

Minister Linda Barnes
Peace Lutheran Church, Memphis, TN

I am Linda. I am Mom/Mamma/Ma/Old Lady to my four children. I am Granny/Grandma to my seven grandchildren. I look forward to going back to prison. I am God's beloved. Because I am God's beloved, I am everything else. My journey to ministry has been long and very circuitous. In a reflection paper written for a long-ago forgotten class, I mused my journey has been like the Mississippi River – I've done a lot of meandering. My best friend, Palestine, now deceased, years ago assured me all the places I've been and all the things I've done have been needful for the making of me. And, she was right.

From wanting to be a Dominican Nun as a young girl, to wanting to be a missionary as a teen to my desire to join the Peace Corps in my college days to a 'tour' through the candidacy process of an ELCA communion partner as a 'seasoned' adult, the meandering has been needful. From my work in county government organizing and managing a case management program serving low-income families to a second career in asset-based community development working with a host of resident-led organizations serving inner-city neighborhoods to a third career in ministry, the meandering has been needful.

My meandering, with and through and because of God's limitless grace, has been needful for the making of me – in and for ministry – to do God's work with my hands. As I continue to discern the work God has called me to, I am in the candidacy process for Word and Sacrament in the ELCA. I am a TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries) student at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS) – and I love the coursework, just often wish I had more time to devote to study, research, writing, and reflection.

I organized and am director of Chosen Vessel Ministries where we provide treatment services to women with substance use disorders. And, I go to prison! Or, I did until mid-February last year – COVID! I have provided volunteer services to the Department of Correction for nearly nine years. Until the shutdown, I spent each Tuesday and first Saturday of the month at the West Tennessee State Penitentiary (WTSP) Women's Therapeutic Residential Center (WTRC). I will forever remember the words of one young woman who participated in my classes and was in the reentry group our ministry sponsored. She always told me as she left my class or group: "remember the prisoner." Her statement brings to mind Matthew 25:37 – "I was in prison, and you visited me." It will be with a grateful heart that I go back to prison!

It is with great joy and sometimes a lot of angst that I serve as a Synod Authorized Minister (SAM) at Peace Lutheran Church in Memphis, Tennessee. I often served as Supply Pastor from January until March, 2020 during which time Peace's beloved Pastor, Tonie Robinson, was unable to serve due to illness. The congregation greatly miss Pastor Tonie who died April 2 at which time I prepared to serve as their Minister.

Our God is good and gracious and full of mercy! It is from a deep well of faith and love this congregation draws from to continue Pastor Tonie's commitment and dedication to feeding the homeless and partnering with other organizations to provide overnight shelter, a hot meal and warm bed during the extremely harsh winter.

My favorite Bible verse is Romans 8:28 "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." This verse is important to me because it reminds me, it reassures me, it comforts me knowing that God is using all my life experiences and circumstances, all the meandering, to change me, to transform me, to be the 'me' that is like the Firstborn, with whom God is well pleased! I am who I am because of my meandering, and the experiences that broke my heart – like the death of my dear child, Erin, who called me "Ma." And sometime, Old Lady. Erin returned to God a little more than three years ago. It broke me heart. I give thanks there is a healing balm!

In the midst of that horrible experience, which I and Erin's siblings and extended family and close friends still grieve, in the midst of the heartbreak, I am reminded and take great comfort in **knowing** I am not in the pain alone – God is with me. God gives me peace that passes all understanding. God has calmed many a storm in my head and heart. There was a time when I could not pray. The Holy Spirit prayed for me! I am reminded of the poem, *Footprints In The Sand*. God carried me many many days over the last three years – and still does.

We serve a God of abundance: abundant love, abundant grace, abundant mercy, abundant forgiveness. When I receive phone calls from our Synod and sister congregations expressing concern, letting me know prayers are being sent up for us, and I get offers of support as our congregation recovers from burst water pipes in the ceiling of our fellowship hall, fallen ceiling tiles upstairs and down, and flooding in the basement/kitchen – all byproducts of the extreme and prolonged arctic blast that came through – I experience more of God's abundance. And, I am grateful.