

**“Ministry in a Time of Famine: A Sermon on the Ordination of Kate
Landis”**

Joseph was 8 years old when I first met him,
There on the island of Grenada in the Caribbean
17 years ago.

Now he is a 25-year-old man, and who knows what has happened to him
In all these years – a family of his own, maybe? Is he still on the island,
Perhaps holding one of those jobs ferrying around tourists,
Or did he get off and move to Canada or the U.S. as so many of the islanders do,
to make money and grasp possibilities that one can only dream about
from the confines of that beautiful, but small, provincial island that is 13 miles
wide and 25 miles long.

Joseph is a man now, his body hopefully tall and strong and healthy,
But when I knew him he was small, waif-like,
His legs like a bird’s legs, thin enough that the bones on his knees looked
Like tennis balls stuck between his shins and thighs,
His blue school uniform shirt flapping around his torso,
His arms like bending twigs, his head bigger than the rest of him.

Every morning when I would leave my apartment to go teach at the school
That Joseph was a student at,

He would pull back the bed sheet that served as the front door to the wooden
House he shared with his parents and 3 siblings, a home about the size of those
Portable sheds you buy at Home Depot for \$500.

And so he would pull back that sheet and bound out onto the road and walk with
Me to the school, eating a grapefruit by tearing off the skin with his teeth

And sucking out the pink flesh with quick, loud slurping sounds.

“*Mista D!*” he would say, because that is what all the kids called me,

‘*Mista D, got any money for snack?*’

Joseph would ask me most every day,

never mind that I had never given him any.

“*I’m not one of the tourists, Joseph,*” I would tell him. “*I’m your teacher.*

Do you ask your other teaches for money?”

And always he would remind me: “*No, he said, “but they’re not American,*

They’re not rich...like you.”

And even though I was a Peace Corps Volunteer, I guess I was rich,

At least by comparison.

Normally I ate lunch with other teachers, but on the occasion I’m remembering
I found myself at my desk in the library.

The slates of the window open, the ocean breeze flowing in,

And with it here comes Joseph, two bowls in hand, one for him,

One for me.

“*Mista D, the lunch ladies say it’s time for you to try the soup.*

Normally I had brought my own lunch, but nothing in my baby fridge

That day, so I’m hungry, my stomach is growling.

“*Well, wow, thank you, Joseph...*”

But he doesn’t even acknowledge my thanks.

Already he has sat down in the chair next to me

And he is spooning in; no, he is drinking in the soup,

Using that same loud, slurping sound he made with grapefruit

To take in the hot liquid into his body.

I look down at my bowl. What is it?

Nearly clear broth, a handful of cooked green lentils,

And, in the middle, a round stone of meat I couldn't quite recognize.

Before I could even take one spoonful, not even sure if I wanted to take

A spoonful, Joseph was tipping the bowl up to his mouth

And drinking in the last ounce.

"Good, eh?" he said, flashing a smile, and then he was gone,

Bounding out of the library to play in the yard with his friends.

Accustomed to richer foods, accustomed to my BLT's and turkey clubs,

I wasn't quite sure I was ready to agree.

Those of us who come from a land of plenty sometimes don't have

The appetite for more simple fare.

I take my first spoonful - not bad at all, actually, could use a little Tobasco –

When I notice one of the teachers standing sideways in the doorway,

Watching Joseph, watching me.

"He seems like a great kid," I say, *'so much energy.'*

"Yes," the teacher says, and then he says more to himself than

To anyone else.

"Don't know where he gets it from."

That soup is the only meal he gets in a day, other than some fruit

And some potato and an egg or two at home,

Whatever his parents can afford to grow themselves.

And then in words that I have remembered ever since then,

Because they speak something true about all of us and our hunger:

The teacher says:

Natan, Joseph is so much hungrier than he lets on.”

Years later I am thinking of Joseph more and more
As I find myself out of the classroom, off the island,
And amazingly, remarkably behind the pulpit,
Which, these days, is feeling less and less like a pulpit
And more like a lunch counter,
Because we are hungry here my friends,
You could even say some of us are starving,
And in the Land of Plenty what famine looks like
Are not twig arms and bird legs
But open-mouthed, dry spirits that drink too little of hope,
And taste not enough of the heaven here on earth.

Let me describe the hunger I see simply; let me give it to us
In a clear broth.

A woman comes to Sherborn or maybe to Shoreline UU
Longing for relationship, or longing to get out of a relationship,
And she doesn't know what to do.
She needs to talk to someone, the minister perhaps,
Because her loneliness is starving her.

