

June 2, Radical Welcome, Rev. Linda Simmons

Here are some things that ministers dreams of hearing from all of you:

1. Hey! It's my turn to sit in the front pew.
2. I was so enthralled; I never noticed your sermon went 25 minutes over time.
3. Personally, I find social justice witness much more enjoyable than sitting in a café reading my favorite novel.
4. I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before!
5. Since we're all here, let's start the service early.
6. Nothing inspires me and strengthens my commitment like our annual stewardship campaign!
7. It is so sunny out today and a perfect beach day, but I told my whole family it would be much more inspiring if we come to church first and then went to the beach!
8. I couldn't find space to park outside. How much I enjoyed the extra walk!

It is not always easy to belong to a group of people who make commitments to one another, is it? Committed community has expectations of one another and ourselves. We give so much during the week in our everyday lives that include difficult conversations and negotiations, too little rest and too much movement, no time to read that excellent fiction book sitting on the bedside, even less time to work on those personal issues we have with intimacy and community we promised to take some time to review.

When we get to Sunday service, sometimes we just want to be in a space we know with the people we know and sink into our pew bathed in the gorgeous soon to be summer light that cascades through our newly installed wavy glass windows and rest.

And then what does the minister do? Asks you to consider who you are and where you are and what still needs to be done within and outside of us. Oy vey!

I believe we who come here are welcoming people. We do consider who we are in the world and notice when we close our hearts and minds to someone or something that asks to be welcomed and that we seek to welcome. I believe we work hard to be and become people we can admire.

So why this reflection today about radical welcome? Because it is currently kicking my conscience down the street! I consider myself welcoming, go out of my way to be open hearted and listen and be present no matter who I am with or when. I have long thought this was enough. I have recently learned that welcome as a spiritual and political practice that does not involve taking some personal or intellectual risks, that does not involve getting a little messy or involved or ruffled, does not feel like much of a welcome to those seeking a place at the table.

Maybe there is a moment of discomfort as I struggle to lean in, but I am left in charge, residing in a place that can welcome or turn away from welcome. That place is what I know as my privilege: I am white, cisgender or I am biological female, identify as a women and

am heterosexual, able bodied for the time being, English speaking as my first language, educated, housed, employed and a documented citizen of the country in which I reside.

All of those indicators assume a right to demand ease, comfort, control and respect. So many of us know them as what constitutes the normal. These aspects of privilege have built a house of bricks with no windows and only one door.

We of these privileges can welcome or deny entry. If the ones who knocks is too different, a trans person of color who is undocumented and homeless, the door might open but they remain in the hallways of our minds and imaginations.

I have been thinking lately a lot about what radical welcome as a political and spiritual practice might look like.

I came to understand this in myself, this barrier, this kind of welcoming that did not transform me- in my work with folks on island who do not have a place to live. It took me many meetings and conversations to realize that I did not truly consider that a person who was homeless has a right to full authority over their lives.

For instance, if someone without housing tells me they cannot work or seek housing off island, I used to go immediately into strategizing employment and off island options that would be so much cheaper and attainable.

I learned, so slowly, that a person without housing has as much right as I do to determine what is and is not possible for them. If they cannot work, no matter if I can imagine a job that might be possible. If they tell me they cannot leave the island, that this is home in a way that is essential for them to survive, no matter if I know that living in Hyannis is cheaper. I am learning to listen now and let all my sense of what is and is not right or best flow over me.

I name the barrier to hearing and presence now not as what is true for all, but reactions of my privilege telling me I have a right to define the terrain of another with less privilege.

And here's what happens, when I have the courage for it, I transform. In these moments, I name my judgements as my limitations and seek to allow another's beingness to permeate my conscience.

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf explores radical welcome in his book Exclusion and Embrace. Volf says that there must be mutual indwelling, holding the other within the bounds of yourself. Such indwelling shouldn't be confused with disappearing, melting into each other or merging into undifferentiated beings. Nor do you have perfect understanding of each other; the goal is not to master the other, but to receive the other on her own terms (as we) continue to seek relationship.

“In an embrace, the identity of the self is both preserved and transformed, and the...(difference) of the other is both affirmed...and...received into the ever changing identity of the self.”¹

There is first an in dwelling. I might call it an in-between dwelling. A time when judgment is suspended enough so that another can be seen. A time when who I am is suspended long enough for another to be an *I am*. In this receiving, we are changed. Like hydrogen and oxygen in the making of water while they remain what they are while becoming something else.

But I err in saying that lack of inclusion or in-between dwelling is only caused by privileged, as I defined privilege in the beginning. There are so many ways of constructing a high ground and keeping others beneath us.

