

"Nations, cultures, arts, civilization ~ these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit ~ Next to the blessed sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbor he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ *vere latitat* ~ the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden."  
~ C. S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory

During my first sermon since my illness I wanted to express what I had learned of God's presence with me over the summer months through so many Christ-like "neighbors". I chose three passages of scripture that affirm God's unfailing presence with us: Psalm 139:1-18, Romans 8:18-39 and Mark 4:35-41. But how could I illustrate this conviction that one of the most powerful ways we know ourselves to be "within the circle of God's presence" is through the Holy Spirit's indwelling of our brothers and sisters in Christ? How could I personally express what Walter Wangerin Jr. testified to when he wrote "And God was there. I had the proof. I had begun to dwell within the circle of God's presence wherein is comfort and purpose and love and life and conviction."?

While in the hospital I had begun to recall some of the people through whose lives God had made himself known to me. As I've mentioned earlier, this led to great times of intercessory prayer as well as tears of gratitude. So I simply shared stories about some of the saints whom God has used to capture my heart for His own over the years:

Clara Shalkup was a friend of my parents who led a children's Bible club on Wednesday nights just down the street from us in West Philadelphia when I was about seven. I so loved the flannel graph Bible stories and Clara's compassionate care for us that I even refused to go to a medical appointment to have some stitches removed because it was scheduled on a Wednesday night!

Charlie Collison was the Sunday School teacher at Newtown Square Baptist Church who somehow survived our class of twelve and thirteen year old boys. God was indeed present to us in Charlie's consistently patient sharing of God's love through the Bible.

Arnie Jacobs and Fern Mitchell were my high school Young Life leaders, whose faithful presence in my life convinced me to go to Silver Cliff Ranch in the summer of 1962 where I remember knowing most clearly the reality of the living Christ, present and calling me to follow.

Young Life staff and servants of Christ, including Bill Starr, George Sheffer and Bob Mitchell, prayed over me at Star Ranch in 1967 as I was commissioned to the ministry, experiencing a new depth of the "purpose and conviction" God's presence brings.

Renie Van Norman showed up at a Danvers Young Life club in 1972, beginning a 35-plus year long partnership in ministry and in life that has so clarified my understanding of the "comfort, love and life" offered by the Holy Spirit's presence at the deepest levels of our lives.

Midweek Reflection # 16 ~ "Within the circle of God's Presence"

I could have gone on and on mentioning the impact of dozens of folks I've shared ministry experiences and joys with over the years and in whose lives the God of redemption and mercy was so obviously present.

I certainly didn't leave out Howard and Elsie Rich, my parents, who began and continued this process with their consistent love and witness to God's unfailing presence. I can remember family devotions in our living room, with me reading and rereading the Deuteronomy 31:8 wall plaque instead of closing my eyes for prayer: "And the Lord He it is that doth go before thee;, He will be with thee, He will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: Fear not, neither be dismayed."

I finished by reminding the congregation of the many opportunities we have to know "God is there" by intentionally engaging in spiritual disciplines with each other, both corporately and individually. And I encouraged them, as I encourage you, to do some reviewing and grateful praying over the names of the many "saints" God has used to give you the proof that you also have been living in the circle of His presence!

May your certainty increase as you remember and give thanks.

Under God's Mercy,

Howie