

“Shine”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Matthew 5:14-16; Isaiah 58:1-12  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
on February 5, 2017

*“Sound is a way to extend the territory you can affect,  
so people can walk into you way before they can get close to your body.  
Certainly the communal singing that people do together  
is a way of announcing that we’re here, that this is real.  
And so anybody who comes into that space, as long as  
you’re singing, they cannot change the air in that space.  
The song will maintain the air as your territory.”*

These are the words of Bernice Johnson Reagon, civil rights activist, history professor, curator at the Smithsonian, and founder of the musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock, responding to a 1991 interview about black music and the way it has shaped African-American experience and identity. I’m going to share a lengthy excerpt of the interview with you because I find her words both important and inspiring, and I don’t want to dishonor the wisdom she shares by chopping up the interview into sound bytes.

Dr. Reagon continues, “I’ve seen meetings where a sheriff has walked into a mass meeting and established the air because this is a sheriff everybody knows. And they’re taking pictures or taking names and you just know your job is in trouble and . . . The only way people could take the space back was by starting a song. And inevitably, when police would walk into mass meetings, somebody would start a song and then people would, like, join in and, like, as people joined in, the air would change.”

She says, “A lot of these black, old songs are ‘I’ songs-‘This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.’ So when you get a group changing songs to ‘we,’ like ‘We shall not be moved’ and ‘We shall overcome,’ that’s the presence of white people in collaboration with black people because in order to express community, you have to go to the first person plural. [But] in the black community, when you want the communal expression, everybody says ‘I.’ So if there are five of us here and all of us say ‘I,’ then you know that there’s a group. A lot of times I’ve found when people say ‘we’ they’re giving you a cover to not say whether they’re going to be there or not. So the ‘I’ songs are very important. ‘This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine’ means that when the march goes, I am going to be there. So it really is a way of saying ‘The life that I have, I will offer to this thing.’”

Reagon explains, “We grow up in a culture, as black people, where we really got strong messages about being visible and that the best way to be was to have this sheen and move almost as if nobody could tell you were there. You know, whatever job you had, if you could just get it done and just-and the cooler you were about it, the more you were applauded, to the extent that people really had to go through a barrier to stick out. Now, ‘This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine’ is just crashing through all of it. It is a very arrogant stance. ‘Everywhere I go, I’m

going to let it shine.’ And sometimes I used to say, ‘Well, you know, I’m going to shine so bright, you’re going to have to have shades on to see me!’ . . . that was the way we felt. . . [Y]ou really are very clear that you are sticking out.”

The white interviewer comments, “Where I grew up, in the Central Baptist Church in Marshall, Texas, that was a song of humility. ‘My light is small but I’ll let it do the work that it can.’”

Reagon responds, “Those preachers will find a lot of ways to keep people down! I mean, can you imagine what would happen in a church if everybody really decided that, you know, they could shine as bright as they wanted to?”

“Or as bright as the preacher,” the interviewer adds.

Reagon nods, “That’s why you ended up with the Pentecostal church . . . [Spirit] is accessible for everybody . . . [O]perating at full power, and inviting people in the congregation to operate at full power, is a very important Africanism within the society, not being afraid of a room of very powerful people and actually stimulating people to operate at full power and not feeling you have to make them bank their power.”<sup>1</sup>

I never thought I’d say this until I listened to Dr. Reagon’s interview, but I’m hoping we get a little more Pentecostal in here. We’re probably not gonna start dancing in the aisles any time soon, but I do hope each of us finds his or her own God-given power, and I hope we celebrate the light in each and every person. May we bring to a halt our candle-snuffing tendencies, whether it be jealousy or fear or insecurity that motivates us to smother someone else’s emerging blaze. Instead let us pledge to be matches, to fan each other’s flames, to admire each one’s light.

As a child in Sunday School, we used to sing, “Hide it under a bushel? No! I’m gonna let it shine! Don’t Satan blow it out, I’m gonna let it shine.” Now I’m wondering, what if God’s people were like those trick birthday cake candles? They may look small and ordinary, but no amount of huffing and puffing can blow those suckers out. I’ve been singing “This Little Light of Mine” to myself, but I’ve slightly altered the words. Instead of “don’t let Satan blow it out,” I sing, “Don’t let *anyone* blow it out, I’m gonna let it shine. Don’t let *anyone* blow it out, I’m gonna let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.”

To paraphrase a biblical prophet, Isaiah says it this way, “Do you really think this is the fast that I choose, that you spend a day humbling yourself? That you bow down low or lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?”

“Is not this the fast that God desires: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Doesn’t God desire that your light break forth like the dawn? For if you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”

The point, my friends, is not that your light is little, but that your light is real, that your light is needed, that your light is not solitary, that your light has family, that your light cannot be

extinguished without your permission, that your light will prevail, that your light is God-given, that your light never has to apologize for shining. To the God who created the very blaze of the sun and the majestic company of stars and the unique magic of you, there is no such thing as too bright.

Sometimes your light will expose uncomfortable truths, and that's okay. You are not required to keep things covered up. Sometimes your light will offend people, and that's okay too. We don't ask the sun to stop shining because we get a sunburn, and no one should ask you to stop being yourself because they are uncomfortable in their own skin.

Sometimes—this is important—your light will feel like it is being utterly swallowed up by the darkness, but that means you've taken your light exactly where it needs to go. Thank you, thank you, thank you for not hiding your light under a bushel basket where it stays safe from the outside world but does no good for anyone. Thank you for bringing your light out here into our pain and our suffering, out here where your light surely feels threatened and the darkness is so much more expansive than it was underneath that little basket. Thank you for joining your light to my light, your light to our light, your light to the Light. Thank you.

A word of encouragement about being light: there are a thousand ways to shine. Be your own kind of shine. It's the brightest way for you to be.

You are the light of the world. Are you able to say that to yourself? "I am the light of the world." If it feels arrogant to say so, just remember, it was Jesus who told you so. Just remember, "I am the light of the world," doesn't mean, "I alone am the light of the world." That would be a terrifying prospect, I imagine. It means, "*We* are the light of the world," but if I say, "*I* am the light of the world," I can't be letting myself off the hook. I can't go on hiding. I can't keep a fire shut up in my bones. I can't leave you to do all the shining by yourself. Instead, I will, I *must*, hold the Christ-light for you in the nighttime of your fears, even as you do the same for me.

Let us pray together. This is a prayer by Macrina Wiederkehr, "O Light of God, anointed by your morning light I lift my spirit to receive the gift of this new day. In all of creation let me see the brightness of your face. Draw me into the radiant glory of your presence and into the small lights of those with whom I live and work. Inspire me to take time for those who are discouraged. May I live with the kind of presence that enables others to feel at home. Great Dawn of God, hear my prayer." Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> "The Songs Are Free," Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, February 6, 1991:  
<http://billmoyers.com/content/songs-free/>