

Midweek Reflection # 8 ~ "Interruptions"

"The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's 'own' or 'real' life. The truth is of course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life ~ the life God is sending one day by day: what one calls one's 'real life' is a phantom of one's own imagination. This at least is what I see at moments of insight; but it's hard to remember it all the time." ~ C.S. Lewis, The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves

I have been familiar with this quote for a long time, usually attempting to appropriate it in areas of my life and ministry which could be regarded as nuisance interruptions, minor irritants that cause delay and frustration. Twice in the past, I wrestled with understanding the truth of it with more serious issues.

In 1989-90 the New England Young Life staff experienced a significant change in leadership, dictated by Young Life managers who didn't understand the different nature of New England, so apparent to anyone who has attempted to minister here for any length of time, and clearly identified every time Gallup does a poll of religious attitudes in the different regions of the USA. The changes led to a huge loss of ministry opportunities from which the ministry has still not recovered and which for a number of years I refused to see as part of God's permissive will. I did finally come to terms with this "Interruption" as God used the changes to lead me into different and productive ministry in the high school and the Church. Looking back on the experience, I could finally forgive those responsible for what I still regard as misguided and ambitious attempts at growth which backfired horribly. What helped me to see this as part of God's permissive will were lessons from scripture like Joseph's experience of being sold into slavery by his brothers. After some difficult and unpleasant experiences, Joseph is used by God in powerful ways to contribute to God's redemptive purposes. Joseph is able to look back on the whole experience with gratitude, forgive his brothers with that memorable line of scripture: "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Genesis 45:8) Like Lewis, in my moments of insight, I found peace trusting in a sovereign God and accepting my real life as "sent by God."

In spite of that lesson, when, in 2003 I was "bounced" from a health classroom job which I loved into a physical education position in the field house which left me feeling totally incompetent and inept, I went through the very same process of denial and anger. Once again, it was through several years of struggle and prayer that I came to see this "interruption" for what I now believe it to be: "one's real life ~ the life God is sending one day by day." While painful and at times very frustrating, there were so many moments of insight into my own weaknesses and strengths and into God's grace and presence that came from the change. I am still grateful for the willingness of the Union congregation to bear with me and to encourage me through those painful lessons! You accepted my whining, often disguised as sermon illustrations, with love and compassion.

Both of these difficult "interruptions" have been part of God's way of preparing me for this latest difficult transition in life ~ certainly the most difficult I have had to face. But I can honestly attribute the incredible sense of peace and acceptance which I have felt throughout the early stages of the diagnosis, surgery and treatment of my brain cancer to God's gracious lessons of the past. On those few occasions when I have been tempted to ask "Why me?", the obvious answer has been "Why not? Who else has had the benefit of so many years of learning to trust in our loving, sovereign God?" During my first sleepless night in the hospital with the brain bleed I had the opportunity of reviewing my life of faith: from early days of family devotions, Sunday school and church worship, through Young Life experiences in high school and college, to ministry in Young Life, in the Church and with PRYME; in all of these rich experiences I was surrounded by a host of faithful fellow pilgrims sharing the journey. There were tears of joy on my pillow that night as I remembered so many companions of the Way and lifted them to God in prayer. I can highly recommend this kind of prayer whenever one is tempted with self pity!

I cannot say that the awareness of God's permissive will at the heart of this experience has been constant. What has been constant is the sense of God's compassionate love and presence. With Lewis, I can attest to only "moments of insight" which help me to hold on, by faith, to my certainty in God's ultimate sovereignty. And I still pray for the miracle of complete healing, not only because I desire that, but because I believe Christ teaches us to do so in the Gospels, with the Gethsemane caveat of "Father, Not my will, but Thine be done."

Thanks for your continued prayers and for allowing me to share my reflections with you.

Under God's Mercy,

Howie