

March 10, 2013 / Fourth Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

I depart from the scripture readings for today, and what I had planned to speak about, to share something of a more personal nature. Yet what I share is completely about the life of faith, as I have endeavored to understand and live it, as a person and as a pastor.

A few years ago, I learned of the death of someone from the congregation I served in Indiana. His name was Ron, and while I served that congregation, we had become friends and shared life at a deep level. I was deeply saddened, though not totally surprised, to learn that Ron had taken his own life.

All of this was re-awakened in me recently as I was sorting through some papers that had for too long cluttered the office in which Sandy Fisher now works as our administrative assistant. Among those papers was an essay, or meditation, I wrote about twelve or thirteen years ago. It was drawn from journal entries I made following a particular visit with my friend.

I would like to share this with you, my community, in part because I realized as I re-read the piece that I had not really mourned the death of my friend. Also, by sharing this with you, I would like for you to share with me in remembering and honoring Ron.

The title is "Breakfast with Chloe".

Breakfast with Chloe

As I awoke yesterday morning, the day did not sparkle before me with great hope and promise. Rather, I felt a certain heaviness, having before me several conferences with persons in difficult circumstances. This prospect cast me back upon habitual feelings of inadequacy and flirtations with chronic self-doubt. However, if nearly a third of a century of work as a pastor has taught me anything, it is the wisdom of facing things not with some trumped-up sense of my proficiency, but with emptiness and openness. As it ended up, the day was full of depth and brightness after all, because I had breakfast with Chloe.

Most weeks I meet with Ron for breakfast and conversation. He is currently on home detention due to a driving-while-intoxicated conviction. I have spent much time with Ron, and the pastor-congregant relationship has transmuted into a deep friendship. I think that this friendship has two main ingredients. First, we speak a common language when it comes to

religious faith. Put simply, life is meant for giving and trying to make a difference in the world. He devotes his energies and time to missions of caring, particularly for children. A few years ago, when an infant was found dead in a dumpster on the east side of Indianapolis, Ron went right to work making arrangements for the funeral service for the child, enlisting me to preside. Oddly enough, he had read, just prior to this incident, a magazine article about a woman on the west coast who was doing the same for abandoned infants who had died. So when this grim and sad discovery was made, Ron went forth to see that the child, who died anonymously, would be buried publicly. On a morning full of icy rain, we gathered to grieve and offer prayers for the child, for the young mother we assumed to be frightened and suffering, and for a world in which children die needlessly.

The second pillar of our friendship is Ron's vulnerability and openness. Many people hold him at the arm's length of prejudice. His being alcoholic is a matter of public knowledge. His struggle is carried on under the microscope of people's penchant for scrutinizing everyone else's lives but their own. We have met often to talk about these things, and Ron has opened his life and heart to me like a book. There is nothing different about Ron's life and struggles, except that he is more honest and humble than most in dealing with the contradictions of his life. He has broken the chains of pretense and posturing that so govern the ways we live, sapping our energies. The lid has been taken off Ron's life for all to see. He wrestles with his demons, not in sheltering darkness, but in broad daylight. There is a community of those who are struggling to live at a deeper, more honest level. They know the painful realities of their own lives and together discover the divine, transcendent envelope in which our lives are embraced, which is called Grace. Ron is part of that community for me.

We used to meet each week for breakfast at a local restaurant. Apparently this arrangement smacked of too much freedom and too little punishment, so the probation officer nixed it. Now we meet at Ron's house, as we did yesterday, I arriving with gravy and biscuits from Hardee's in hand. Ron was still pajama-clad, making coffee and setting out orange juice. He excused himself to go downstairs, where I heard faint and small human noises emerging from the bathroom. Descending the stairs, Ron informed me that Chloe would be joining us for breakfast.

