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Hannah Griggs

Sister Jane: “Journeying” with God’s People

Abstract: I interviewed Sr. Jane in December of 2017 regarding her life experiences as a woman religious. This paper includes portions of the interview where she reflected on her experiences journeying with God’s people, God’s relational presence with those who suffer, and the relationship between spirituality and politics.

Sister Jane worked as an x-ray technician for 12 years before she became a director of campus ministries at a local university: “It was a lot easier being an x-ray tech—at least it was black and white!” Sister Jane joked. Sister Jane counseled many young college students during this time. Later, she continued her service as a hospital and hospice chaplain. “Journeying” with God’s people, she has counseled college students, spoken at funeral services, comforted dying people, and accompanied the family members of the sick: “Journeying is just being present to people....attending to their needs, spiritual needs, companionship needs—how is God calling me to be a part of their lives?” During the last 10 years, she has cared for local nursing home residents. Additionally, she organizes Bible studies and retreats for St. Mary’s Hospital. Sister Jane thinks of God’s ministry as deeply relational. Hospitality, compassion, service, and community inform both her ministry and her daily life—in fact, I don’t think she could separate the two.

It is obvious that Sister Jane does not see God’s presence as abstract or transcendent, but instead as relational and tangible. Sister Jane reflected on the times she journeyed with others while working as a hospital chaplain, as an x-ray technician, and as the nursing home chaplain.

She knew a patient who had been comatose for two days when the family asked Jane to provide a prayer service. After reading the scripture, she invited members of the family to say goodbye to their loved one, whispering in his ear. Although the patient and his son were estranged, the man's son came from out of town to say goodbye. The son went to the comatose father and sat on the edge of the bed. Incredibly, "his dad took his arm, and he threw it around his son. And just held him...they just held each other. And those are ways that I know that God has used me that are beyond me as a person. That's why my religious life is such a gift." For Sister Jane, God is not a distant power, sterilely observing his creation: God actively works through people to heal relationships.

As an x-ray technician, Sister Jane witnessed another profound example of God's healing presence. On a dark and stormy Midwest night, a woman broke her hip. Jane called the ambulance. An ambulance worker saw that Sister Jane offered the sacrament of anointing the sick before the patient was transferred to another hospital. Later, that man told Sister Jane: "I know you Catholics believe in anointing of the sick, but that night, I think it did more for me than it did for her." Having a fear of Catholicism, the man had vowed never to step foot inside a Catholic church, but he witnessed something that night that changed his mind. During the drive, "there was a light inside of the cab and around the ambulance that led them to the hospital. He said 'I know it was from that sacrament of the anointing.'" Telling this story brought tears to Sister Jane's eyes. God's presence in the world, through the ministry of his people, had demonstrated God's longing to be in relationship with all people—Catholic or not. Not only had God guided the woman who had broken her hip to safety, God had also reconciled the barrier between the man and the church.

On another dark and stormy night while she was working at the nursing home, Sister Jane prayed with a mother for her daughter who was travelling in the adverse weather conditions. She prayed that the lord would “surround her vehicle with [his] angels,” protecting the mother’s daughter. When the daughter arrived safely, her father said that he had seen a light around the car. I cannot help but notice that she uses a story about a treacherous journey to again show that God “journeys” with people, being present in suffering and danger.

As she reflects on the lives of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Pope Francis, she exclaims: “When you really touch skin to skin, it makes a difference!” Sister Jane brings this relational ethic into all of her interactions. Later in our interview, she remembers the similarities between Jesus’s birth to two migrant parents and the dire circumstances of immigration today. She echoes Pope Francis’s call to welcome immigrants, saying that in the midst of “the whole issue about [President Trump] and wanting to close the borders and the immigrants and all that.... [Pope Francis] says, just plainly, they’re our brothers and sisters.” Sister Jane notes that many conservative Catholics are upset by the Pope’s particular care for immigrants and refugees, but she believes that “there’s always going to be opposition...if we’re doing the work of Jesus.” Treating undocumented immigrants like “brothers and sisters” will bring resistance from powerful political opponents, but this is why voicing solidarity is so vitally important.

Although Sister Jane works in healthcare and sympathizes with immigrants, Sister Jane does not see her work as political: “I would say it’s more spiritual. Social partly...but sharing the gifts that God has given me, yeah, that’d be spiritual.” Nevertheless, despite Sister Jane’s hesitancy to call her work political, Sister Jane does believe that being politically active is important: “If we’re really living in the world and *really* living the gospel of Jesus, I think we

need to [be politically active] in certain ways.” Sister Jane would call this “journeying” with people—being present, building relationships, and sharing God’s love: “It’s just by being present to them. It’s not by doing any big theological teaching or anything like that: it’s just being—like Jesus. It’s just being the presence of Jesus to them.”

Works Cited

“Sr. Jane.” Personal interview by Hannah Griggs. December 28, 2017.