

Isn't it amazing what an impact a single person can have? I mean, there's the big folks, the Ghandis and the Jesuses and those types, but I'm thinking smaller (and maybe kinda bigger at the same time). Like, that one friend who ate nothing but Campbell's Chunky Soup so you never eat a can of the stuff again. Or the first person to break your heart, or the last one to make it sing. I've had a lot of those people in my life. There's even one or two who I never really met and only had one short interaction with. Like, on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, this one guy glared at me from the crosswalk while I waited for the light to turn green. Turns out, in an attempt to keep my stick shift Subaru from rolling backwards, I might've kinda revved the engine and he must've thought I was about to run him over. I think of that angry look a lot, especially at red lights on hills.

We've all got those people, some close, some not so close. For me, one of those people is Donny, a fella from Arkansas that made an enormous imprint on my life. I've told y'all some stories about Donny, but for a refresher, Donny was a man in Little Rock with all sorts of hard luck. He was homeless and gay, dealt with dissociative disorder (what used to be called split personalities), lost an eye to a gunshot, and on and on. There are many layers to his troubles, but that's probably enough to give you a sense of the guy's woes. When the world drew lots, he came up last nearly every time. Except one. Donny had an incredibly loving, patient, and kind partner named Fred. Fred was a veteran and used his VA benefits to get Donny the medications he needed. He kept Donny safe, and he gave Donny a reason to try to be good. At one of our Mercy Church services, Donny got down on one knee and proposed. I gotta admit, in my own prejudice, I was worried. Not because of them, though. They were fine. But I assumed the other homeless folks were bigoted and would say or do something nasty. But they didn't. They cheered, the newly engaged beamed, and the musicians struck up a rousing tune while Fred and Donny danced in the basement of an old church. I knew Donny and Fred for all of a year, maybe a year and a half. He called me a couple of times after I moved up here, but mostly, once I left Little Rock, I left Donny behind. At least, I left him behind physically. He's with me every time I put on my collar and sometimes when I'm in my civvies.

See, among the many other things Donny was, he was also my own personal prophet. What I mean is Donny had a way of saying things that were true and needed to be said without mincing words. He knew I could take that kind of raw honesty. Truth be told, sometimes he was unduly confident in my thick skin, but he wasn't mean about it. His truth stung as often as it inspired, but I needed all of it. On one of the many occasions I saw him in jail, Donny put his hand to the glass between us and asked me to pray for him. I didn't know people actually did that hand to the glass thing; I thought it was just a sappy movie trope. Nope. It's real, and I put my hand up there, too, and it felt electrically important. We prayed together, and then when we were done he told me he was gonna send me a letter. He did. It was incredible. But it also had a really creepy clown drawn on the envelope. It turned out, Donny wanted that letter to feel special so he traded a few packs of ramen noodles in exchange for a fellow inmate's artistic prowess. Donny wrote about how he appreciated clowns because they don't hide their masks. He resonated with that, a single person baring distinct personalities out there in the open. But then he warned me about my own masks and being careful not to let one overpower the others. A bit of projection, perhaps, but it was a warning I needed. I keep all his letters, by the way, and I read through them every year or two. They're important. I've got so many stories from my friendship with Donny, I feel like I can't do the fella justice. Suffice it to say, he was the single hardest and single best opportunity to see Christ in another human I've ever encountered. Donny was a complicated dude.

Now, I suspect you may be wondering why I'm doing all this talk about him way up here. I just got a sad email from a priest down in Little Rock with the sad news that Donny died last weekend. The news was as

bittersweet as any encounter with him ever was. Yes, he died, but he was about as happy as he could've been. Not long back, he and Fred finally got married. They tied the knot in a sterile ICU complete with a cowboy hat and ivy wrapped around the bed rails. I didn't cry much, but my eyes did well and blur for a time. Instead, I'm overtaken with a weird sense of calm and maybe even joy. I don't know how I can express this enough, but Donny had a hard, hard, hard, hard, hard life. He suffered immensely and now his suffering is done. And truth be told, so is Fred's, at least the suffering that comes with watching your heart's love in pain.

You know, I've been thinking a lot about this whole scene on the mountain with Jesus glowing, old prophets returning, and Peter looking around for a place to put down roots. Everyone just kinda ignores Peter's suggestion, but it's pretty clear that it wasn't the right thing to do. I think it was the wrong thing because Peter and James and John and even Jesus needed to leave that place. Maybe if Peter had made little houses for everyone, they'd never leave, or worse yet, they'd start to connect the houses to the miracle and from there, maybe the houses would replace the miracle as the important thing, emphasizing the human response to the sacred instead of the sacred itself. So they needed to leave because the sacred would travel with them and inspire them wherever they went. They didn't need to mark the place on the mountain, they needed to mark the miracle in their hearts.

When I think of Christ Church, I think of lots of stuff. A beautiful sanctuary, cool stained glass windows, interesting people. But when I think of Donny, I think of God. Sacred things happened around that man all the time. No one stopped to build him a dwelling place, and he didn't particularly want one. He wanted the freedom to roam, and he trusted the sacred to show up wherever he did. And he was right. I don't know if Donny was unique in that. It certainly seemed like a higher concentration than most of us experience, but maybe that was just because he was open to sacredness more than the rest of us. It's funny, when I think of Christ Church, I think of a place that I belonged to before. I remember it very fondly, but it was then and it was there. Donny, though, Donny is mine. I mean, he's in my soul and he's in my heart. He goes where I go. He's free to roam with me. I hope he's a little bit in yours, too. I know you never met him, but maybe my stories have given you some of Donny to carry.

Churches are tricky places, you know? We say all are welcome, that our hearts and doors are open to all, and that means sometimes "all" show up with all of who they are. That's what we want. It isn't always easy, but it is immensely sacred. And it's easy to get to thinking that this beautiful building is God's dwelling place. It's not. I mean, it's a place we reliably find God, but God doesn't stay put. Wherever we go, God goes with us. Maybe it's better to say wherever we go, God's already there. And that means God's in some beautiful places and some really nasty ones, too. God's in the faces and the hearts of everyone we meet, some beautiful, some nasty, and some a little bit of both. I miss Donny terribly, but I am so, so grateful he was in my life and continues to be in my heart. Wherever I go, he goes.

I'll leave y'all with this thing he said to me once. He'd often show up on a Sunday morning and sit in the way back, self-consciously distancing himself from the rest of the Body of Christ. He said, "I love being here. Do you know why? Because for one hour a week, I don't have to worry about what crazy thing I'm going to say. For just one hour, I can sit there in silence and only say my prayers. All the other voices in my head go away, and all that's left are these beautiful prayers we all say together." Y'all, it means the world to me that we get to do the same every week. And it's a true gift to carry each of you and your unique glimpses of God with me. I hope you catch a little bit of Donny in your hearts and carry him with you wherever you go. It is good for us to be here, but it's even better for us to be here together. And it's better still, a little later on, that we leave this place. May Donny rest in peace and rise again in Glory!