

Leave the Light On

Lee C. Moorehead
Farewell Sermon to Madison
on retirement

This is a theme I have been saving for this day. Several years ago (1980) Betty came home from a Minister's Mates luncheon at Annual Conference and told ~~me~~ a true story that Zelda Stanke, ~~the~~ the widow of one of our United Methodist minister^s, Oscar Stanke, had shared at that luncheon. When they had ~~decided~~ decided to retire, they went to a seminar led by the famous psychiatrist, Elisabeth-Kubler Ross, who was offering positive suggestions for continuing to lead creative lives. After they had retired they did many interesting things together. One evening ^{she} ~~was~~ leaving Belleville (~~W.I.~~), where they lived, to drive to Madison where she was to speak to our United Methodist Women here at First Church (~~about 1974-75~~). As she was about to drive away, Oscar leaned in at her car window and said, "I'll leave the light on for you." She went on her way, and returning some hours later, found the light still glowing through the window. But when she entered the house she found that "The light that had burned within him had gone out." He had died while she was gone. But Zelda said she felt that he truly had left light for her to continue. Later that year Zelda went back to college.

I have treasured that story and pondered its meaning for several years. As I share it with you this morning I am not, of course, referring to death. I feel very much alive and well, but as I leave this church to enter a new phase of my life I would like to have you remember me as one who left the light burning in the window. It is a small light, not enough to illuminate the whole house. But it is a light, and I pray that you will want to keep it burning. It is not really my light. It is rather the light of Christ.

Dr. Edward W. Bauman, minister of the Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., tells of one of his theological students who returned from his last service at a nearby student parish. During the service he noticed that an elderly woman had been crying. As she left the church he commented about her tears. She told him: "It is because this is your last Sunday. You are leaving us." But the student pastor with sincere modesty,

replied to her: "You shouldn't cry. I'm sure they will send you someone better to take my place." At that the woman began to cry again, and she said: "Oh, that's what they all say, but every year it gets worse and worse." (God's Presence in My Life, p. 56) Now there may very well have been situations like that in this church before, but I assure you that that is not what is going to happen now! You will be excellently and beautifully served by your new minister, Kenneth Engelman. The light in the window is going to burn much brighter.

I speak to you out of the love I feel for all of you in my heart today, ~~xxxx~~ because I have run out of Sundays. A few years ago I chuckled, perhaps prophetically, when I saw a Peanuts strip in which Charlie Brown is talking to Linus. Charlie is saying: "My grandfather says life is a lot like a football game . . ." Linus asks: "Does he feel like he's in the fourth quarter?" Charlie replies: "Worse than that . . . He's afraid he doesn't have any more 'Time Outs.'" (3-7-81) Well, I don't have any more "time outs" between Sundays, so I want to tell you what is in my heart.

As some of you know my ~~xxxxx~~ life-long model for a preacher has been the late Ernest Fremont Tittle of Evanston. I once was keenly interested to learn that when Tittle was still in grammar school, he pursued a career as a gaslight tender, "Starting out at dusk to light the city's street lamps, and again at five in the morning to turn them off." (A Mighty Fortress, a collection of Tittle's sermons with a biographical sketch by Paul Hutchinson, p.xi) I must tell you that all of my life I have wished that I could be a lamplighter. One of my treasured childhood poem's comes from Robert Louis Stevenson's classic A Child's Garden of Verses. And among those precious poems that illumined my childhood, and still my life, is "The Lamplighter":

My tea is nearly ready and the sun has left the sky.
It's time to take the window to see Leerie going by;
For every night at teatime and before you take your seat,
With lantern and with ladder he comes posting up the street.

Now Tom would be a driver and Maria go to sea,
And my papa's a banker as rich as he can be;
But I, when I am stronger and can choose what I'm to do,
O Leerie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps with you!

3

For we are very lucky, with a lamp before the door,
And Leerie stops to light it as he lights so many more;
And oh! before you hurry by with ladder and with light,
O Leerie, see a little child and nod to him tonight!

On several occasions when I have been invited to read in schools to little children I have read ~~them~~ that poem. Yes, if there were still lamplighters being hired today I would apply immediately for such a job!

Indeed, as Christians that is what all of us are called to do. Our calling is in the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 5:14-16, RSV) In a world that seems so dark and forbidding to many, there are many places, when it grows dark, where we can leave the light on.

*I-

Most frequently, I suppose, we are attracted by lights set on a hill. We love to look up and see a light flickering and flashing in the night. But what about a light shining in the valley?

A few years ago Lois Gilbert gave me a copy of a letter that her mother and father, Hazel and David Talbot, had received from a woman who had lived near to them in Palatine, Illinois. Hazel gave this letter to Lois as the Talbots prepared to move to the Oakwood Retirement Center. Mike and Fritzie Check lived some distance from the Talbots, on a hill, a little above them. Their two properties touched and the Talbots permitted the Checks to drive across their land to get to their own. The Checks had a beautiful marriage. Mike was a highly respected ^{Professor} ~~Doctor~~ at Northwestern University and Fritzie, a lawyer, edited a law journal.. Mike died and the Talbots received this lovely letter:

Dearest Hazel and David, dearest of Friends:

The feeling within me for the happiness you gave Mike and me, and for the hands extended by you in sympathy is way down so deep in my heart that it cannot well up in mere words.

The warmth that flows to me each evening from the beautiful mums and from your lighted home with its constant welcome give me strength in the face of terrible loneliness and heartache.

4

A strange thing has happened. Providence seems to have left to me a bit of Mike's amazing qualities of completely ignoring the existence of bad things in life and of greeting each day as a new ~~mar~~ marvel and a day alone to be lived to the fullest.

This world was a wondrous place seen through Mike's eyes. It's a miracle that out of all the people in this world, I was chosen to be his beloved.

