

A movie I've seen and quoted many times in homilies, "It's a Wonderful Life," has in it many memorable scenes, and in it George Bailey keeps struggling with the choice to make. On the one hand, he has the abilities to go to college, to leave Bedford Falls, see the world and achieve success. On the other, his family and his love for Mary make it difficult for him to leave. And in that memorable scene where he's about to leave Mary's house after the high school reunion dance, he says to her how he's going to get out of the town and see the world do all these things when he breaks down and embraces her, and then tells her of his love for her and his choice is made. It's not easy, and he's not famous by the end of the film, but the choices he made end up helping so many people.

In real life, we all face those same choices. What do we really want?

In the 1960s, Dick Van Patten, who was the father on "Eight is Enough" found himself asking these same questions. But he found the answer through realizing what a gift he had in God and his family.

One afternoon, his young son came up to him. An exasperated tone in his son's voice told him it was probably his third or fourth attempt to get attention from his dad. Seated at the dining-room table of their home in Bellrose Village, Long Island, Dick had been absorbed in theater trade papers, desperately searching for an acting job. It was summer, 1963, and he hadn't worked for three months.

"What is it?" He asked irritably.

"Daddy," he said, hopefully, "let's go play catch, okay?"

Nels was eight, blond, blue-eyed, the eldest of their three sons. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, his brothers appeared—surrounding their dad like a band of Indians.

"Yeah, Daddy," said seven-year-old Jimmy, "let's go out and play!"

"Come on, Daddy," piped six-year-old Vincent, "Please!"

"Daddy's busy," he heard his wife, Pat, say, shepherding the kids toward the kitchen.

Dick returned to the papers, but couldn't concentrate. His work had always meant everything to him. Everything. Besides, his idea of being a good husband and father was based upon being a good provider. He felt like a failure.

He stood up and walked over to the living-room window. Outside, the setting sun cast long shadows over the neat green lawns and white frame houses.

With sadness, he recalled how happy he and Pat had been when they moved here as a young couple six years ago. When he met Pat, she had her own successful career as a professional dancer; she'd given it all up to marry him and raise their family.

Back then he was still riding high on the wave of success following his long-running role as Nels on the popular “I Remember Mama” TV series, and was sure he’d go on to be a star. After all, he had been acting since childhood.

He still recalled vividly his first audition, a child personality contest. His grandmother remained by his side until he was called before the judges to recite his poem. “You can do it,” she whispered, squeezing his shoulder reassuringly.

When he won the contest, which resulted in a four-month contract, Grandma was the one who moved with him to Hollywood. He was 15 when she died. By then, he’d acted in numerous Broadway shows and was working and studying under Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne.

He was always glad that his Grandma had lived to see his success. But, he thought ruefully, good thing she isn’t around to see me now...

In recent years, he found himself having to accept smaller and smaller parts. There was no good explanation why, and he didn’t know what to do about it. Not even in church could he find comfort or guidance. His own prayers seemed flat, vague. As he grew increasingly irritable and impatient, his behavior was taking its toll on his family—especially his sons.

Dick felt the gentle touch of his wife’s hand on his shoulder. “Dick,” she said softly, “don’t worry.”

He gave her the same annoyed look he had earlier given his son. But Pat’s concerned expression remained unchanged. “Honey,” she said, “I think maybe we should pray about this.”

“Pray? Don’t you think I do?”

“I mean,” she said quietly, “let’s pray together. Let’s pray specifically. You know you’ve always said you’ve never prayed without receiving an answer.”

Pat was right. He did have faith in a personal God, and strong belief in the power of prayer. But this problem of a declining career and no money coming in was so big—he didn’t know how to pray about it.

Pat seemed to sense his thoughts.

“God knows what’s best for us,” she said. “Let’s simply ask Him to get us through this summer according to His will.” She paused. “Okay?”

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Yes,” he said dully. “Okay.”

Holding hands, they stood by the window and prayed.

He didn't feel any better.

A few more weeks passed. Nothing changed. Pat asked if he would mind if she tried auditioning for some local dance productions. He wasn't crazy about the idea. But, reluctantly, he agreed. They needed the money.

