

Guest list: Luke 14:1, 7-14; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

by [Bruce Wollenberg](#) in the [August 24, 2004](#) issue

I got into trouble once. Big trouble. I was enjoying myself at a barbecue supper with several clergy in a small northern Kentucky town. When we ran out of some food items, I volunteered to drive my MG—with the top down, of course—to find a grocery store. I was on my way back to the barbecue when a local officer nailed me for speeding. He informed me that I would have to appear before a judge that very evening.

Feeling unfairly charged and in righteous dudgeon, I decided to ignore my appointed rendezvous. Big mistake. The town was small and I was driving a sports car with out-of-state plates. When the long arm of the law found me, I was escorted to the municipal lockup.

“Remember those who are in prison,” admonishes the Christian moralist. No luck in my case. Back at the barbecue, my colleagues had finished their brats and beer before they “remembered” me and dispatched an emissary to bail me out. I was extremely grateful to see them. No one wants to be left friendless behind bars.

Remembering the incarcerated is only one of what Harold W. Attridge calls a “series of discrete and staccato admonitions” in the final chapter of Hebrews, but that directive carries personal poignancy for me after my experience. As a member of the Freedom Writers program (<http://www.amnestyusa.org>), I write letters to officials in countries that detain prisoners of conscience (as determined by Amnesty International). This is one way that I can respond concretely to the biblical admonition. As I write the letters, I reflect on the fact that they are going to places around the world where to be jailed also means to be tortured.

The writer of Hebrews 13 groups this and other paraenetic points under a broader one: “Let mutual love continue,” which echoes Jesus’ “new command” to his disciples. Yet turning that wide-open imperative into something pointed, contextual and behaviorally measurable is seldom easy or straightforward. How do we begin? Perhaps we might make a start by reflecting on our daily experience of other people. Is it just me, or is there a certain coarseness at the mall or the supermarket, an

attitude of entitlement that has the self always in prime view? Are drivers—of both grocery carts and SUVs—increasingly aggressive? Would it hurt to slow down so that we can be ready to offer kindness to strangers?

No, one doesn't want to reduce discipleship to (un)conventional pleasantness; Jesus' command that we bless those who curse us, for example, is not a small thing. Yet perhaps something can be said for simple niceness, for decorating our mundane transactions with a quiet graciousness. These simple acts and words can be a welcome, civilizing social lubricant. The "it" done to the least of us, after all, can be as small as the amount of water that fills a cup for a thirsty child.

It is easy to let strangers remain strangers and thus avoid any potential claim they might have on us. But this won't work for those of us called to a Christ-mirroring vulnerability, one that regards the other as brother or sister, and a claimant on our concern.

And the text challenges us to redefine strangers as angels, after all, or as "friends we've yet to meet."

"Let marriage be held in honor." This is more complicated. Some would honor marriage by unequivocally restating its traditional, restrictive definition by constitutional amendment or religious sanctions or both. Others, regarding this issue as one of justice, would offer an expanded understanding of marriage that opens it civilly and sacramentally to same-sex couples.

And fornication? The free-wheeling frolics of *Sex and the City* and its imitators set the tone for many and render the term itself risibly antique. Adultery fares no better, with many couples embracing what psychologist John Gottman calls a "conditional commitment" rather than the risky, come-what-may promise cherished by the church.

Executive avarice and corporate greed, still high in national consciousness, will be part of any discussion of "How much would Jesus accumulate?" and of Christ as the one thing needful. But the second clause, about satisfaction with the status quo, is meant for the reasonably fed, attired, housed and paid. On behalf of those who are not, those who are ought to be malcontent with the scandalous American toleration of dying (as opposed to living) wages, the widening income gap and the inability of millions to afford decent health care.

Rich and poor alike need to know that “My Lord is my helper,” but those who have the wherewithal are enjoined to please and praise God by sharing what they have with those who need it. Taken seriously, this evangelical counsel can quickly lead from small gesture to major sacrifice, from charity to political involvement.

Hebrews offers us an album of snapshots of a love life offered as a sacrifice of gratitude to God, whose Christ has already given himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:2). He who has taken the lowest place and been exalted on high bids us follow his example of humility in social situations. Then Jesus proclaims what John Dominic Crossan calls the principle of “open commensality”: invite everybody, all the nobodies; transgress class boundaries; don’t lower your standards, have none. This is the way to entertain strangers— all of them angels—sent by God. So we prepare a limitless table, and there, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, we remember Christ in bread and wine, Christ present, remembering us and calling us by name.