

*Come Holy Spirit
Use me to Your glory*

Precious Pilgrim,

"I see the lights. I see the party lights."

We went to Fargo, North Dakota, to attend the memorial service of a dear lady, Mylah Miles, my brother-in-law Jim's mother.

She was one of my encouragers. She was a neat lady. I liked her a lot. I wish we had been neighbors, for I know we would have enjoyed each other's company. I look forward to being closer to her on the other side. I was saddened when I heard she was dying of ovarian cancer, and I told my sister-in-law Kay that when the time came, I wanted to be notified and I wanted to attend Mylah's funeral. When Kay called, I went, and I am so glad I did, for what a gift I was given.

Kay and I flew to Fargo at noon on Friday and her husband had arrived earlier. He met us at the airport, and as he drove us to his parents' home, I continually asked about the weather. I could not comprehend living through their windy, bitterly cold winters. How did they cope? How did they survive? The answer hourly unfolded, for I was allowed to see the beauty of a Fargo, North Dakota family and its warmth. I felt Mylah's smile from the moment I entered her world. The warmth of her loving family and home radiated from every inch of that place. On my arrival, Jim showed me with great pride, two rare white birch trees that they had planted in their front

yard. In the half-acre back yard, we visited and dined with family and best friends. There I was shown with great pride three cottonwood trees and two apple trees. We watched a rabbit and a squirrel play together and a bevy of birds dine on stale angel food cake, which had been strategically placed under an evergreen tree. Two green plastic garbage pail tops had been turned upside down, filled with water, and converted to birdbaths. One even held a floating yellow rubber ducky for a decoy to entice the birds. It worked perfectly.

As we watch all of this outdoor activity, John, Jim's middle brother, enthusiastically discussed his recently planted flower garden. He had been the incredible 24-hour caregiver to his mother during her last months. Inwardly, I think we were all in awe of the compassionate, constant care he had given. We listened and laughed as he described his unique approach to planting his approximately 8' x 3' garden plot. He showed us the pictures on the empty seed packets of ten varieties of annuals, and one of perennials. He said he'd mixed all the seeds in a bowl and then he'd tried to plant the larger ones in the back row. We all giggled hysterically as we envisioned the quantity and quality of the various and sundry flowers that would soon be trying to poke their heads up for air. It was going to be quite a crowded living space.

As the sun gently set, I felt a great peace settle over Fargo, and that same peace seemed to enter my very being as we entered the house. All gathered in the living room around the

upright piano. There brother John and his ten-year-old niece took turns playing. We heard jazz. We heard hymns. The piano was especially loud for an upright, for John had removed its front cover so that the sound would travel all the way to his mother's bedroom. He'd played daily for her.

Jim then asked Kay to show me around the rest of the house. First Kay took me to the basement. One room was devoted entirely to the game of pool and another to the game of ping-pong. Two of the brothers informed me that the whole house was designed around these two family rooms. For today's gathering, Big Jim, Mylah's husband, had lovingly arranged photos all over the ping-pong table. There was generation after generation, event after event, episode after episode of family memories captured in these pictures. It was wonderful!

Kay finally pulled me away so that we could continue on our tour. I followed her up the stairs to the second floor bedrooms. They strongly reminded me of our grown children's rooms at home. Each held whiffs of the past with their trophies and prom pictures permanently displayed. At the same time, you could tell this was no dusty old museum. These living spaces had moved into the present as indicated by the books and magazines, clothes and suitcases that shouted of present-day activity.

An unusual eye-catcher was a rope, which was tied to a door and stretched all along the hallway. On it hung round

loops made from colored construction paper. Kay and I were sure it was just one more North Dakota game to help get one through those long winter nights. We wanted to learn how to play so we could transport it to the south. On inquiry, we learned that this ingenious mechanism had been devised to help Big Jim stay acclimated in the dark. He has Parkinson's disease, and one of its symptoms is disorientation. Kay and I were right. The rope and colored rings do help Jim get through the long winter nights, those created by a debilitating illness.

There was only one room left to visit, Mylah's bedroom. Somehow going into the room of a recently departed person makes you feel like you are entering a sanctuary. I knew that Mylah had spent painful hours, days, weeks, and months in this bed. I knew she had died in it, with two of her sons standing by tenderly talking to her 'til the very end. I also liked everything about this room. It felt lived in and loved. It felt warm and friendly. My main impression was of a family, an intact family, for there were photos everywhere on the walls, on the tables, everywhere. I knew that many of the family lived great distances away, but I could tell they remained a close-knit group, just like the intricately designed knitting that lay on Mylah's bed. It was unfinished, just as we all are on this side of the spectrum.

The indelible impression, the image I want to permanently keep, the symbol which will act as a great source

of strength to me over the years - the true gift from Mylah - was the "party tree." It stood in the corner of her room. It was a four-and-a-half-foot tall piece of driftwood with the wonderful shape of a tree. On it hung colored lights. I'd never seen anything like it. It looked to me as if someone had found large plastic bottles of various shapes and sizes and hues and electrified them. Later I learned that these were typical North Dakota party lights. With their kind of weather, maybe it takes larger ones to brighten up a spot and push the darkness away. When you're dying of cancer, maybe it takes larger colored lights to brighten up a spot and push the darkness away. That tree acted as a powerful symbol of victorious Christian living, but even more so - and "hip, hip, hoorah, hallelujah, yea Mylah" - was that it is even more strongly representative of victorious Christian dying.

Under usual circumstances, one wouldn't expect to find such a treasure, a lighted tree, in a place of death. Surely the curtains should have been drawn and the furniture draped in black. Surely we should have been whispering instead of smiling with others singing in the next room. Surely the dread of death, our own deaths, should have blanketed this place with somber melancholia. But no - Mylah had given us a gift, a gift of life: her life that we were continuing to celebrate, but even more importantly, a gift of showing us what victorious Christian dying is all about.

"O death, where is they sting?"

O grave, where is the victory? I Corinthians 15:54-55

In Christ, there is no darkness! In Christ, there is no death, Pilgrim!

I found the weather in Fargo quite bearable. I found a warmth there which will push away even the most inclement weather. The warmth of a family centered on Christ makes everything aglow - and having a "party tree" shining doesn't hurt, either. Thank you, Mylah.

With love, I am,

Lucy

P.S. I later learned that the party tree belonged to a dear friend of hers. She had also had cancer and in her will left the tree to Mylah. On breaking house, the boys decided that I was to have the party tree with all of its lights. It is one of my most prized possessions.

. . . Peace.