christian writer John Bunyan, who said, "You have not lived until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."

**END**