

Simply One Page- Which Side of the Table?

This piece was created from my own reflections and vision. I used ChatGPT as a tool to help shape the text from my original concepts and structure. The final form is the result of thoughtful revision motivated by my one page intent. Mike Haddorff 2623

It feels more pronounced now than at any point in my lifetime: we are living in a polarized world. Politically, culturally, religiously, even spiritually, we seem to be sorting ourselves into sides. Tables have formed. And most of us know exactly how this works.

I sit across from another person, over coffee, at lunch, in a meeting, sometimes in a conversation that lasts only a few minutes, and without much effort, I start to locate them, a phrase, a tone, a slight rolling of the eyes, a position hint. And quietly, often unconsciously, a judgment forms: “Yep, that’s the side.”

If I sense you’re on my side, something in me relaxes. I listen more freely. I speak more honestly. There’s room for curiosity. I don’t feel the need to manage myself.

But if I sense you’re on the other side of the table, my internal guardrails rise. Some of this is conscious, but much of it isn’t. My words become measured. Certain thoughts stay unspoken. I listen, but not to understand. I listen to assess. Is it safe to say this? Is it dangerous to say that? What follows isn’t real conversation; it’s guarded morse code.

It’s draining, but I’ve learned how to do this well. We all have.

Polarization has trained us to survive conversations rather than enter them. The goal quietly shifts from connection to protection, my identity, my standing, my sense of being right, or at least not being misunderstood. The person across the table becomes less a human being and more an object to file.

And this is the problem.

When self-protection becomes the primary posture, relationship always suffers. Truth turns into something to defend rather than something we discover together. Listening becomes strategic. Language becomes cautious. And the space between us fills with unspoken tension.

What unsettles me when I look at Jesus is how differently he seemed to move through these same dynamics.

He didn’t appear to sort people into safe and unsafe before engaging them. He didn’t scan conversations for threat. He didn’t manage his words to preserve tribal approval. He spoke with a kind of freedom that comes from not needing to protect a position.

Jesus seemed willing to be present with people as they were, asking open questions, listening without fear of contamination, speaking truth without trying to control the outcome. He trusted relationship itself as the place where something real could happen.

He didn’t sit on one side of the table against another. He seemed to remove the table altogether.

If that’s true, then following Jesus may have less to do with saying the right things in risky conversations and more to do with noticing how quickly my guardrails go up and choosing presence instead of protection.

Maybe the invitation isn’t to choose the better side. Maybe it’s to stay engaged when everything in me wants to fight or flee.