One muggy morning, he was seated at the dining-room table, scanning the trade papers, when Pat rushed in, breathless and smiling. She had just auditioned for a summer production of Hit the Deck, at Jones Beach.

"Guess what!" she gasped. "I got the job! They want me in the chorus! And the pay's not bad!"

Instead of being pleased, he felt his stomach tighten into a knot.

"That's great," he said tersely. "That's real nice, Pat."

She came over and hugged her husband. "Rehearsals begin tomorrow," she said. "I'll be gone a lot during the days. You'll be all right taking care of the kids, won't you?"

"Yeah," he said. "Fine."

By this time, the three boys had found places around the table and were listening with rapt attention.

"Don't you see?" Pat continued. "This is the answer to our prayer."

"Yeah," Dick said. "Right." It was an answer, all right, but it sure wasn't the one he had been hoping for.

When Pat was working, he didn't really mind taking care of the kids. That is, he didn't mind the duties involved: fixing meals, doing dishes, enforcing naps and bedroom clean-ups.

What bothered him was the way God had chosen to answer their prayers. True, thanks to Pat's income, they were "getting through the summer." But what long-term good could ever come from this situation? It sure wasn't helping his career.

One hot afternoon as he was putting away the last of the lunch dishes, Jimmy entered the kitchen.

"Daddy? ..."

Dick stiffened, feeling a request coming on. He was in no mood for requests.

"Daddy, can we go to Greenwood?"

“Greenwood” was Brooklyn’s Greenwood Cemetery, where Dick’s grandmother was buried. The kids loved visiting Greenwood; with six square miles of wooded grounds, four lakes, lots of wildlife and great shady trees to climb, it was more like a park. Only 20 minutes away, it was, for their family, a place of good times and happy memories. Why not? He thought. They hadn’t been to Greenwood in ages. “That’s not a bad idea,” he said. “Get your brothers, and let’s go.”

Once at Greenwood, they walked the familiar hilly path to Great-Grandma Van Patten’s grave. They talked a little about what a wise, loving lady Great-Grandma had been, about how happy she must be up in Heaven and watching us down here on earth. As they talked, Dick felt himself relaxing, forgetting the tensions of unemployment.

Before he knew it after they played a game looking for the oldest graves, Dick was daydreaming about his own childhood—and about Grandma Van Patten. She was always there...her steady blue eyes shining, her voice encouraging, her gentle touch conveying her trust and love for a little boy.

He found a tall, leafy tree and leaned against its massive trunk. In the distance, he heard the whoops and hollers of his kids having a good time.

“1890! Here’s one from 1890!”

“Aw, that’s nothing. I found one from 1865!”

He shut his eyes, allowing his thoughts to drift...

Why, he wondered, had Grandma spent so many hours with him? Surely she must have had better things to do. But she’d always been so selfless, so generous with her time—as though being with him was genuinely important to her. Their times together had meant so much to him.

He reflected he had been so self-absorbed lately—so wrapped up in worry about his career. Perhaps—he felt a twinge of guilt at the idea—perhaps, there was more to being a good father than simply being a good provider. Could it be that God was trying to tell him that his sons might need and benefit from the same kind of love and attention that Grandma had given him?

When he sons called to him for his attention as he was having these thoughts, in the minutes that had passed, something had happened to Dick. Surrounded by his happily chattering boys, he felt his heart melting. How precious his sons were...how short was their time together...and how much he loved them!

For the first time, Dick fully appreciated that, next to God, his family had to be the most important thing in his life—even more important than his career. And with that realization, a great imbalance was corrected in his heart. The weight of worry about getting work had lifted; God, he knew, would take care of that in His own time.

He was also beginning to understand a little better how God works. By keeping him home for the summer, He had shown Dick how to appreciate and love his family in a new way that otherwise would have been impossible.

This was a lesson worth more than all the jobs in the world. It was the kind of lesson his grandmother would be proud to know he learned.

After that sunny afternoon in Greenwood, Dick considered each day an opportunity to grow closer to his family. He and his sons did everything together. Before summer's end, neighborhood kids were coming to the door and asking if Mr. Van Patten could come out and play.

