

ONE MINISTRY, MANY SETTINGS: IN THE COMMUNITY

On Christmas EVE at just about MIDNIGHT, this church went DARK! The ONLY light came from the 4 candles on our ADVENT Wreath, and the CHRIST Candle in the CENTER of that wreath (THIS candle HERE), which had JUST been lighted for the FIRST time, that VERY night, in order to symbolize the BIRTH of the One who was BORN to be *the LIGHT of the WORLD*. And IN that soft light, you could barely SEE Mary and Joseph sitting up here on the HAY, holding baby Jesus. And in the PEWS, over 300 worshippers sat in SILENCE, and maybe AWE, for that brief MOMENT of DARKNESS and shadows. And then, a LIGHT was taken from the CHRIST candle and PASSED to MARY and Joseph, and several DEACONS, who PASSED it from ONE pew to the next, ALL around the church. And it was absolutely BEAUTIFUL to watch the light being passed, ONE person to ANOTHER: YOUNG and old, RICH and poor, FRIEND and stranger. It was like watching EACH person giving to the NEXT a very precious GIFT. And friends, it WAS a precious GIFT, because SYMBOLICALLY, we were sharing Christ with one another. SYBOLICALLY, we were all offering the light of LIFE, the light of TRUTH, the light of GOODNESS, the light of the WORLD, with one another. And as the LAST people received the LIGHT, we began to SING: *Silent Night, Holy Night*, (and we got to the verse) *Son of God, LOVE'S pure LIGHT. Radiant BEAMS from Thy holy face bring the DAWN of redeeming grace. Jesus, Lord at Thy BIRTH. Jesus, Lord at Thy BIRTH*. And when the singing ended, I said the benediction: *IN the silence of this HOLY night, may the HOLY Child of Bethlehem be BORN in our hearts. And may the eternal LIGHT of His LOVE shine WITHIN us all our days, that through US, Christ might CONTINUE to give LIGHT to the WORLD. Friends, CARRY His light in your HEART, and SHARE it with each one you MEET*.

And friends, THAT is the ESSENCE of what I've been trying to SAY in this sermon series as I've talked about our MINISTRY as disciples of Jesus Christ, and how God calls us to LIVE our faith in ALL the TIMES, PLACES, and CIRCUMSTANCES of our daily lives. WE are called to LET the LIGHT of Christ shine WITHIN us, and THROUGH us, OUT into the WORLD. Just as JESUS says in His Sermon on the Mount: *LET your light SO shine before OTHERS that they may SEE the good works you DO and give GLORY to your Father in heaven*. And AS the RISEN Christ says to His disciples: *AS the Father has sent ME, so I send YOU!* (John 20:21) Yes friends, WE are called to LET the Light of Christ shine BRIGHTLY in and through US! In other words, WE are called to be as CHRIST-LIKE as possible; to be HIS hands and HIS voice, DOING and SAYING what HE would DO and SAY if HE were here in the flesh TODAY! WE are called to BE, as my teacher and mentor Henri Nouwen used to say, **LIVING Reminders** of Jesus Christ in this world. And AS we LIVE this way, WE will bring Christ's PRESENCE into our HOMES and factories, shops and hospitals, town hall and voting booth, ball fields and city streets. Yes, WE are called to LIVE in such a WAY that wherever WE go, CHRIST goes.

And I believe that MORE than anything ELSE, this world NEEDS the Light of the world! This world NEEDS that divine PRESENCE! After all, I don't need to tell YOU how DARK it IS out there right now! There is not ONE of us who doesn't THINK about that darkness a LOT, and probably FEAR it a good deal! There is not ONE of us who does NOT ask the question: *WHAT is this world COMING to? HOW can people keep getting MORE and more VIOLENT,*

*and MORE and more disruptive and UNCIVIL and DISHONEST? How many MORE acts of TERRORISM do we need to WITNESS? How many MORE children need to DIE of starvation and HUNGER-related CAUSES? How many more WARS will we BEGIN, and on HOW many more FRONTS? HOW many more SCHOOL children will be SHOT – or BULLIED? HOW much more prejudice do people of COLOR, or GAY people, need to ENDURE? How much more POLLUTION and ABUSE can our environment HANDLE, because its inevitable MELTDOWN is ALREADY happening? HOW much closer to HOME do CRIME, MURDER, and BANK robberies need to GET? HOW much more IMPERSONAL and UNCARING can our workplaces BECOME? HOW much more stress and BREAKDOWN can FAMILIES endure? And how BAD will our economy GET? Yes, our QUESTIONS just keep COMING, because this WORLD seems to be getting DARKER -- and DARKER -- and DARKER! And it's TRUE: we NEED the Light of Christ TODAY as much, or MORE, than we have EVER needed it! And THEREFORE, it's absolutely CRITICAL that EACH and every ONE of us carry in our hearts even the tiniest FLICKER from the FLAME of Christ's LIGHT, because every SPARK will HELP! So, WE need to work CONTINUALLY to let it SHINE, let it SHINE, let it SHINE! (a CHILD begins to sing: *This Little Light of Mine*).... That's right, _____? Do you want us to sing it now? OK! Let's ALL of us sing a few verses right NOW! Please play a few verses, Renea!*