God is generous in giving me your love to help fill the void. May His blessings and bountifulness be with you always.

Lovingly, Fritzie Check (April, 1959)

In sharing this letter with me two years ago, Lois added her own note: "I especially liked the second paragraph and the reference to the lighted home which comforted her. Thought maybe you could use it in a sermon sometime. Lights on hills are comforting, but lights from valleys also comforting."

As your minister for these past eight years, I have told you many times that I do not have cozy and clinching answers to towering questions of mystery and suffering. Furthermore, I have raised serious questions about your way of life, and my way of life, of our behaviour and performance as Christians. But believing fervently in that Light of Christ that came into the darkness of our world long ago, I have always tried to leave the light on. Yes, in the valleys as well as upon the peaks. One of the old hymns that I have loved reminds us:

Brightly beams our Father's mercy,
From his lighthouse evermore;
But to us he gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.
Let the lower lights be burning!
Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman,
You may rescue, you may save.

(No. 148)

-II-

"Leaving the Light On" also describes the nature of the Church. This is what the church is all about.

Betty DeVore

Many years ago at a School of Mission I heard ~~Mrs. Howard (Betty) DeVore~~, a missionary ^{ary} with her husband in Nome, Alaska, tell about an Eskimo boy, 12 years old, who stayed at church one night until they closed up. It was 20 below zero outside. Later that night he knocked at the parsonage door, shivering in a pair of pants and a light wind breaker. His drunken father had locked him out and he had seen the light in the parsonage window. The minister asked

him to go home and try once more. He had already been waddling about ~~for~~ ~~the~~ ~~in~~ in the cold. He returned to the parsonage. His father would not let him in. So they opened their door, and took him in. They gave him a hot shower, warm pajamas, and a bed. The next day he returned to his own home, and his father, now sobered, ~~xxxx~~ let him come home. The minister counseled with the father many times. The boy was always in church. (S.Iowa School of Christian Mission, Mt.Pleasant, Ia, July 12-16, 1965) That is what a church is all about, I believe. There is always a light of hope, help and healing, ^{and of welcome,} in the window.

Many years ago I heard Bishop Shot K. Mondol of India tell of an Indian church set on a hill. From around the foot of the hill, families came in the afternoon to worship. They brought their lanterns. Then when the service was over and the sun had fallen beneath the horizon, and darkness began to spread over the earth, the leader of each family would go to the central light in the midst of the church and light his lantern. Then the families would leave, their lanterns lighting the way. Bishop Mondol commented that that was a beautiful sight to see those families scattering their lights all around the countryside as they returned to their homes. ((Ohio Conference, 1952) That is how I think of this church. ^{I see you carrying the light into your homes, your schools, your offices, your neighborhoods, your workplace, yes, even your political activity.}

I do not know the Rev. Ted Rockwood of Rochelle, Illinois, but last fall I was deeply moved by an open letter he wrote to the Northern Illinois Area News, printed in the United Methodist Reporter. (Nov.18,1983) What he wrote describes the Church of Christ at its best on earth:

On Tuesday, Sept. 20, 1983, the Northern Illinois Conference in general and I specifically lost a beautiful parsonage lady in the name of Evelyn Lillian Rockwood, to the ravages of multiple sclerosis. Her battle for life dramatized our connectional fellowship as it relates to our conference health insurance program, often maligned as being too expensive and too inclusive. I would like to bear witness to all my brothers and sisters in Christ that, without our fine program and its coverages, this is one parsonage family that would have been wiped out financially. I am grateful for all those clergy and churches who have, through the program, helped bear the heavy financial burdens of our disaster.

Although an invalid for the past three years, and blind for the past two years, Evelyn gave a witness that, even in these trying conditions, she could inspire many others to not give up hope. Her ~~illness and blindness~~ situation motivated her own congregation to face up to the handicapping conditions of their buildings and to overcome them. Her illness was a catalyst for prayer and for those with special nursing talents to organize.

Many tributes have been paid to this Christian lady who dedicated her life to ministering to her family and sharing the ministry of her husband. But perhaps the greatest tribute was penned by a 90-year old former parishioner who wrote: "She has taken her bright candle and is gone into another room I cannot find, but anyone can tell where she has been by all the little lights she leaves behind."

-Rev. Ted Rockwood
Pastor, Rochelle UMC

So I think of all those great souls in my life who have gone before me, disappearing into rooms which I cannot, for the moment, find. But I can tell where they have been by the little lights they leave behind. How true this is of this great church. So many of you by the loveliness and vitality of your Christian witness have lighted my way into the future. Whenever I have the privilege of preaching the Gospel I will share the light you have given me.

Through a life of sixty-five years I have toiled and trudged, sometimes ~~spinning my wheels~~ slipping and sliding in the dark. In the springtime of life I walked through lush fields. In the summer times I have groped my way up steep mountains of mystery and wonder, perspiration flooding my eyes; in the cool, elegant fall I have wondered how far it is to the end of the trail; in the bleak midwinter I have felt the cold, biting winds of doubt and fear. But always, in every season and on every journey, I have been led by Christ who walks before me as a majestic and mysterious Guide. As I see steep hills and impossible canyons still looming in the horizon, I think of Christ as he taught us to think; I see him as the Light of the World. Yes, that light is on the mountains; and as the mists settle in the valleys below, that Light is still there. In a world where great storms thunder and threaten, where earthquakes uproot familiar landmarks, there are times when that Light fades and falters. But always it reappears! There it is! O Light of the World,

we hail thee! And you and I carry in our love and witness, the reflections of that light. "You (too) are the light of the world." Do not let it be hid. Do not light your lamp and put it under a bushel, but put it on a stand, so that it will give light to all in the house. "Let your light so shine before men (and women) (and children), that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."