

The title of my presentation is A SERVANTS CHRONICLE.

When I was a teenager, I thought I was being “called” to the ministry. I’m a little slow sometimes, but it only took me about ten years to finally figure out that I wasn’t! At least not in the formal sense. But, as the body of Christ, we are all called to be an expression of Jesus in this world.

My story starts with an inspiration that I will call: Black and White.

“Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

This scripture reading is from Acts 10:34-35 of the New International Version.

His name was Raymond. Raymond has known me since the day I was born. That’s because he was my grandfather. My grandfather was an ordained minister who served God all of his life. He was a mentor to me in all things Christian. He inspired me in many ways. He was instrumental in starting and growing new churches. He was the type of person who would help other ministers and ministries in any way that he could. This is one of the ways that he did that. He was not what we regard as a full-time minister who is paid to be a pastor, but rather he worked a full-time job at the Oldsmobile plant in Lansing, Michigan, and used his resources from that job to support his ministry activities. He forged personal relationships with other ministers he worked with at the Oldsmobile plant, intentionally befriending colored ministers, because he felt a kindred spirit with them, and felt that the Holy Spirit was leading him to build those relationships. I use the word colored, because that was the terminology used at the time. So, being my grandfather, we have to remember the timeframe that we are talking about. These were the days in the 30’s, 40s and 50s well before the inception of civil rights legislation that would come in the mid 60s. He understood that people of color were not regarded in the same manner that white people were. But it was very important to him that they be regarded as brothers and sisters in Christ and treated equally, especially when there was prejudice and discrimination in our society. So out of these relationships came a two-way street of ministering. He would preach at their churches, and they would preach where he held services. My grandfather was a gentleman and a gentle man. Soft spoken, but believed strongly that God loved all people, and that his Holy Spirit resided in everyone who would welcome Him into their lives. So to me, he was a great influence and a mentor in many ways, but I would say, especially in regard to people of other races who are not exactly like me. I grew up and went to school in Haslett, a very small town in a suburb of Lansing, the capital city of Michigan. There was not a black face among any of the students that I went to school with. Honestly, I was pretty confused about what was going on with this conflict between the races at the time. Because I didn’t know any black people personally, all I really had to go on was what I saw on the news, or heard others speak about, and that wasn’t good! All I knew about black people came from the stereotypes and anger of the 60’s. Some of you are old enough to remember race riots of the 60s, and there certainly was a large scale race riot in Detroit that made the national news. I wondered why these people hated us, and I wondered why we hated them. My grandfather is the one who caused me to understand this in a meaningful way. He would talk to me about those days, and the relationships that he had forged with people of color. I was barely a teenager at the time. He seemed to be defying the negative attitudes of the time. He had several black friendships and somehow made them feel like he was the lucky one to have them as a friend. He understood what the Apostle Peter understood when God showed him a vision that had one purpose. To communicate to Peter that God was not just the God of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles, and ultimately, the whole world. I would invite you to read the entire chapter of Acts 10 in its full context. It is a foundational and pivotal moment of the early church. One of things you will read is Peter speaking to the people gathered at Cornelius house. “While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.” My grandfather knew the same thing in regard to the races. After he retired, my grandfather would come into town and proclaim

