



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

The Light Within

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, December 22, 2019

It is a haunting tale I have told before. The little match girl was sent out every day by her abusive father to sell matches on the street which the family made in the hovel of a home. If she did not return with all the matches sold and money in her pocket she was beaten. It was a cold, cold day before Christmas and the little match girl bundled up as best she could against the wind and the snow. “Matches for sale, matches for sale” came her weak and tired voice over the wind. It was so cold. No one seemed to be buying matches that day, as if they would all blow out if they bought them. Try as she might she had not sold a single box. Hungry and exhausted she found shelter from the snow and wind in a doorway. She couldn’t go back home without selling at least some of her matches. She tried again “matches for sale, matches for sale” but no one stopped. The rich hurried home to their warm homes in this dark time of the year.

The little match girl so cold, so hungry, looked into the window of one the houses on the fine street she was on. There were lights in the windows and inside people were warm and a great feast was spread on the table. And around the table were people, well dressed and warm and laughing. A girl her age was there. Oh, she longed to be there. She ached to be in that room. The wind blew again, but the light in the window didn’t even flicker. She stepped from the window, finding the shelter of the doorway again. She was cold, so cold. She knew she couldn’t go home so she lit one of the packs of matches to stay warm. They glowed against the fading sun, warm in her hands. Ah, it felt so good. The little match girl lit another pack and this time she closed her eyes as she felt the matches warm her face. She imagined herself inside the lovely house, feeling the warmth of the fire. It felt so wonderful. When that pack burned out she opened her eyes and suddenly she remembered where she was and the cold returned. So she closed her eyes again and

lit another pack, and now she imagined she was once again in the house with the light in the window eating all the good food, turkey with stuffing, potatoes dripping with butter, peeling back an orange she felt its sweet spray in her face, it all felt so good. The pack of matches died again but this time she didn't feel the cold, in fact she couldn't feel anything but her fingers holding that burned out back and the glow on her face. She had only one pack now, and she closed her eyes and lit it again, transported into the room with a light in the window, warm and well fed and the little match girl remembered who she really was, not poor and cold and alone, but here in this family. She was home. And they remembered her! They called out her name. She felt home and she stared out the window beyond the candle into the snow beyond. It was so good to be home.

They found the little match girl's body the next morning. All the matches had been burned and lay in a pile by her feet in the doorway. She had a smile on her face; she had found her way home.

Hans Christian Anderson's story of the little match girl is perhaps the most troubling story of the Christmas season. Some have seen it as a justification for a better life in the hereafter for those who suffer in this. While in some sense that may be true, I find it instead to be bitter testimony to the tragedy of poverty. I think there is a deeper message which incorporates both the spiritual release and indignant justice this story suggests. And it has something to do with a light in the window. John Tarrant in his book [The Light Inside the Dark](#) writes "Everything new needs to be held, needs a place into which it can be born. The container which hold is character...character is the vessel which holds our swirling selves. We do not always have a say in all that befalls us but we do have a say in the shape of our character..." As the little match girl dreamed her character as a brave little girl transformed her in spite of all reality.

And of course, we need an even brighter light today with what is happening to us nationally, and in December so close to the anniversary of the shootings in Newtown, stars of little children who will never see the light of their earthly homes again. Our

hearts ache for the families, for the loss of innocence, for a country that still allows this madness of gun ownership to trump the rights of the innocent to come home ever again. I have been studying the life and faith of Fred Rogers. If you haven't seen the new film about him starring Tom Hanks, I heartily recommend it. Fred Rogers famously said after any tragedy "Look for the Helpers. You will always find people who are helping." In a time of darkness, I have been asking myself where are the helpers?

They are among us. Those who help children cross streets safely. Social workers who despite the failings of a broken welfare system, find ways to personally help those who, like the little match girl, are out in the cold. There are any number of you who have helped up the fallen, given your time to help children read, and shared your money so that others might find light. The point is this: the light is within us already. That is what Fred Rogers taught to children. And I will have more to say about this in my Christmas Eve homily, but it was his faith in children that actually saved a generation of children who are now adults.

Part of seeing this light within us lies in examining our attitudes towards the bounty of our lives –that is those of us who are inside that warm house on the warm side of the candle – and the injustice of the world – that is those who are on the outside looking in, we need not exchange one for the other. The purpose of our very character this time of year is to reconcile the two sides of light: to celebrate the warmth and light while at the same time reaching out to those who seek to come inside to a home for which they have been longing. Whether innocent children or madmen.

Actual light—candles or oil—was precious in those days, a rare commodity. It wasn't until about 1800 that ordinary people could afford candles in their homes. You would hoard oil for your lamp carefully. It was precious. Poor people must have looked at the lighted homes of the rich with longing and envy.

