

How God has touched me and taught me through . . .

Peter Dawkins – One Sunday morning in my office, Peter walked in on me preparing for the morning class and service. He shuffled to me sitting at my desk to pick me up. As he embraced me in his arms he said, “You’re still my pastor aren’t ya?” “Yes, Peter I’m still your pastor.” “Good,” as he chuckled on his way out of the office. Unconditional acceptance and love were mine in that moment. I think I’ve hugged more since that moment of encouragement and tried to be more positive with people.

Bennet Moore – Regularly, Bennet demonstrates great generosity to me. On the Sunday morning of my installation service, Bennet presented me with a cross made of blue and white beads. What a kind and perfectly appropriate gift for the moment. A number of his art projects adorn my office, from foam angels to colored pictures. A generous spirit pervades his personality. He is even generous with his smile.

Mary Esther Swindel – Mary Esther has not been tremendously vocal nor obvious in her behavior, but demonstrates one of my favorite traits. She is simply faithful. She is here. She’s here on Sunday’s more often than I am. How I appreciate the steady faithfulness of her presence.

Preston Conrad – One never has to guess at how Preston feels. He will tell you. He’s transparent and real, no fake exterior with him. What you see and what you hear is what you got. I’ve never been more honored to be a pastor than when I was invited to have a role in Preston’s mother’s memorial service. It was a special service. Preston’s mom died on a Wednesday. The family held a service on Saturday, but did not tell Preston of his mom’s death until the following Monday. Hard for him to attend a service 2 days prior. So his friends and staff organized a service of their own for Preston to remember his mother. A choir of his friends sang. A close comrade and a teacher shared some thoughts and I, his pastor, prayed. Preston shared his thought, “Mom’s gone on to a better place. I’m not gonna cry.” And he didn’t. He didn’t cry about his mother. He didn’t cry about his family forgetting him. And, he didn’t cry about his friends remembering him with a special service. But, I did.

Gerald Brown – The scriptures say, “Make a JOYFUL noise to the Lord.” I love to watch and listen to Gerald sing. He belts out the tune the best he can and sometimes he even knows the words. He’s not worried about the perception of others; he’s not worried about getting it right. Gerald just wants to sing to the Lord. The joy is seen as his body sways to the beat. The joy is heard in sound of his voice. The Lord must be pleased. May I live unto Jesus with the same unbridled song in my heart.

Billy Holliday – I absolutely adore Billy’s greeting. He’s sitting in the pew as the service begins. We make eye contact. His mouth opens in a smile that almost swallows his face. His hands slide over his shining face to control his overflowing glee. Wow, what an affirming, accepting reception all for me. Do you think God has the same response to me every morning? Do I have the same response to God – my wife – my children – my friends – my enemies?

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William Prewitt– William has taken a liking to my children. At first he gravitated toward the girls. Of course, they did not know what to do with him. What a great teaching tool for a father to his children. God loves all, no matter how they might be disfigured. How can we learn to love like God? William gives my family this divinely ordained learning opportunity. The wondrous event lately is that Nate (my four-year-old son), because he has literally grown up with William, is not affected by the differences. Recently, Nate left the side of his mother to sit with William during worship. Of course he wanted to share with him the Spiderman book that he recently checked out of the public library. I wish I had the experiences of friendship that Nate had so that I did not have negative guttural responses to William disfigurement. I wish that I had Nate’s experience so that I didn’t see William with disfigurements but just another human being with differences who liked Spiderman too.

Johnny Conrad– About once a month, Johnny will share a prayer request during the worship service, “I want to pray for you and your family and everybody here – this whole church.” It’s something that we all feel, but only Johnny feels the freedom to regularly pray for one another. Maybe we are too dignified. Maybe we are too time conscious. Maybe we are focused on other things. Maybe we think that God doesn’t want us to pray such prayers (even though the scriptures are full of admonitions to pray for one another.) I don’t know what it is but Johnny’s simple, regular, faithful prayer request reminds me to “pray without ceasing.” Also, I must tell you that Johnny returns the benediction to me every Sunday. As I reach out my hands so does Johnny. He closes his eyes with force adding even more wrinkles to his already bunched up face. He points his face heavenward like he is in that moment receiving the very touch of God. In so doing, Johnny sends me out every Sunday with the blessing of God.

Bill Perkins – I’ll never forget one Sunday when the Bells had just finished a beautiful piece. They played clearly and strong. The sounds crisply bounced throughout the sanctuary and in my head. The ring of the bells seemed to fit perfectly together in that moment of celebration. My feet were tapping, the congregation was smiling and bodies were even swaying. As the last bell comes to a sudden stop, Bill broke out in uninhibited laughter. His boisterous response to a song well played. I thought it was a perfect response – just what I would want – to a piece entitled, “Joyous Spirit.”

Bryan and George – Both these men are new attendees to Central since my arrival. They are the best example of evangelism. Their friends find the church helpful and beneficial in their lives and spiritual growth. So these friends have invited Bryan and George to attend “their” church. Bryan and George experienced something positive from God in their initial visits and continue to come. What was once their friend’s church is now their church too.

Rev. Andrew (Drew) Smith is the pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Mobile, Alabama. This article is used with permission. Drew says, “The names have been changed but the people are very real – often more real than me.”