Chloe is a four year-old chunk of sunlight. Ron and his wife have taken in Chloe and her very young mother, adding to the body of evidence that Ron takes seriously his

determination to make a difference in the world for children. I had met Chloe before, when Ron brought her to church, but had not had the pleasure of getting to know her. I was delighted at this new dimension to our breakfast. The clouds were lifting a bit. My day was brightening up.

Chloe came up the stairs, with the deliberateness and concentration native to young children. She was adorned in ruffled and brightly patterned flannel pajamas. Two necklaces graced her tiny neck and a beaded bracelet her ankle. She was delightfully over-dressed, and I felt decidedly shabby. In her quiet way, Chloe was talkative, and walked right up to me to be sure I appreciated all the details of her outfit. Sometimes we speak of rising to greet the dawn. I felt the dawn had risen to greet me in the visage of this small child.

Being in the company of children has a way of illuminating life, casting life in its fullest light. When I learned that Chloe was breakfasting with us, the cobwebs in my head began to disperse and the day unfolded before me with considerably more potential and promise. Only the night before had Kaye and I been talking about just this thing. She had attended an all-day seminar on “vital churches”. The person leading it, who had some good things to say, proposed that congregational leaders build a vision of the church and then live toward it. Kaye asked if children were to be involved in the vision making process. He hadn't a clue what she was getting at. Children have no real place in church or society. We plan things for children without including them in the planning. They are excluded and treated as not-yet-human. They are only “potential,” not real, with something crucial to offer as children.

My breakfast with Chloe gave me further indisputable evidence that life needs to be lived in the presence of children, whether in our minds or beside us in their pajamas. Children humanize us. They hold us accountable to our truest and best selves. If we listen to them, they will tell us what life is really about and how to live it. If we were to talk and plan and work in the company of children, then it is a sure thing that we would find our ways out of the wasteful and destructive courses of life these days. We would think twice, maybe three times, before we make another violent video game, harvest another acre of rainforest, or build another weapon. If those in places of power, influence, and wealth were to carry out their ponderings and decisions in the presence of children, either in fact or in mind, there would be a great turning of the world toward life instead of death. We might just find ourselves again in that wondrous present moment of life, back in the Eden of the world,

where we know God and each other without shame or veil, and God doesn't have to ask, "Where are you?"

I think it was because of Chloe's presence that my talk with Ron went so well and profitably. He brought up some struggles that were quite challenging for that early hour. Yet having Chloe present with us, as she sat or lay down on the couch between us, seemed to calm and center us both. It was as though a boundary of grace encircled us, calling us back from too much seriousness and reining us in when we would gallop off into excess thought or anxiousness. Ron was struggling with the inactivity of these months, not being able to go about freely the things he wants to do for others. I suggested that perhaps this was a kind of enforced wilderness time, or sabbatical. He has already finished three months of his probation, and the time will go by very quickly. Shouldn't he simply accept this as a time for doing inner work, preparing for when he is able to do what he wants again? This is a time for reading, reflection, prayer, and enjoying the inactivity. After all, he does tend to be compulsive about his good-doings. This turned a light on in him, and it was something that we seemed to stumble upon together. Therapy, literally healing, is not something bestowed upon one person by another. It is more of a mutual uncovering of truth. The "professional" brings only the knowledge that the truth is there and perhaps a hint or two about where it might be found. The rest is the result of dialogue, listening, and being ready to see it when it emerges.

As we were finishing, Ron affirmed that what we had discovered and talked about was just what he needed. As he said this, I looked down at Chloe, curled up on the couch, with the sleepiness that sometimes comes to us between waking up and going off to school or to work. I looked at her with the realization that anything good that happened that morning had to do with her. Somehow, without fanfare or intention, by the mere grace of her presence, she had, as Jesus said would be the case, led us into the kingdom of God, life as it really is and is meant to be. Into our various prisons, Ron's and mine, had come this flutter of wings, this stirring of a breeze, of freedom. As I left, Chloe's benediction fell silently over me, a mantle of blessing. I knew it would be a good day, whatever might happen. And it was.