The dark was darker for them, and more fearsome. No streetlights, nothing that would produce the kind of scattered light that obscures stars above many towns today.

Christmas carols are full of the image of night: “O Holy Night,” “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” “Silent Night.” Christmas Eve was always more appealing to me as a child than Christmas Day—more magical, more evocative. But in those times, there was nothing romantic about the night. And a light appearing at night would have been a powerful spiritual symbol. Psychologically, it’s about something that wakens us out of our sleep, our usual inattentive state. Despair, even depression. If you’ve ever had a “dark night of the soul,” you know what I mean. This is what Jesus’ people were in.

They also lived in fear, a theme we feel especially now. “Fear not” was an important and often repeated message of Jesus. And he probably did see fear in them. Why else would you say it? Jesus looks at the frightened folk, and says Even if you have no money, no power, no status, you are light. There is a power within you that is God, that is light. You don’t need to be afraid.

Where is the light of our world? Some would say it is a spiritual, as in the light of the Buddha or Jesus. Others would say it burns in the love we have for one another. Some would say the light resides in our home, thus the ancient worship of the hearth fire which never goes out. Sadly, the little match girl transcended her suffering to a spiritual home but at the very real cost of her life. She showed her character to be both brave and desperate, spiritual yet tragic. For me the larger question has to do with the family on the inside so envied. What part did their characters play? It would be easy to forgive the wealthy family. After all, they didn’t even know the little match girl was out there. It wasn’t as if she knocked on the window and asked to come in, all the more the tragedy for those born marginalized and forced to keep silent. But did the wealthy family have an obligation to her? They did, but not in the ways that are most obvious.

I believe the answer is from the warm side of the light in the window is not so much being comfortable or even individually inviting the poor into our homes but rather undoing the

very system of poverty that keeps those out from having their own warm world. We are a long way from the desperation of the little match girl in the industrial revolution and the world we live in now. Few in our country at least die of cold and starvation, but the desperation is very much there. In a social service system that doesn't work, in a health care system that relegates the poor to long waits and inadequate care, in a political process that is far beyond accessible to most. We have both the right to comfort and the imperative to bring others into our light, towards a home of their longing. With our votes and our money, we on the warm side of the candle can change the reality of those without. We can change the reality of fear (in fact I believe that monolith is cracking already) to a new reality of compassion. (see Marcus Borg's [The Heart of Christianity](#) for an excellent expansion on this point).

For me the most powerful symbol in the story is the light in the window of that home. We approach the darkest and longest day of the year and candles are lighted to invite back the sun. Candles in the windows of homes, are signs of hope and invitation. In my travels I have marveled at the light in so many different kinds of windows. Rich and poor, menorahs, and Advent, bulbs burned out, perhaps symbolizing the broken nature of our lives, and yet hopeful, colors like blue, green, red and white.

Light may symbolize an invitation to a home but not for all of us. The tragedy in the story is that the little match girl could only get in if the rich opened the door. Light both warm us and invite others in. The work we do, while not physically inviting others less fortunate is a light towards home.

Christmas and the advent season leading to it, stirs in our swirling selves this dual identity; warm and celebratory, and concerned with love for those who need to be in. Light does shine this season and in unexpected ways. 125 years ago today Department storeowner James Edgar delighted customers' children by walking about the store on weekends dressed in a Santa costume. Edgar aspired to broad-mindedness in his religion, and though not a member he attended the Unitarian church where he paid the annual

pledge to reserve a pew. The first Department Store Santa, a Unitarian. And who says we can't have a little fun. Light shines despite it all.

But there is still a deeper level to consider. Not just the call to shine but the call to shine our light on others. We are in the midst of an emergent stream of new spiritual seekers, perhaps some of you here. They are not interested in divine intervention. They are interested in shining out to the world. I see it in some of the most innovative philanthropy ever; micro lenders helping a coop start in the barrio, mothers forming an alliance to bring crack heads to treatment, the next generation of spiritual seekers are light shiners. Its as if there is a call going out to the spiritually hungry. A call to shine. In the words of Jan Richardson:

Call it
the waters of salvation
or the garlands of gladness.

Call it
fear
falling away
or call it the loosing
of the chains.

Call it
what binds us together:
fierce but
fragile but
fierce and light

Call it light and
We will rejoice over you
with gladness;
call it
we will renew you
in love;
call it
he will exult over you
with loud singing

as on a day
of festival.

Call it
the thin, thin place
where the veil
gives way.

Or call it this:
the path we make
when we go deep
and deeper still
into the dark
and look behind to see
the way has been lit
by our rejoicing.

—Jan Richardson