

## Light Up the Night

Isaiah 9:2-7

December 24, 2009

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society annually bring help and hope to people battling blood cancers with their Light The Night Walk events. The events are inspirational. Participants carry illuminated balloons – white for survivors, red for supporters, and gold in memory of loved ones lost to cancer. Together the walkers form a community of caring, bringing light to the dark world of cancer. Several members of our Cancer Care Ministry Team took part in Columbus' this year.

The image of lighting up the night is a powerful one. It's why we look forward to Christmas Eve each year – to have this visual reminder that light can pierce the darkness of the night - that light can overcome dark – in the internal world of our souls as well as the external world. Jesus Christ is the light of the world – because of who he is, what he said, and what he did the world is a better place. We come tonight to be reminded of that and to reaffirm it for ourselves – to be inspired again to believe that light is more powerful than dark and that into the dark recesses of our soul, the night of our lives, light can come and birth hope, joy, peace and love.

One of the ways I have found to be helpful is through the sharing of simple stories. The one I want to share with you this year was in an issue of Guidepost magazine a few years ago. It was written by Jim Sowards of Lampe, Missouri and is entitled “Words That Made a Difference.” “While I was cleaning out an old storage box I picked up a large envelope and emptied it onto the floor. Ancient bills, canceled checks, cards from people I barely remembered. *Why did I save all this stuff?* I wondered. Then a bent, tattered business card caught my eye: Queen City Casket Company, Springfield, Missouri. I turned it over. There, in faded ink, was a hand-scrawled message. Immediately my mind traveled back decades.

“I was nine years old, trudging down the cold, wet streets of Springfield, with a beat-up leather satchel of popular magazines over my shoulder. My ragged coat was two sizes too big and the weight of my bag dragged the collar to one side. I stepped carefully over the puddles on the sidewalk. I didn't want the cardboard lining in my shoes to get any wetter.

“Selling magazines was what I did to earn money for my family. One of five boys, I had lost my mother to pneumonia when I was five. My father had initially sent me and my two younger brothers to an orphanage. After several months we returned home. Dad worked two or three jobs to keep a roof over our heads. We did whatever we could to help out: harvested walnuts, gathered trash, collected scrap metal to sell by the pound.

“Most of the time, I sold magazines. I had my regular route and regular customers. Once, I was hanging around a local nightclub trying to scrounge up business, and a stranger called out, ‘Hey, kid! How many magazines have you got in that bag?’ I counted them out. Making a show of it, he bought them all!

“But the week before Christmas, 1939, business was not good. On my rounds that day, I stopped at the barber shop. The men talked about whether it would be a white Christmas, as though that would somehow make the holiday better. I knew snow wasn't going to make a lot of difference at my house.

“I listened for the sound of the twelve o'clock whistle, then headed for the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. I had my report card with its good marks in my pocket. All I had to do was present it for a free Coke. Then I visited Mrs. Wells, an elderly lady who lived a few blocks away. She offered me some cookies from her cookie jar. The cookies and soda were my lunch. Not bad.

“I came to the Queen City Casket Company on Clay Street. The owner, Mr. Rader, always took me back to his factory to ask his workers if they wanted any magazines. They teased me, saying, ‘Come on, Jimmy, climb into one of our satin-lined caskets and take a little nap.’ I shook my head. I didn’t want to have anything to do with a casket.

“Shaking off the rain like a wet dog, I went into Mr. Rader’s office. After a quick glance he led me, shivering, over to the stove. He frowned when he noticed the hole in the top of my shoe. ‘Jimmy, let me see your soles.’ Hopping on one foot and then the other, I showed him. ‘You can’t walk around like that,’ he said. ‘Come with me.’

“Before I could protest, he whisked me into his pickup truck. *Where on earth is he taking me?* I wondered. We pulled to a stop in front of a shoe store. Inside, a salesman fitted me with the finest pair of shiny black oxfords I have ever seen. When I stood up in them I felt about 10 feet tall. ‘We’d like a pair of new socks too,’ Mr. Rader said.

“My feet warm and dry, I got into the pickup truck and Mr. Rader drove us back to his factory. I didn’t know what to say. No one had ever done anything that nice for me – not old Mrs. Wells, not the people at the Coca-Cola Bottling Company, not even the big shot who bought all my magazines at the nightclub. Mr. Rader had done it because he really wanted to help. I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to hold back the tears if I tried to talk, and I didn’t want to be a crybaby.

“As I stood in his office, fingering the strap on my bag, Mr. Rader took out a business card and wrote something on it, then handed it to me. With teary eyes, I read, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ He put his hand on my shoulder. ‘Jimmy, I want you to know I love you.’ Never in all my nine years had I heard those words. Maybe my mother had said them to me, but I had been too young to remember.

“I said good-bye, my hand closed around the business card in my pocket, and went back out into the cold winter evening. Yet for the first time in my young life I sensed a flicker of hope that somehow things would be all right. Maybe not that Christmas, maybe not even the next year. But with people like Mr. Rader in the world, there was hope. There was kindness and love, and that would always make a difference.

“All those years later I stood with Mr. Rader’s card in my hand. The card had migrated into that old envelope; its message I had carried with me ever since that day in 1939.”<sup>1</sup>

Lighting candles in the lives of others is what gives meaning to life – it’s what kindles hope in others and in us. It’s what the children among us need – it’s what the stranger on the street needs – it’s what our neighbors need – it’s what we need – it’s what the whole world needs.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote an article several years ago entitled “What One Candle Can Do.” He concluded his article with: “As our world grows colder and darker during the winter months, we must do what Jews and Christians alike have been taught to do at this season. Light a candle in someone’s life and see how it makes the darkness flee. A little bit of light is all we need – but we need that little bit so badly.”<sup>2</sup>

Christmas Eve reminds us that Jesus Christ is the light of the world and his coming then and down through the ages into the world and into the lives of individuals rekindles hope. It’s what we celebrate this night each year.

And each year we pray that it will take hold a little more in our lives – in our communities of faith – in our communities – in our world.

Tonight is a night like none other – a night when darkness is understood in a new way – a night when light coming into it is filled with meaning. Tonight is a night when we reaffirm our belief that light is more powerful than darkness – that love is more powerful than hate – that peace is more powerful than war – that reconciliation is possible – that God can be known in a baby – in you and me – and though us others can see the light. Together we can light up the night.

And so we prepare for the holy experience of lighting up the night by hearing again the story in scripture and song of God's coming to live among us in human form so that we might understand God's great love for us.