

"This Little Light of Mine" Is Not So Little!
John 1:1-18

Sometimes we sing a little song with children in the church that goes like this: "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, let it shine." I think the next line is "Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm gonna let it shine." Then, "Not gonna let Satan snuff it out, I'm gonna let it shine." From there you make up lines such as "Shine all over Greenwood town" or "Shine all around old Harris Church" until you run out of ideas.

Not a bad song for Epiphany Sunday for children or adults! However we can we need to remind ourselves that God has sent light into the world and that we have been touched by it. We have light to guide us through the darkness of this world. Indeed, we are light. Epiphany has three emphases that deserve recognition and celebration. The term "epiphany" is defined as a sudden insight or appearance by a deity. We observe Christmas to celebrate the coming of the Christ to reveal the heart and intention of God. Epiphany guides us to be specific in what we are celebrating. First, there is illumination. Light has come in the Christ—the light of love, grace, and reconciliation. Second, there is manifestation. The light is revealed in ways that we can understand. Everyone can relate to a child and to the hope and renewal a child brings. Third, there is declaration. We live the story and we tell the story. We let our light shine until every dark corner of our world has become bright with the light he has brought.

On this Sunday we look over our shoulders and remember vividly the wonder of Christmas and the blessings it has brought to us. We turn to the future and see that we are entering a new year, and while there are no promises, we hope for time to grow and to experience what God can do through us. With new understandings in our hearts and an open calendar before us, it's a good time to make commitments.

My prayer is that all of us will allow the light of God to burn brightly in our lives and that we can somehow bring that light to the dark places in our world—places where there is need and pain. My commitment is to be more attentive to sharing the light in my surroundings. I value profoundly my relationship with you in this church. For all its weaknesses the church is a family of believers that touches us with blessings that we too often take for granted.

The church is a fellowship that provides opportunities for worship and Bible study, some of the most enriching things a person can pursue. It is a support system, where people provide care and love. It is a workshop for the shaping of ethics and justice. It is an outlet for creative expression and sharing. This church is not “our” church. It is God’s church. It is our privilege to serve God through it. God calls us to share its life with all those around us.

We live in a society that doesn’t care much about what the church says or does. People will begin to notice and to listen when the church moves beyond itself to the sharing of that light that is shining in the world. People who do research into beliefs and lifestyles say that 70 to 80 percent of persons outside the church say that faith and religion are important in their lives. What they say they want from the church is honesty and caring.

Our mission is to reach out, to love, to give, and to witness to the light. What a great opportunity we have to tell persons that they are children of God! It takes an attitude that focuses on them. A parable by Theodore Wedel illustrates this point. I read it often, and I share it with you:

“On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks occur often there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding

area, wanted to become associated with the station and to give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

“Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because it was now used as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club’s decoration, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held.

“About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boat loads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club’s lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

“As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that

seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.”

Each time I see that parable I feel uneasy. Many of the churches I know spend most of their time and money trying to keep things going. If we could shift our emphasis to reaching others for Christ, the “things” that are so important might take care of themselves.

That’s why I call you to think about “this little light” that you and I have. Epiphany reminds us that the light shines forth into the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Join me in making a commitment to sharing the light in 2010. Specifically, let us dedicate ourselves to a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. Insofar as our service to Christ through the church goes, let us seek to build up this congregation. Let us commit ourselves to attending and giving to the work of the church. Let us determine that regularly we will invite persons to worship and study with us. Let us pray for and expect God’s involvement in what we undertake through his guidance.

And let us all be ministers. I heard a neat story once about what is really important in the church. A pastor came to a committee meeting straight from the hospital. He had been talking and praying with a church member who was near death. They had spoken about death, faith, and hope. The pastor was feeling very “spiritual” when he arrived at the meeting. The council discussion had to do with whether the church ushers should wear badges. The members argued for nearly two hours over these questions: If the ushers used badges, should their names be engraved on them? Should ushers be allowed to take the badges home? If they took them home and forgot to bring them back, should they be allowed to serve? On and on it went. The pastor thought he would scream. Then he said, “Look, I’m on a high because I have been witnessing to a man who is dying. You’re on a low because you can’t agree on something that really isn’t that important. Let’s swap jobs. Let me make a decision about the ushers. You take my hospital list.” To his amazement they agreed. To his further

amazement, at the next meeting of the church council, the members asked for more ministry opportunities.

This “little light” of ours really isn’t so little! It shines with power. It dispels the darkness and changes lives. May it change our lives. And may it change lives all around us. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

J. William Harris
3 January 2010