SONG: This Little Light of Mine

Yes, we need to *let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!* SO, what does it MEAN for US to be the LIGHT of Christ, for US to let the LIGHT of Christ shine IN us and THROUGH us? Well, we've talked a LITTLE bit about what that MEANS in our HOMES and in our workplaces, and I HOPE that ALL of us have become more CONSCIOUS of it. But WHAT does it mean for us as CITIZENS -- as citizens of a community, as citizens of a nation, and as citizens of our world? Well, FIRST it means that *public service is NOT a CHOICE for Christians, but an OBLIGATION*. As Pope John Paul II once said: *Christians have a RIGHT, AND a DUTY, to contribute, so far as they are able, to the building up of society*. In other words, WE need to care ABOUT, and to care FOR, the MANY communities OF which we are a PART, and to do EVERYTHING in our POWER to ENHANCE life WITHIN them. We need to do EVERYTHING in our power, for example, to make CERTAIN that our frail ELDERLY are being cared for LOVINGLY and conscientiously in this city. We also need to do EVERYTHING in our power to make CERTAIN that our children are being offered the BEST possible EDUCATION, even if it means SACRIFICING a few more of our hard-earned TAX dollars! We need to do EVERYTHING in our power to make CERTAIN that the POOR among us are not ONLY getting FED and sheltered, but ALSO getting the RESOURCES and TRAINING they NEED in order to ONE day break FREE of the VICE-GRIP of POVERTY. We need to do EVERYTHING in our power to make CERTAIN that we VOTE for, and SUPPORT, leaders with GOOD values, who have a CONCERN for the POOR and the OPPRESSED in our nation and WORLD, and who will work HARD to enhance life for EVERYONE, NOT just the RICH, or a few special interest groups. WE need to do EVERYTHING in our power to make CERTAIN that QUALITY, affordable HOUSING and HEALTH CARE are available for ALL people. We need to do EVERYTHING in our power to make CERTAIN that our KIDS get good COACHING by adults who work at BUILDING their self-esteem, and who care MORE about instilling good VALUES than about creating more RUNS and TOUCHDOWNS! We need to do EVERYTHING in our power to make CERTAIN that we work at combating EVERY kind of PREJUDICE and discrimination that DIVIDES people and causes animosity, whether it's

RACISM or sexism, AGEISM or nationalism, RELIGIOUS prejudice or HOMOPHOBIA. And this LIST of WHAT we need to be doing just goes ON and ON and ON, because AS we talked about the very FIRST week in this series, because the ministry of Jesus was a ministry of JUSTICE! And so, OURS must be ALSO.

And of course, it's EASY, working for JUSTICE and doing to good DEEDS, to feel OVERWHELMED, and to get what's called *compassion FATIGUE*. And it's EASY because there's just NO WAY that YOU and I can do it ALL! There's just TOO much work to be DONE! And we get WORN out TRYING! BUT, we CAN do our BEST! We CAN do everything in OUR power! And thankfully, we CAN do MUCH of it TOGETHER, IN and through the church, and our denomination. And THAT makes it EASIER! However, a LOT of it has to be done APART from the church. NO one from church, for example, can walk into the VOTING booth WITH us and VOTE for the RIGHT candidate! We HAVE to do it ALONE! And NO one can work on our JOB with us every day to help us make good CHOICES. We HAVE to do it ALONE! However, AS I said LAST week, the CHURCH is a community that gathers us IN, in order to send us OUT! And WHILE we are HERE, it is hopefully INSPIRING us and TEACHING us, PREPARING us and EMPOWERING us, with ALL that we NEED so that we can OUT from here and be FAITHFUL disciples of Jesus Christ, letting HIS light shine IN us and THROUGH us, and ALL that we DO!

