

Mrs. Jones

By Sandy Troyan

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In hopes to even out my tan, I had worn a strapless maxi dress in a bright, fuschia color. It was one of those purchases that I am often intimated to wear, mostly because I fear that the maxi dress has been way overdone by Kristie Alley. But after an extended vacation to New England that revitalized me beyond my knowing and the Minnesota sun shining, I put on that fuschia maxi dress and was ready to take on a hearty list of places and things to do.

As I made my way back to my little apartment with a bunch of mint and gorgeous and fragrant lilies from the Farmer's Marker, a six-pack of summer beer and a Twin's t-shirt for Thursday night's game, I discovered something wonderful, the Saint Anthony Park Art Festival. I was thrilled to see the street covered with white tents that were each filled with an individual that was willing and ready to share their passion with the world. They were artists, each with something beautiful to share with the community.

As I approached a stand full of photographs of various Minneapolis tourist sites, the artist of the photos commented on the beauty of the dress and how flattering it was, especially with the complementary turquoise necklace. She noted that these are two colors she always tries to capture on film because of their simple beauty.

It is a wonderful feeling to hear the word beautiful, especially when it pertains to you and it is not coming from a creepy, old man with one too many drinks at the bar. Today the word

beautiful is resonating with me. As I was wandering the aisles of the liquor store earlier, one of the stops on my list, my mother called. She shared with me that one of my favorite people in the congregation I grew up in had passed away, Mrs. Jones, even though as I got older she began to sign her cards to me as Ginny. She was still Mrs. Jones. She will always be Mrs. Jones.

Mrs. Jones has been an active member of both faith communities my parents have been members. She has been known to shake her little Tic Tac container when council meetings were getting a little too long, but that is not how I will remember her. I’ll remember Mrs. Jones as the one person who always made the case to say how wonderful it was to see my beautiful smile. The same practice continued each time I visited home. She would go out of the way to say those more than welcoming words, “How wonderful to see your beautiful smile.”

Whenever I have had the chance to preach or share the importance of ministry for and with young people in the congregation, Mrs. Jones was part of that story. She did something really special, something really beautiful, she went out her way to welcome me. I always saw her coming as she weaved in and out of pews to come greet me with those most precious words. And interestingly enough, the last time I saw Mrs. Jones, I weaved myself through a church building that was unfamiliar in order that I could find her. And like every other time, she shared those words, “It’s so wonderful to see your beautiful smile.”

It is that message of welcome that has disappeared from the church. I could see Mrs. Jones three Sundays in a row and I would hear the same message, or I could see her once a year and it would be those words of welcome. It made no difference.

Of course I would hear other messages of welcome in the church. There would be that message of welcome as I was greeted at the sanctuary doors. There was the welcome from the pastor at the beginning of the service. But I have to admit, I did not feel welcomed from that message. That message of welcome never seemed sincere or in its very nature, welcoming. It seemed like just another part of the Sunday morning routine. But Mrs. Jones words allowed me to feel the message of welcome when I was not hearing it from anywhere else.

Sadly, I won't hear those beautiful words of welcome from Mrs. Jones next time I am home, but I carry them with me, as I have for many years. Each time my parents would give me an update on Mrs. Jones, especially during her battle with cancer, those words of welcome went through my head. Those words have helped me form my missional ecclesiology, as well as my vision of leadership in Children, Youth and Family Ministry. And probably more important, her message has been part of my personal faith formation. You see, Mrs. Jones did not have to say a word to me, she did not need to wind her way through the pews to find me or even send a card of well wishes as I had surgery or congratulations as I accepted a new call. But she did.

Mrs. Jones' message is a hard one to explain, I know this, I have tried. I have struggled to find ways to help faith communities see the importance of this message of welcome. It is nothing complex, but in a way it is. It is a message that has the ability to transform. I know this to be true. I could easily give up, but I can't, not just yet. For I know that the message of welcome has been internally placed in each of us. Our task is figuring out how to share it. Maybe it is not words. But it is there. I know it. Mrs. Jones figured it out.

And now I ask the question to all of you, how can we figure this out? Note that I did not ask the question how can you figure this out? I ask how can *we* figure this out. Of course, you are part of this, and Mrs. Jones was one person, but she was also part of the larger we, whether it be the congregation she worshiped at or the community she lived in. We cannot forget the we.

Maybe we can figure this out by me spouting off a long list of statistics, such as some recent findings from the Barna Group that include that after a study of young people, 63% don't believe Jesus is the Son of the one true God. 51% don't believe Jesus rose from the dead. Or would knowing that 85% of students raised in Christian homes will leave the church at 18 to never return. We have some things to worry about. These statistics are alarming.

What does this mean for you? Maybe nothing. So, again, I propose the question, what does this mean for us? I clear solution may be maybe we need to spend more time in Confirmation and Sunday School making sure our students believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Or that they believe that Jesus is the son of man. But then we are left divided. We can easily tell students this, but we need to realize and accept that there is a divide between believing and knowing. As cheesy as this may sound, I know that Ohio State University has a great football program, but I am still going to believe that Penn State will go to the Rose Bowl.

Of course this question of belief is not an easy one, because we, as the community of believers, were not called to force these young people to believe the claims we hold true to the Christian tradition. Instead, we are called to give them a space to believe. For example, our students may fall into the statistics that have been listed above, but as they state their unbelief, we create a space for them to share what they do believe.

Let’s look at some statistics that may be a little more promising. If we look at young people that are lacking caring environments, only 5% have a mature faith. Once a young person has one caring environment, 17% of young people have a mature faith. And when a young person has three caring environments, 53% have a mature faith.

Again, it is a we project. I’m not asking each of you to create three welcoming environments or communities. I am asking that we create that one caring community. Why is this important?

In one of my first youth and family ministry books I read while working on my undergraduate I read this statistic, when individuals leave a congregation, they know within the first twenty minutes of leaving the parking lot if they will return. And I also feel that the same may hold true to how people embrace a congregation in other ways, social media, website, print media, etc. If that message of welcome is not there from the start, why would one want to return?

That same goes for young people, why would we want to return someplace knowing that we are not welcomed.

Throughout the next twelve months you will see more or attempt to be a place of welcome for our youth people throughout a bunch of projects, including reinstating, recreating, and reintroducing mentoring programs to our communities. We really believe in the power of this message of welcome. We see the hope it creates. We see the transformative power it holds. We see that this is our part of our promise we made to this young people at the waters of baptism. And you know what I think is most important, we see that our young people need it.

Throughout the next few months really take the time to listen as you introduce what you are doing in ministry this season, because remember, this is not a “you” project. Or a Youth and

Family project. Nor is a project to create more work. I hate to even call it a project because it is really simply living out our call to be community.

Again, as I have been spending the past few days reflecting on that first genuine message of welcome I heard from Mrs. Jones, I wonder where did you first hear that message. And is it because of that message that you are different person? I know for me it is.