

Jeff's Jottings

Mallory, Part II

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Last week, I introduced you to Mallory, the thoroughly reluctant church-goer. Mallory hadn't been to church in, literally, two decades. But something — she surely didn't know what — had been tugging at her insides lately. And so here Mallory was, clad in the only pair of non-ripped jeans she owned, hand on the handle of the heavy wood door of the neighborhood church. She'd gotten that far twice before, only to walk away, fearful of what she might find if she actually decided to open that door.

This time, though, she did open the door, and walked in. She was surprised to be greeted almost immediately, and warmly, by a nicely dressed, older woman, who placed in her hand some kind of program and pointed her to a large area she called the sanctuary. The service was a lot like the few things Mallory remembered from her childhood. People stood and sang from a book while an organ played; they read printed responses from the program. (She heard at some point that it's called a bulletin.) The sermon was clear and practical, based on the Bible but applicable to life. The various announcements she heard spoke of a lively, engaged congregation. Hmmm, Mallory thought, this doesn't seem so bad.

People were invited to a large gathering room after the service for coffee, which was okay tasting, thought Mallory, though it wasn't great either. She asked the person serving coffee who she might speak to about the church, and was directed to a table on the other side of the room. She saw mostly people's backs as she weaved her way around any number of small, circled groups; once she found the table, however, the person there, deeply engaged with someone about flowers or gardens or something, passed her off to someone

else. With each “passing” conversation, Mallory got the sense that she was just getting in the way. Finally, she just left.

It was strange, she told her roommate when she got back to her apartment. The atmosphere seemed really friendly at first. But it was kind of like being the new person at a party of friends. After a while you got the feeling that they really didn’t need you there; that it would almost upset what they already had going. I’m sure it’s a nice place; but it was clearly their place. Not mine.

What would happen if Mallory came to your congregation? Would she experience something similar? We’ve all learned to speak words of welcome, but what is the rest of our language saying? What does welcome mean in the ways we actually act?

Too often, it seems, we want people to *fit in*, not actually to *belong*, especially if they appear to be new, and different. That is, we expect newcomers to adapt to our familiar priorities and activities — or to leave, feeling like temporary guests at someone else’s home. It’s not that we’re choosing to exclude. We’ve just done it this way for so long.

Mallory’s quest will continue over the next few weeks. I hope yours will as well, as you reflect on how your congregation is welcoming the Mallorys of this world — or how you’re sending them home.