that he was going to visit so-and-so's church, and wanted to know, did anybody want to come along? Guess who raised their hand? I saw firsthand what mutual love, respect, and genuine Christianity looked like. You know what I found out about those black churches that I went to with my grandfather? They worshipped the same God that I did! They served the same God that I did! They sang many of the same hymns and songs that I did, albeit with much more enthusiasm, emotion, and excitement! They prayed to the same God! They prayed for each other, and they prayed for other people outside of their community. They worshipped with all of their heart. My grandfather used to say that "those colored people know how to get a hold of God"! And he always added that God is no respecter of persons, which is the scripture this story is based on. That was the language of the King James Version, but in our modern versions, we would use the word favoritism. God does not show favoritism towards any particular group of people, but rather loves all of his creation equally. This caused me to learn from my grandfather that one of the most effective ways to counteract racism and prejudice in our culture is to simply and intentionally build an authentic relationship with each other. Because when you truly get to know someone in a genuine way, you will find that we have a lot more in common than we realize. And when we recognize and build on what we have in common as brothers and sisters, the Holy Spirit can use it as an example for others to see, and will cause us to see all people the way God sees them. There is a story in the Old Testament about the prophet Elijah and his protégé Elisha. Elisha had asked to receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit. So Elijah stated that if he was present when God took him, he would receive just that. And he was there to see Elijah taken up into heaven, and he did receive what he asked for. That's how I felt about my grandfather. If there was anyone that I would have asked for a double portion of their spirit, it would be my grandfather. I did not make that known to anyone, nor did I ask God for that. But guess what? God had a plan. On the day that my grandfather died, the Holy Spirit was speaking to me at work all day, in the form of this compelling feeling that I should go visit him after work that day. It was about an hour drive to the care facility he was in, because he had Alzheimer's disease. You know how it is. I'm busy. I have things to do. I really don't feel like I want to do that after work. But the feeling that I should go was so strong and compelling, that I turned on to the highway in his direction to go visit him instead of going home. Almost immediately, the Holy Spirit revealed to me that he was dying at that very moment. And God didn't want that man to die alone. So that's why the feeling was so compelling! That was the purpose! I had about 30 minutes with him before he took his last breath. It was a blessing to hold his hand, tell him I loved him, and say this is the day he had been waiting for. The day Jesus welcomes him to his eternal home. And yes, in case you are wondering, I really do believe that God gave me a portion of his spirit because I was present at his death! So because of that example, set before me by my grandfather, I followed his lead and did the same thing. I also worked in the factory building cars in Lansing Michigan. I also intentionally befriended and built relationships with people of color, which also included ordained ministers. I even ended up being asked to participate with a band of brothers in the Black History Month celebrations at our local union hall. We called ourselves The United Brethren in Christ. We sang old Negro spirituals and songs of freedom that came out of the experience of slavery. I was the only white face among my black brothers singing together, not for vain glory, but to the glory of God. These brothers have remained friends of mine for over 45 years now. All because my grandfather caused me to understand what Peter spoke: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right". So next, I would like to tell you a story about one of the people I met in the factory and forged a relationship with, who also was a great example of being a servant of God.

