

## “A Bright Light,” December 6, 2009

I was having lunch with a friend the other day, and mentioned the topic I was working on for the next sermon I needed to prepare, and told him it had to do with the image of a lighthouse. Out of the blue, he asked me if I knew how many lighthouses there are in Indiana, and I responded with my own question: “Landlocked Indiana?” He smiled, and said “Google it, and see what you find out.”

When I got back home, I did precisely that, and to my surprise, I discovered that there are, indeed, lighthouses in Indiana. Although we only have 45 miles of shoreline along Lake Michigan, I learned we have six lighthouses along that stretch of the lake.

My friend also mentioned that we have a lighthouse right here in Indianapolis—the one atop Methodist, or I guess what they now call Clarion—Hospital at 16<sup>th</sup> and Illinois. As we talked about it, I realized that the lighthouse on top of the hospital serves pretty much the same purpose as the ones along the lake or those we see along the seashore. Lighthouses are there to cast a beacon of light that breaks through the darkness, pointing the way. In a very real way, a lighthouse’s beacon is a sign of hope, and so is the one at 16<sup>th</sup> and Illinois—a sign of hope for those who are struggling with illness and disease.

As I continued to think about this, it seems that a lighthouse is a good image for us for this time of the year. After all, the days are shorter, and it gets dark much earlier than it has over the spring and summer. There’s something about light that breaks through the darkness, telling us that there is hope, and a reason to be hopeful.

Obviously, I’m not just talking about light in a literal sense, but there are times that we need hope, a glimpse at some future that’s different from what we now experience, and it occurs to me that we each have a role to play in that. In fact, we can be like a lighthouse, and send out a beacon of hope to all those we encounter, if we pay attention to the way we live our lives and connect with others.

I really believe that’s what our Bible passage is trying to say. This is Jesus speaking, and this passage is part of his sermon on what we now call the Mount of Beatitudes. This is how our passage reads: “You are like

light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your God in heaven.”

There are a couple of essentials in the Bible passage. The first is that we are told that we are like light, and I believe that Jesus is reminding us that we have the light of God’s love within us. That’s part of who we are. Furthermore, not only do we have the light, but we’re to let the God-light shine for others to know, and for them to realize it comes from God.

How do we do that? What does it take for us to begin to acknowledge that we are filled with the light of God’s love and hope, and then how do we begin to share that hope in such a way that it draws others not to us, but to God?

First we need to realize what it means to be a person filled with hope. Someone has said hope is a sense of expectancy that is rooted in the goodness of God. That means that there is the possibility of goodness at every turn, and we anticipate it because God makes it possible. We all need hope, and we can provide hope for others.

If there’s ever a time that people need a little hope, a little light, it’s right now as we approach Christmas. We know that Christmas is often a difficult time for many people, and this Christmas may be even more so. So, right here, right now... we can provide some hope.

Certainly one of the ways we can do that is by helping our Food Link families. These are families who are in desperate straits, and who never know where the next meal is coming from. So we can join with others, or sponsor a family ourselves to help supply some of the needs this season.

However, I want to suggest that there’s an even greater gift, and sign of hope, we can offer, and that is to continue past Christmas. Just because the season passes does not mean the need does. What about paying attention to birthdays, other holidays, the start of school, and help out then, too? What I’m saying is for us to consider not just being a flash in the pan, showing up on their doorstep only at Christmas, but to build a connection, a relationship, to get to know the family, to show honor and respect, and help them believe in themselves. That’s

something we can do that's like the beacon of the lighthouse that is always constant, even when the seas are calm.

There's yet another way we can let the light of hope shine, and it has to do with being aware of how we treat each and every person we encounter—the ones in our homes, as well as complete strangers. A good place to start is with the people who are part of our lives on a daily basis. What might being a beacon of hope look like?

Maybe it means that we stop focusing on the negative aspects of a co-worker or family member, and stop complaining about what this person or that one did or didn't do. How about if we made a concerted effort to remind ourselves that each person has a spark of God-likeness within him or her, and we need only to look for that spark. When we find it, then we can encourage it, and we just might be surprised what a little affirmation and encouragement might do.

I see this so often with our little granddaughter. To her, the world is a place of fascination and wonder meant for her to explore. Every little thing she does is met with cheers, encouragement and positive reinforcement. She is encouraged to be herself, to try new things, and her slightest effort is rewarded with accolades.

What happens, however, when we get older? The cheering and encouragement stop, and all too often, we begin to find fault, pointing out the mistakes, flaws and shortcomings. That's not being hopeful, and it's not looking for the goodness that's rooted in God. We need to revise our thinking and put on a new set of glasses—glasses that cause us to see and affirm the good, and that blind us to the idiosyncrasies that all of us have. I'm convinced that it's worth the effort.

When we begin to see the positive in another person, whether that person is someone close to us or a complete and total stranger, it changes our outlook, and it changes our relationship with that person...for the better. It also plants within us a desire to help that person be all they can be. That means that we just might be able to see possibilities that we have never seen before, and maybe, just maybe, our encouragement will be just what is needed to take that first step toward a brighter future.

Hope is an intangible quality that can make all the difference in us and in others. It's like the lighthouse that stands firm and tall, sending forth a beacon of light for all to see.

I think the best writing on hope I've ever seen comes from Father James Keller, founder of the Christophers. I found it in one of Mort Crim's books, and it contains some of the things we've talked about, and much more. It goes like this:

Hope looks for the good in people, instead of harping on the worst.

Hope opens doors where despair closes them.

Hope discovers what can be done instead of grumbling about what cannot.

Hope draws its power from a deep trust in God and the basic goodness of human nature.

Hope lights a candle instead of cursing the darkness.

Hope regards problems, small or large, as opportunities.

Hope cherishes no illusions, nor does it yield to cynicism.

Hope sets big goals and is not frustrated by repeated difficulties or setbacks.

Hope pushes ahead when it would be easy to quit.

As Crim says, "Could there possibly be *anything* better than the pure, refreshing, healing atmosphere of *hope*?" I don't think so.

Closing:

I like something Goethe once said, "Sometimes our fate resembles a fruit tree in winter. Who would think that those branches would turn green again and blossom, but we hope it, we know it."

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will each let the light of hope, that God plants within us, shine for the entire world to see.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.