I do not mean to suggest that there is never a right and wrong. I do not mean to suggest there is never a need for boundaries. We must lean in life ethically and consider where our ethics come from and if we wish to keep them without revision when we learn their provenance. Sometimes the answer will be yes. And sometimes a crack will open that lets in new light, new awareness, new ability to reach out to others with ethics that challenge our own. We need ethics that struggle and breathe and allow themselves to be remixed in relationship.

I know I have mentioned my eldest brother Charlie whom I met standing over my father’s casket during his wake, whom all of my brothers and sisters met at that time. My whole world shook meeting him over my father’s casket, where he lay with rouge on his cheeks, lipstick on his lips.

The one who had been my eldest brother until that moment, Steven, met him then too. Steven’s place was rearranged in an instant. Though it was still his to welcome or reject. He was brought up with our father. Charlie was never allowed to meet us. There was a privileged inside and outside and the insiders, in this case Steven, could determine the welcome.

My brother Steven died of cancer two years ago. He was a former marine, a smoker and drinker and lived an unhappy life of anger and resentment that tangled his heart. I miss him still, miss knowing who he could have become too, for himself, for his family, mourn that he died so broken.

And on the day of our father’s funeral 20 years ago now, Steven with no time to prepare, before reading his eulogy, said to all of us seated there, including Charlie, my father’s eldest son that we met only hours before: I am not my father’s eldest son. He had a son before me

¹ Spellers, Stephanie. Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation (Kindle Locations 264-268). Church Publishing Inc.. Kindle Edition.

who is here with us today. Charlie, I am glad you are here. I am sorry it took so long for us to be in the same room.

In that moment, Steven was not only transformed, and he transformed all of us.

Zr. Alex Kapitan and Rev. Mykal Slack, the presenters in our Genderqueer class that we just finished, gave us some enticing imagery around welcome. Using the work of Stephanie Spillers, an Episcopal Priest, they talk about the difference between welcome, inclusion and incarnation.

The welcoming community is an admirable one: it reaches out, listens for others' hopes and concerns, risks the possibility of rejection, tells the story of grace in its community, and invites others to join in its journey. Its message is: "Please, join us in what we are already doing."²

The inclusive community is one that has heard and implemented some of the principles of the welcoming community, and then added a crucial commitment: to providing hospitality to the stranger. Whereas the welcoming community's plan largely draws in those who reflect the cultural identity of the existing community, an inclusive community has begun to explore what it means to welcome those outside their cultural group.³

The inclusive community says: "Come, be part of us, even bring your personality and culture because we find them interesting and exciting, but neither the institution nor the current makeup of the community will actually be changed or shaped by your unique presence or gifts."

You may join us, but you will not affect our central cultural values and practices."

To be radically welcomed, folks need to see the signs of genuine openness and not mere inclusion. This is incarnation. They need to know that they matter and can bring their whole selves into community, and not only so that they can be assimilated into the community's dominant culture. The power structures spoken and unspoken open themselves up and invite participation, leadership, mutual relationship.⁴

² Spillers, Stephanie. *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (Kindle Locations 1182-1185). Church Publishing Inc.. Kindle Edition.

³ Spillers, Stephanie. *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (Kindle Locations 1173-1177). Church Publishing Inc.. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Spillers, Stephanie. *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (Kindle Locations 1231-1233). Church Publishing Inc.. Kindle Edition.

Alex Kapitan, one of our presenters in the genderqueer class, defined these terms using a dinner party analogy. Welcome is saying, come to dinner. Inclusion is setting a place at the table with a name card, incarnation is asking, "What do you eat? Do you eat at a table? Do you use silverware?" Incarnation requires that we look at who we are what we hold to be true, normal right and then make room for another truth, normality and right. Incarnation asks, who's inside, who's outside and what it would take to go beyond inclusion to mutual embrace and transformation.

Someone asked me recently what I do and do not love about Nantucket. I said that I do not love the housing crisis this island economy generates, or the income gap between the wealthy and middle class, or the sense of judgement and invisibility those who use opioids endure, or the human trafficking where immigrants are paid less than living wages.

What I really love is that we can make a difference in all of this. We can speak and act and rally to change these consequences. We can. We do.

I was asked then what gives me meaning here. And I answered, What gives me meaning is here on this island people have room to make meaning. We are all meaning makers as human beings and when we cannot find meaning that sustains us, we crumble.

May we continue to see ourselves as incomplete, as needing one another, as part of an equation that without others and their meaning making molecules, cannot be sustained. May we continue to mine our privileges; however they show up, and consider who is left in and out and why.

May we love one another into incarnating all that we can be knowing there is so much more within and between us all that is waiting for an opening, an invitation, a radical welcome.

Amen.