

FEBRUARY 27

What is a stranger? When I ask myself that question, one of the answers I come up with is that a stranger is someone I have difficulty looking in the eye and/or acknowledging their space and/or existence. Why?

Is it because I, in my own self-deluded and self-imposed importance, don't have the time to get to know them, or just that I don't care?

If I don't care, is it because there's nothing they can do for me? Because, trust me, there are people I do care about and, whether or not I want to admit it, one of their common markers is that they bring something to the table, at least as far as I am concerned.

But Jesus says we should care for and welcome those strangers even if—maybe especially if—there's nothing they can do for us, even if they bring nothing to the table.

So I have to ask myself: if Jesus didn't have anything to offer me, would I still believe in him? Would I still try to follow his example? If I got nothing out of believing in Jesus, would I still believe?

An entire religion is named after this Jesus, and plenty of folks say they care about him, but what I find in too many conversations is that this care, love, and concern is rooted in what Jesus can do for them. Too often, Christianity becomes not “Do I believe in Jesus?” or “Do I try to follow Jesus' example?” but rather, “What do I believe about Jesus?” and suddenly it's

about belonging to an exclusive country club where everyone looks and believes like I do. Oh, and by the way, if you don't belong, you're doomed. In those settings, if you look around, there are no strangers.

Lest we forget, Jesus turned the religious establishment of his day on its ear with his radical inclusiveness. Are we really followers of his if we fail to follow that example?

What if this was the acid test of Christianity: "How many strangers have you welcomed today?"

—Bo Cox