I call this one: The Super Servant

"The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

This scripture is from Matthew 23:11-12 of the New International Version

His name is Aaron. He is one of the African American brothers that I intentionally built a relationship with after the example that my grandfather set. We became immediate friends. When I first met him, he had recently been appointed as the very first Industrial Chaplain in the GM/UAW organization. He didn't seek the position, but rather was recognized as a great candidate for the job by the people who appointed him. He was a humble man after God's own heart. He loved people. That's why he got the job, not because he sought after it. In addition to being an Industrial Chaplain, he also served as a Chaplain for the county sheriff's department. Now, I'm not necessarily saying that this is a bad thing, but I think he may have had an ulterior motive with this Chaplain position! If he ever got pulled over by the police, he would always make sure they saw his badge right across from his driver's license in his wallet! Anyway, he was a double duty servant in the capacity of a Chaplain. But wait! There's more! He also pastored a church in the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ denomination. This man is already more ambitious than I ever was as a servant! And there is also the personal side of servanthood for him. He and his wife Vergie had six children of their own, but also adopted three more into their family. So, double duty parenting as well! But wait! There's more! They also took in over fifty foster kids over the years who needed not only homes, but some strong direction in life. They took in some kids who were the hardest to place for various reasons. Many of them have kept in touch over the years and were grateful for what they had done for them. I cannot fathom how anyone could take all of that on and be successful, but of course we know that with God, all things are possible. I became a servant of sorts to Aaron, but in a very different way than you would think. Yes, I did serve on the Chaplaincy Committee in the plant when he asked me to join the committee. But I also spent time with him, and served him simply as a friend. Yes! Being a friend can also be an act of service! My service to him was simple for me, but essential to him. He wasn't my pastor. He wasn't my chaplain. When we got together, he was my friend. I didn't burden him further with demands as a pastor, or as a chaplain, or any other ministry he was involved in. I sought rather to relieve some pressure and stress of his ministry by doing things we enjoyed, laughing and having fun together, and allowing him to be himself, totally at ease. He knew I fished for salmon, and asked if I would take him along and show him how to catch salmon, which I did. He knew I was an avid mushroom hunter, so I took him out and showed him how to find and identify various mushrooms. My favorite story that we still laugh about to this day, came from a mushroom foray after hours at a Chaplaincy conference. We were in the woods and I spotted some oyster mushrooms which grow on trees. These were a little high at about fifteen feet up, and out of reach. I thought I could find a long limb to reach up and maybe scrape them off, but he looked at me and said "brother Keith, you're forgetting something! I'm a country boy and I think I can get 'em"! He then proceeded to climb that tree in an attempt to reach them. But alas, the country boy got smart, decided to reconsider, and came back down. So, brother Aaron is 12 years older than I am. But after observing how far he got, I'm thinking "I'm 12 years younger than he is, so if he could get halfway there, I should be able to get the rest of the way"! So up I went. And I did get further up. Until that moment that the branch went CRACK, and down I came, hugging the trunk of that tree as best I could, and grabbing for branches so I wouldn't have a disastrous free fall. I was scrapped on both arms as well as the entire front of my torso! Laughing about that is still a stress reliever to this day! He still needs that kind of a friend today too, because I'm not finished yet. There's more! Since the time I have known him, some 45+ years, his denomination has elevated him to the position of Superintendent, and then to his current position as a Bishop! Again, he never sought those positions, but the leaders saw his humble heart and love for people, and that's why he is Bishop Aaron Milton today. Let me tell you, if anyone would have told me that I would be personal friends with a Bishop, I would have lost a large sum of money betting against that! So I continue to be a servant to him by being the person he can be himself with, to have fun with, to laugh with, to talk about anything under the sun with. And I'm blessed to be his friend and serve him in that way. Now, particularly for African American churches, they are very respectful with titles. No matter what relationship you have with a person, you always address them with the title that they have rightfully earned. Right from the start, he was brother Aaron to me, and I was brother Keith to him. But not wanting to be disrespectful, I asked him how he wanted me to address

him. And he said “well brother Keith, I would prefer that you continue to call me brother Aaron like you always have”. We both feel that God called me to be this particular kind of “friend” servant to him. A man with a humble heart. A big heart. A heart that God has used in so many ways, yet he would still simply call himself just a servant of God. What an amazing servant of God he is! With this story, I’m going to end with a different verse that I began with, because of the relevance to fostering so many kids. “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

This scripture is from James 1:27 of the New International Version.

The next story is called: The Least Among You.

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.

This scripture is from Matthew 25:40 & 45 of the New International Version.

