

*Feed us, Lord, for we are hungry for Your Word. Amen.*

Jesus knew human nature. He knows me. He knows I’ve got seating issues.  
If I get to a meeting and there’s no room, or there’s an inner and an outer circle,  
It takes me right back to elementary school and feeling left out.  
If I go to a wedding or fancy dinner, and I’m at a table far from the action,  
I feel cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The arts of protocol and etiquette have arcane rules for proper seating arrangements  
– as a girl growing up in the Foreign Service, I learned early that the  
most important woman at a party is seated to the right of the host, and the  
most important man to the right of the hostess. What a gendered world!  
Where we sit says a lot about our status. And status is important to us.  
It is human nature to assess our own position relative to other people’s.  
We structure our lives and build our security by deciding who’s in and who’s out.  
Social networks run on the principle that we decide who we designate “friend.”  
It’s a natural human tendency, taken to new levels of Internet organization.

But Jesus wasn’t big on natural tendencies – he constantly distinguished  
the ways of this world from the ways of the Realm of God.  
Jesus invites us to live not out of natural human tendencies, but supernatural ones.  
Jesus is always coming up with this outrageous stuff.

*“Sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and then come follow me.”*

Yeah, right. What do we live on?

*“If anyone takes what belongs to you, do not ask for it back.”* Huh? It’s my stuff!

*“Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you.*

*Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”*

What, do I look like a doormat to you?

*“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,  
and you will be blessed.”* Invite the homeless into my house? That’s dangerous!

It’s these things that cause some people just to shut the book and say,  
“Well, obviously this Jesus was hopelessly out of touch with my life.” Why bother?  
I hope that’s not a choice we make. Strangers were just as dangerous  
in Jesus’ time as they can be today – perhaps more, with more diseases.

And yet, he gives this teaching for the way his followers are to live.  
So we can reject it, or we can go deeper into it and find the word of life in it.

One way to go deeper is to look at the reading from Hebrews,  
in which we see Jesus' teaching distilled by a few generations of disciples.  
This teaching recommends not only a radical hospitality –  
entertain strangers because sometimes you'll find it is God himself  
who is visiting you – but a radical re-ordering of our social lives.  
We are to have a special love among those who believe Jesus is Lord –  
*Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters*, the writer says.  
And that is immediately followed by, *Do not forget to entertain strangers*.

When I told my neighbors last weekend that I was going to be hosting one of our  
Canadian members and her friend, and that I'd never met them in person, they  
said, "Are you sure she's not an ax murderer? Should we have a safe word?"  
But Karyne is family – I've been praying and studying and worshipping and  
ministering with her for nearly two years! And now her friend Shari is family too.  
Jesus invites us to see ourselves, our lives, as connected to a whole lot of people,  
many of whom we never met – to learn to think like "we."

Our country is deep into "us" and "them" thinking and it is killing us.  
Our political discourse has become nastier and more polarized than I remember.  
The discord extends into our religious life, Christians condemning other Christians,  
people damning other religions, pastors burning Korans.  
Some years ago, there was controversy about a proposed Islamic center in  
Lower Manhattan, and people seemed to feel free to slam Muslims and Islam.  
I was president of an Interfaith Council in Connecticut, and I decided we should  
have a public event to stand with the Muslims in our community.  
We put together an interfaith prayer vigil. Over 100 people gathered on short notice –  
Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, none-of-the-above, clergy, laity, politicians...  
and there was an incredible feeling of unity. Everyone was there because they  
felt that was where they needed to be, and we enjoyed being together.  
There was a notable absence of anger and the Spirit of God was palpable.  
At the end I invited everyone to reach out and put their hand on the shoulder of  
another nearby, so we were all connected, and we had a silent prayer.  
I invited people to pray for God's fullest blessing upon the person next to them,  
upon all of us gathered, upon our city and nation and world... it was amazing.

A little glimpse of heaven. A bunch of strangers divided by religion, ethnicity, all kinds of things, became a community. No “us” and “them,” but “we.”

What calls us back into “we” is remembering who first “friended” us:

A God who is holy and all-good – who didn’t need to be relationship with creatures as rebellious and often un-holy as humans can be, who chose to take on our state, come to our party, eat at our table, hang out with us in order to call us back to ourselves, to call us back to himself.

It’s not only that Jesus sat at table with unacceptable people like tax collectors and loose women and the blind, the poor and the lame –

It’s that He came to us in the first place. He could have left us to our own mess. From the perspective of God’s perfect holiness, we are all unacceptable.

Yet, from the perspective of God’s perfect love, we are all loved.

And when we see other people, even strangers, even sinners, as equally loved by God, maybe we can allow God’s love to flow through us to them.

Then we may start to sit not with our friends and important people,

but with the ones who look the least like us, or who make us uncomfortable.

We may start to offer our seats not only to the aged and infirm, but to people who don’t have our privileges of position, health, generational wealth.

We may start to host events not for our families and friends but for strangers, even people we find strange, outcasts, people who don’t think or vote like us.

We may even learn not to distinguish between the “in” and the “out.”

How about we have a new social network – “GodSpace.com.”

On GodSpace everyone else on the network is your brother or sister.

No one can “un-friend” anyone. In fact, when someone misbehaves on the network, rather than being blocked, that person gets included all the more.

People on GodSpace.com are most highly regarded not for how many ‘friends’ they have, but for how many unpopular people they are connected to.

As they share pictures and stories with those people, they become like family, and it becomes natural to share resources, introduce them to other friends.

And the lines between “us” and “them” get blurrier and blurrier, until it’s one big network of giving and receiving, mourning with and celebrating with,

until the day we all eat together at one table with the One who made the Net in the first place.

And at that table, every seat is the best seat. *Amen.*

**Luke 14:1,7-14**

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable:

"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.

If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you,

'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.'

Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid.

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

**Hebrews 13:1-8**

Keep on loving each other as brothers.

Do not forget to entertain strangers,

for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners,

and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure,

for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have,

Because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

So we say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you.

Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.