

“Ministering Together” Rev. Linda Simmons, August 18, 2019

Most of you know that I became a minister after graduating from divinity school in 2013 and that this has been and still is my first ministry. It is so difficult to tell you what I have learned from you all, from stepping into this work, this life profession, of ministry.

Before divinity school, I had been a manager of a federally funded non-profit to help young folks who had dropped out of school get their GEDs or high school equivalency and jobs. Most of them had been to jail more than once. Most struggled with drug addiction. They taught me that anything less than authenticity resulted in a book whizzing by my head, or the bathroom toilet paper being set on fire or initials carved into the elevator.

You might say my journey to authenticity was paved with thorns or books or fires or elevators, as the case may be. I’ll never forget one young person, he must have been 17 or so, saying to me, “Linda, if you flip the script because of pressure from the feds to do more, you’ll be sorry.”

He was telling me that he liked and appreciated me the way I was, in his language. That’s the key to life isn’t it. Learning to hear in the language someone speaks.

When I first got to this island, having never been before except to meet the search committee, an islander said to me, “Linda, this island teaches you to accept your humanity, all of it. Nothing is private here so you might as well get used to being who you are.” I laughed. I only learned slowly that this was not a laughing matter. I mean really, ya’ll should have a big sign at the ferry terminal:

“Beware, accepting your own humanity required for island residency.”

Reflecting back on it, I think I became a minister so I could stop working on accepting my own humanity. I wanted to be only present, thoughtful, considerate, and have life result in fewer times an apologize was merited. In other words, I became a minister because I was fed up with being human.

Well, that lasted about 2 months with all of you! Nothing like coming to a board meeting with a migraine that kept me up all night for you to see and hear my worst self shining through! I was so disappointed that I could not hide from all of you. I wanted to hide.

I wanted to be a minister and only a minister. Between islanders being very upfront people and me wearing everything right on my sleeve, that did not work out very well!

So, what have I learned in the past six years with you? I have learned to be human and to accept that it will not always be pretty or well packaged or even professional. But it is really more than that. I have learned to be accountable to my own humanity and yours too.

Accepting and being accountable to my own humanity on this island that requires this at least from us, and though you do not throw books or burn up the bathroom, you send pretty clear messages when you feel that someone is trying to be something they are not, I have also learned to see you in your humanity more clearly.

I am not saying that I do this all the time, humanity does not abide by always and nevers, but I am saying that I have learned to ask the question: “Do you want to be right or in right relationship” more often. Now the answer is usually, I want to be right. But the only path to travel that is worthy of me and you, is to remain in right relationship, or maybe it is better said to remain, to just sit in it, whatever it is: fear, anxiety, loss, confusion, stubbornness, to just sit in it and know it as mine until it quiets, and I can hear what is needed.

Someone asked me at a dinner party the other day what the essence of what I do is in five words or less. I asked if I could give him seven and he agreed.

I said, “Learning to love people as they are.” And if I could have added more, I would have said, “And helping them love themselves for the people they are by shining a light on their beauty when it is hidden from them.”

You have taught me this. You have helped me understand that being human is a recipe that takes a lot of time to prep and often does not rise as it should and sometimes is hard to swallow, but always, always nourishes.

Here is what I hope for our future together, that we continue to risk being more human together, that we show up bigger, in all our beauty and frailty and learn from one another the languages of humanity we still struggle to understand.

What I hope for is more love, here and now. Right here and now.

And with more love comes more grace. For me grace is more of an ecology than a theology: building a landscape where we feel seen, understood, heard which nourishes space to change in the light of that seeing, understanding and hearing.

Thank you for this expression of love, this expression of showing up and offering our humanity to one another and the world.

Thank you. You have taught me what staying in the human game looks like. It's hard. It's beautiful. And it's the only thing I can imagine worthy of my life. Thank you!

Amen.