That rock-solid foundation of love and trust that was established proved to be invaluable later. In 1970, the family moved to Hollywood, where the stresses and strains of show-biz careers have been known to destroy the strongest ties.

They would remain as close as ever as the years went by. On Sundays when everyone's in town as the kids grew up, they would go to church together.

Thousands of years ago it was written, "And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers..." (Malachi 4:6). Dick was convinced that even in this rapidly changing world, the family can work—that it remains God's will for His children. It's up to us to live in accordance with that plan.

So what is it about? Our plan? Or God's plan?

This week in the Gospel we meet two men who live by two sets of rules.

On the one hand, there is Herod. Herod has made a name for himself and risen up to achieve power in the midst of a tumultuous time in Roman history. Loyal to one side, Marc Antony, and then after Antony takes his life loyal to Caesar, he is rewarded with greater power, ruling first Galilee and then all of Palestine, albeit as a vassal ruler under ultimate Roman control. He has money and power, but he is also ruthless. Nothing will get in his way. In fact, he has 3 of his sons killed when he becomes fearful they are plotting against him. Caesar once remarked he would prefer to be one of Herod's dogs than his sons. At the same time, he undertakes building projects, rebuilding the Temple, and eventually is known as Herod the Great. He gets the fame, the power, the money. But, at what cost?

On the other hand, there is Joseph. Joseph isn't rich. He isn't powerful. He's not all that significant. But he trusts in God, and serves his family. He sees his role as protecting Mary and Jesus and providing for them, so he undertakes very difficult missions, traveling to Egypt to escape the persecution, then back to near Jerusalem but then a third time to Nazareth after learning Herod's son is now in power following his father's death. In each time an angel gives him these instructions, and each time he trusts,

never doubting God's plan, never complaining, never doing what is in his own interest, but rather just doing all out of loving service.

Herod dies powerful, but with what? Joseph dies with Jesus and Mary in his life, but also having ultimately helped bring God's plans to fruition, and God sees him through.

That's something that Dick Van Patten realized one day as he visited his grandmother's grave and spent time with his sons. He'd go on to have more roles in movies and TV shows throughout the 70s and 80s and his career would be just fine. God didn't give him all he wanted when he prayed, but God came through and he made the right choice, putting his career behind God and family.

As we think about this, it's so important for us to do the same.

The takeaway for us is where are our priorities? Something good to think about on this feast day and as we enter the new year is trying to appreciate the importance of our family, and keeping those priorities straight.

It starts with God. Dick and Pat prayed together, and God was front and center in their family. Dick also trusted in God even though it was tough when he got the enlightenment he needed. God can kind of fade in the background like Christmas can when we take down the decorations. But God isn't just for Christmas and Easter; He's for every day of our lives, so pray. Go to Mass. Pray with one another in the family. Talk about the faith and let the Holy Spirit into your families and lives to give you the guidance you need. God will always see you through.

Second though, listen to the words of that second reading: put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Family life takes work. And it can be easy to get focused on the sports schedules, the busyness of school and work, to the point where you end doing a million things but not really knowing what's going on in one another's lives. So as you look at your family, work on these things. We all have to forgive and let things go, and also say "I'm sorry." We all need to be patient when you live under the same roof. We also all need to be humble too in families, and realize we don't control one another. A wise parent realizes they are always learning on the job, and asks God for counsel but also sees that their children are growing and unique and changing; a child realizes they can't always have things their own way but need to share, or do things for others, and make mistakes too. Through it all though, God will help give your family something very special, namely holiness.

Lastly, as we work at growing in these things with our family, all of them take time. Remember time is such a great gift, one of the greatest we can give. Give God your time by making him a priority, but do the same for your families. Dick Van Patten came to realize that a game of catch was better than sending out another resume, so try to make sure you get things in like family dinners, real conversation, maybe a family game night, and know what's going on in the lives of one another because family is one of the greatest gifts we are given.

At the end of "It's a Wonderful Life" George still is a man of modest means, while Potter still has a lot of power and certainly a lot of money. But as his brother Harry toasts him, "to my big brother George, the richest man in town," he's rich in what truly matters because he chose the way of Joseph, which led him to happiness and holiness. May we strive to do the same, learning from Joseph that when we do, we become an instrument of God's grace.