A young adult who grew up with no religion whatsoever,
Who has toured the bar circuit and dismissed religion
As bunk, who covers his ears with hands when he hears
Preachers using broken words about God this or God that,
Shows up at a Wednesday night meeting in our fellowship hall,
Thirsty for a drink, yes, but thirsty even more to sit with people

Like him who want to give the drink up.

The parent of the 13-year-old girl who happened to see the text
From the boy she ‘hooked up’ with on the bus home
Shows up in the Director of Religious Educator’s office,
Hungry, starving for a way to talk to her daughter about
Relationships and sex and the preciousness and dignity
Inherent in this one body we are given.

The middle-aged man who flops into the pew no longer
Able to believe in the God of his childhood,
Ashamed at his questioning, worried over how his family
Will respond to his doubt,
Hungry, starving for some comfort-shaped words from
The preacher or the music that will assure him it is okay
To go where his soul is leading him.

I have seen all of these people, and oh so many more,
come into our congregations over the years,
And as I do, as I welcome them, as I stare at them in that silent moment
After the music ends and before the sermon begins,
I sometimes hear again what that teacher said to me all those years ago:
“Natan, the people are so much hungrier than they let on.”

And even now, even after the years and the experience and the training,
it can feel a little daunting, frankly, a little overwhelming
as any minister who is honest will tell you,

to stare out and see the hunger in you and in me.

What can I say? What will I do? Where do I even start?

And it's in these daunted, overwhelmed moments that I remember back

to my own ordination 10 years ago,

remembering how I wasn't just ordained by myself or to myself,

but rather how I was ordained into this faith

That ministers much more to me than I minister to it.

In other words, all this nourishing, all this relieving of hunger pangs,

All this ministry isn't up to you, Nathan, or to you, Kate.

There are colleagues, there are congregations,

There are lay folks who love us despite ourselves and we them,

there are sanctuaries, there is our centuries-long history,

And in my theology, there are my prayers, nearly constant prayers,

That I will be ready and worthy to wake another day and

serve this tender, holy, odd vocation that is ministry,

this work, as every minister here will tell you,

that makes us better than we would otherwise be.

And so we have come together today to ordain Kate Landis into this ministry,

To welcome her into the ranks, to give her the title of 'Rev.'

And to give her some instructions of our own.

Kate, the question leading you as you make your way

Across the country, your car pointed toward the upper left Coast

Is not '*Where will we live?*' It is not: '*Jay, did you remember to pack the blender?*'

It is not '*should I or shouldn't I wear a robe on my first Sunday?*'

It is not even *'what should I preach?'*

No, I think the question leading you most of all

Is: What will it mean for me to minister in a time of famine,

In a time when the covenant between language and truth is broken,

When people are arrive at our thresholds, not sure why there are there,

Not even sure what they need?

And for you to answer that question, Kate,

You will have to do something very difficult.

You will have to resist the temptation to impress them with your

Seminary Knowledge or wow them with your hard-earned insight

Or fire them up with your considerable passion.

Instead, you will have to give them something that is so old-fashioned

That is nearly out of fashion:

You will have to give them your honesty.

You will have to tell them what you believe, what you doubt,

Where your heart breaks, where it is made whole.

You will have to notice where your own hunger is,

And you will have to talk about that hunger so that the people

Know you understand theirs.

And, Kate, you will have to speak the truth about the world you see,

Even and perhaps especially when it is hard for them to hear

And for you to say.

And this is because preaching to the choir is no longer enough for us, Kate.

And pleasing the rank and file and keeping people happy is not

Our ministry, in the end.

No, our ministry is nothing less
Than the nourishment of souls; it is the quenching of open-mouthed,
Dry spirits,
And Kate, as you know, the people are hungry and thirsty,
Hungrier and thirstier than they ever let on.

So Kate – go.

Go with our love, our encouragement, our blessing,
And our prayers.

Trust your own words, talk straight,

Cook up the clear broth,

And as BB Taylor says,

*“Give Shoreline the things you have dug up with your own hands,
Words and discoveries you have brought back from your own
Encounters with the Holy.”*

That’s what you have done here the last two years,

And we have been fed because of it.

And as you go may you feel the arms of this congregation around you.

May you feel the foundation of our faith beneath you.

May you feel the blessing of God above you.

And you may you feel the divine spark inside you.

Amen.