Her name was Geraldine. She was about thirty years old when I met her. She was about 5’5” and about 300 pounds. Oh, and she was blind. Both of her parents were blind and had passed along the genetic defect that left her blind at birth. She had a brother who was also blind from birth. She came to detest the fact that her parents gave birth to her at all, knowing that any offspring would be born blind. So, of course she had a difficult life with many resentments along the way. She survived on social security disability, deposit refunds from the bottles and cans she collected, and she collected scrap metal to take to the recyclers for whatever money she could get out of them. She could only carry a small amount at a time in a backpack. She got around on the bus for the most part, but was always on the lookout for anyone who could take her places that the bus route didn’t. I was one of the people she found. She would ask me on a regular basis if I could take her someplace after I got out of work. It went something like this: “Can you take me to the grocery store after work”? I said sure. After the grocery store, she would say, “I also need to go to the pharmacy to get some medicine”. Ok then. “And since we’re going past a Burger King, can we stop so I can get something to eat”? Ok Geraldine, but I do have to get home too. “Oh, and if it’s not too far out of the way, could we make a quick stop at (fill in the blank, because there were so many options)”. So, almost without fail, every errand for her turned into several stops to complete the run. And I would get home late for dinner. Again. Many times I would spit, sputter, and complain out loud after she got out because she had done it to me again. But, she legitimately needed assistance right? And so it continued. To make matters worse, she would chew her fingernails in the car and spit them out.... in the car. Plus a few other bad habits. So to say she was a little on the rough side was an understatement. Her house was an absolute mess. Trash and junk everywhere on the floor, dirty pots, pans, and dishes everywhere. Plus, she had many roommates. Like cockroaches and bugs and ants and flies. So, of course, she also needed help with things around the house too. Yes, she was blind. But I have known other blind people who have kept their house fairly clean, so you would never know it. She was not cut out of that mold. This hard way of living also left her with an attitude that came out frequently. As an example, when she was paying the clerk at the store, many times they would try to simply give her change back in one swoop. She would pull her hand away, and give a look of disgust to send a message. Then she put her hand back out to receive the change again without saying a word. If they tried to do it again, then they would get a nasty verbal. “You can obviously see that I’m blind”, she would say. “I need it counted back in my hand so I can know what I have, and organize the money in my wallet”! These things were daily frustrations for her, and it was kind of understandable how it would affect one’s attitude. Life was indeed a struggle for her. She didn’t have much money, and knew I wouldn’t take any gas money from her. But she did try to show appreciation for what I did for her in other ways. She liked to bake, so she would bring me a cookie or banana bread that she had made to show her

appreciation. Baked in the very same kitchen with all of the roommates that I previously described! So, of course I never wanted to spoil my appetite for dinner by eating snacks, so I thanked her, but always took it home to eat it later, or to share it with my wife! Wink wink. The one thing that did bring her joy was music. She loved music. Stevie Wonder had attended the Michigan School for the Blind in Lansing, Michigan, and so did Geraldine. She just couldn't figure out why. If Stevie Wonder could make it big in music being blind, why couldn't she? But of course that was always a dead end street for her. But almost every time I was driving her around, she would ask if I would like a song. And I always said sure! And she would sing, a cappella, a song or hymn that she learned. She didn't do a bad job, but she was no Stevie Wonder! But it was her simple way of giving something back to me, and I recognized it as such. I always said thank you and complimented her. She made me angry with her many stops. I'm only a part time saint after all! I often grumbled and complained (to God, not to her) about how much of my time and effort she took. I would let off steam to my wife about it after I got home, although she was well aware of the situation. I said she didn't have a very good attitude? Well, what about me? I didn't either. I was always reluctant to help her, knowing what I was in for. I disliked that I was stuck with the task time after time after time. Yup, out of her sight, I had a very bad attitude. But inside my heart, I understood something very important. Like the parable that Jesus taught in Matthew 21:28-31, one son said he would go into the vineyard and work, but didn't. The other son said he wouldn't, but did it anyway. Jesus asked a simple question. "Which one did what the father wanted"? We don't have to be perfect and without flaws to be a servant of God. We just need a heart to respond. She was undeniably "one of the least among us". Her quality of life wasn't very good, and her attitude toward life followed. But here is the truth in light of the scriptures. I wasn't doing it for Geraldine. I was doing it for Jesus. A reluctant servant? Yes. A servant with a great attitude? Ummm, no. So, does that mean I was actually grumbling about helping Jesus? I felt put upon when I was driving Jesus all over the place and making more stops than I wanted? I wasn't resenting the time that Geraldine was taking, I was resenting the time that Jesus was taking? Because, he said "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me". Being servant minded is one thing. Putting it into action is another. Your execution does not have to be flawless. Mistakes can be made. Attitudes can be had. But actions always speak louder than words.

That leads me to my final story called: The Challenge and the Grace

Her name was Kathy. She was my sister and was a year older than I. Kathy never married, and lived with my parents again after her health deteriorated. Kathy had diabetes for over ten years or more, undiagnosed, and therefore uncontrolled. As a result, she developed retinopathy that affected her vision, and kidney failure that affected her very life. She was a kidney dialysis patient for over ten years before it finally overtook her.

