A few years ago, I was asked to preach at my church, and I talked about how I saw one of the main messages of Christianity being to go hang out with people that society often looks down upon. To go out and treat everybody as an equal. (For those who want a reference, it's all over the Bible, but the command in Luke 14 about inviting "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" impacted me deeply, as has the book of James and its message of showing no favortism.) As part of this process, I asked myself: who do I hang out with? Am I hanging out with people like me or people who, in some sense, are on the margins of society?

So, I went through all my Facebook friends at the time and made a spreadsheet (because: that's how I roll) where I classified them with respect to my best guess at their income level, their disability status, their religion, their criminal background, and, among other things, I discovered that 97.3% of my friends were middle or upper class.

And this was after making a concerted effort to meet people in poverty, through organizations like Thriving Connections (called Circles at the time) and New Leaf - New Life! It was eye-opening, to say the least, to see how my life had been set up for years to keep me separate from other parts of society.

(Nerd friends: yes, there's sampling bias, by only examining friends who were on Facebook, but I'm confident the numbers wouldn't be significantly different by incorporating non-Facebook friends!)

Thriving Connections (TC) isn't a Christian organization, but they're doing what I think Christianity should be striving to do: to love people simply by intentionally being with them.

One of the beautiful parts of TC is how people from different walks of life get partnered together, to surround a person in poverty and to let them, with support from others, guide their own path forward. This means a lot of talking - formally, in focused monthly meetings, but also informally, over text and hangouts and however else life works. It means listening to another person in crisis and learning how to be a calming presence. It sometimes means shutting up, listening to insights from community leaders at weekly larger gatherings and listening to a person talk about their own experiences and work out how they see a way forward.

You don't go into a TC partnership trying to "fix" somebody else; you don't have a checklist of volunteer activities to get through; you're just there to be available for another human being, to let them know that they're valid and worthy of love and that you want to be friends.

And the beauty of the set-up is that whoever you meet at TC lets you know that you're valid and that you may not always know what you're doing or how best to help, but that that's okay. You're there, and that's plenty.

Markus Dickinson