SO, we are ALL called to GIVE of our TIME, our TALENTS, and our TREASURE in SERVING our community, NATION and WORLD. And in ONE way or another, MOST of us are DOING that, and doing it ABUNDANTLY! In your bulletin, you'll find a LIST of organizations that this church supports, either on our OWN, or THROUGH our denomination. And I would GUARANTEE that these organizations reflect only a FRACTION of what WE in this church are DO to SERVE the wider communities in which we live, because week after week, month after month, and year after year, YOU and I are out there GIVING our TIME, our TALENT, and our MONEY to help MEET people's NEEDS and build up our SOCIETY. And let me TELL you: EVERY time ANY one of us DOES that, and DOES it because of our FAITH in Jesus Christ, no matter how SMALL our effort may BE, the FLAME of Christ's precious LIGHT, the light of His LOVE, shines a LITTLE more brightly in this world. And that Light PIERCES that dreadful DARKNESS that seems SO overwhelming! Yes, EVERY little effort COUNTS! As my OTHER teacher and mentor, William Sloane Coffin used to say: *NO one makes a BIGGER mistake than those who do NOTHING because they can ONLY do too LITTLE!* And friends, we ALL need to REMEMBER Coffin's words when our lives get BUSY, and we feel DISCOURAGED because we CAN'T do ENOUGH! Yes, even the SMALLEST contribution COUNTS because IN it and THROUGH it, the LIGHT of Christ SHINES in this world of darkness! SO, WHEN you LEAVE here today, and EVERY Sunday, CARRY in your heart the LIGHT of Christ, EVEN if it FEELS like it's only a FLICKER. And let it SHINE!... Let it SHINE!... Let it SHINE!... And let it shine in your own UNIQUE way, according to the PARABLE of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. You see: Rudolph finally realized that the NOSE he was so ASHAMED of was actually his GIFT and his WITNESS. And OUR uniqueness can be that for US as well... and SHOULD be! SO, let it SHINE, my friends!

And one LAST thing: AS you go out from here and SERVE your community in various ways, you DON'T have to always TALK about your faith! SOMETIMES that's important, ESPECIALLY if someone ASKS you WHY you DO the things you DO – or what MOTIVATES you, and WHAT keeps you going, ESPECIALLY when things don't seem to get any BETTER.

It's IMPORTANT then to TALK about your FAITH and your LORD. But at OTHER times, I think that TALKING about our faith MAY actually HURT more than it HELP. After all: we live in an age when GOD, and religious faith, tend to be TRIVIALIZED, so that very OFTEN people won't take us SERIOUSLY when we TALK about our faith in Jesus Christ. SOMETIMES they even stop LISTENING! INSTEAD, we need to realize that ACTIONS speak a lot LOUDER than WORDS. So in my OWN life, long before I TALK with someone about my faith, I try to LIVE my faith in their presence. I try to grab their ATTENTION -- NOT with WORDS, but with DEEDS, or with my PRESENCE as a person they know to be a person of FAITH. And THIS approach actually comes from St. FRANCIS of Assisi, who said: *PREACH the gospel at ALL times. If NECESSARY, use WORDS.*

Well, THINK about all this, friends. Think HARD about how YOU can CARRY the light of Christ OUT into the wider COMMUNITY -- OUT into KEENE and New Hampshire, OUT into the United States and the world -- and let it SHINE, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine! In other words, what can YOU do to bring JUSTICE and love, PEACE and hope, JOY and fulfillment to ONE and ALL, all around the globe? What can YOU do to take the Light of Christ and let it SHINE, let it SHINE, let it SHINE? Let's STAND and SING like we MEAN it *This Little Light of Mine!*

SONG: 'THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE'

1. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine! This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!
2. Put it under a bushel? NO! I'm gonna let it shine! Put it under a bushel? NO! I'm gonna
let it shine!
Put it uner a bushel? NO! I'm gonna let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!
3. All around this town, I'm gonna let it shine! All around this town, I'm gonna let it shine!
All around this town, I'm gonna let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!
4. In my daily work, I'm gonna let it shine! In my daily work, I'm gonna let it shine!
In my daily work, I'm gonna let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!
5. Into this dark world, I'm gonna let it shine! Into this dark world, I'm gonna let it shine!
Into this dark world, I'm gonna let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!
6. Trustin' in the Lord, I'm gonna let it shine! Trustin' in the Lord, I'm gonna let it shine!
Trustin in the Lord, I'm gonna let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!
7. It's the light of Christ, and I'm gonna let it shine! It's the light of Christ, and I'm gonna let it
shine!
It's the light of Christ, and I'm gonna let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!
8. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine! This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!