Her name was Cindy. Cindy was also my sister, albeit an adopted sister of the heart. Kathy and Cindy were lifelong best friends, having met when Cindy's family moved in next door to us when she was seven years old. At first, I was just the annoying brother of her best friend. But over time, she also recognized a special bond that had developed between us as well, and adopted me as the brother that she always wanted but never had. We were both the same age, having been born eight days apart, but since she came first, she was always "the old one". After we graduated, life took us in different directions, and both Kathy and I lost track of her for some time. But this crazy thing happened years later. Cindy also developed kidney disease, but from a genetically inherited condition. Their kidney disease became a serious health issue for both of them at the same time. One day while on one of her initial visits at the dialysis center to arrange for scheduling, Kathy heard a voice call out to her. Kathy? Is that you Kathy? Now, Kathy couldn't see well enough to see who it was, but she recognized that voice! Cindy? Winnie? Winnie was Kathy's nickname for her. And so started a new chapter of their lives where they would go through the ups and downs of kidney dialysis in order to keep living a little while

longer. Between my aging father and my youngest sister Leigh, they got Kathy to her dialysis sessions three days a week, because her vision wasn't good enough to allow her to drive herself. By this time, I was recognizing that my family was needing me, so I made plans to retire from my job and become available to help. Unfortunately, my mother, who had Parkinson's Disease, died about two months prior to my last day of work. After I retired, I talked with Kathy to see what assistance I could give her. My aging father soon decided that he shouldn't be driving anymore either, so I would also drive him to appointments, visits with his family, and church, along with Kathy. The youngest sister who had been taking her to dialysis treatments saw her opportunity to check out completely, so being a caregiver and helping my family get around became my new full time job. Cindy also suddenly had her sister stop taking her to dialysis as well. She had a pretty crappy husband, that I would honestly refer to as a POS if you know what I mean. He preferred that she take the special transit bus. Whenever Cindy was hospitalized, he didn't even take the time to be with her. When she was released to go home, he would tell her to take the bus home. Being that she was my adopted sister, and had a dialysis schedule very close to the same time as Kathy, I ended up taking her as well. It was a forty mile trip one way to get Kathy, another five miles to get Cindy, and ten miles more to the clinic. Three days a week. The days in between were filled with doctor appointments for my father, Kathy, and Cindy. Kathy and Cindy both ended up in the hospital on several occasions because of fluid buildup in their lungs causing a life threatening condition. Every time, I was there to be present, to comfort, and to love in that moment. Needless to say, life was very stressful for me having taken on so much. But once again, there was a need, wasn't there? Two years after my mother died, my father died. Six months later, Kathy died. Two years later Cindy died. But also during this time, there was more to deal with. My youngest sister Leigh who didn't help with anything anymore, also needed help during the same time period. Mental help, which she fiercely resisted. After several appeals to her to get evaluated, I finally obtaining a court order to have her evaluated for mental illness. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia, which we assume that she had for years, but hid it well. Because of her religious upbringing, she simply thought that the voices she was hearing was spiritual warfare. She suffered with delusions that were not based in reality. But in the end, she also was diagnosed with stage four endometrial cancer, and that's what ended her life a year after Cindy died. What a wild ride! I call it the time of caring for my dying family. What a heavy burden that was to carry. I should also add in all fairness though, that there was one other sister one year younger than me, Sheila, who helped as much as she could while she was still working. And when she retired and wasn't working anymore, she also took the youngest sister Leigh in to her home to care for her the last year of her life along with my continued assistance. But what a journey. So, you want to be a servant for God? Look around. There seems to be no shortage of people who are in need. Nursing and convalescent homes, seniors trying to stay in their own homes, people who don't have transportation, people who just need someone in their life. There may be a personal price to pay for being that servant, and the price may be high sometimes. It's not always smiles and happiness. But one thing I can say without hesitation is that God's grace is sufficient. I have no regrets for any of the things I have done as a servant of God. And you won't either! Because the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothed you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

This scripture reading is from Matthew 25:34-40 of the New International Version.