

# Ronald Arms: Inside Out Space

February 16, 1997

Ronald Arms

## Inside Out Space

It is a stretch to stand here this morning. I am convinced that one of the most effective and most common ways of using religion to keep people from a direct experience of God is to convince them they need a building in which to worship and a professional staff to guide them. These two choices will cost so much there is little left for anything else. If evil needs an effective strategy to handcuff good, supporting church buildings and church staff accomplishes that.

The gospel lesson invites me to change my heart and mind. The kingdom of God has come. Reading this with new eyes I'm going to take it as an invitation to think together with you about space. It is common to think of place as out there—to look at it from the outside in. A change of heart and mind invites us to consider it from the inside out. God's domain is about 'inside out' space.

Because we are a people who give Jesus importance in our lives, to think about space is to think about Jesus. Jesus never became a Christian; he became a human being. We are not called to be Christians, nor is our calling to create Christians. God wants us to help people become human beings. God's domain invites us to use space to deal with the hunger, the hurt and the happiness of humanity.

In his day Jesus did this in four ways. He refused to insist on a fixed place (the Temple) for worship. He refused a fixed time (the Sabbath). He moved beyond a fixed group (Israel). And he moved beyond a fixed morality that excommunicates tax

collectors and executes adulterers to an ethical behavior in which love and mercy are the key behaviors.

Jesus took a faith many lived from the outside in (depending on a fixed place, time, group and morality) and provided an embodied example of how it could be practiced from the inside out. It could be lived everywhere, all the time, by anyone. What matters is not a building, a calendar or a clan. It is the experience of Spirit, the practice of compassion and the teaching of wisdom that make the difference. These three windows, spirit, compassion and wisdom, are what I want to use to help us explore inside out space. They may give us insight into the Kingdom of God that changes our hearts and minds about the use of space.

## **A. Experience Spirit**

The first way in which Jesus lives from the inside out is that he clearly is a spirit person. He has a first hand relationship with God and invites others to claim the same. He knows that the map is not the territory and the menu is not the meal. He will not settle for second hand knowledge of the Sacred. He promotes an unbrokered relationship with spirit both for himself and others. The Sacred is directly available. But where?

Jesus is difficult on this point. An honest reading of the gospels says to me that he was highly critical of the public practice of piety. Going to synagogue and keeping the Sabbath did not equal the arrival of God's kingdom in his experience. I'm not sure how comfortable he would be with Sunday morning worship as a reason for owning space. Clearly Jesus had places he used to get in touch with Spirit: the desert, the dining room table, an upper room, the garden. So space and spirit are connected for him. How can we connect them without space becoming an obstacle to our experience of the Sacred?

Let me share a story that helps me. "In a small town, a young

piano player had a dream. Considered to be a child prodigy, his goal was to become an internationally renowned pianist...He was invited to audition with one of the most famous teachers in the world. Under the master's knowing gaze he drew forth his best performance...The maestro contemplated what he had just heard and said, "Traveling the path I see before you is very difficult...The issue here is more than physical technique alone. You are the real instrument that must be mastered. All of you is presented in how you play. If you are to be master, you must learn to face your fears and wrestle with your habits."

As we think about location, we need to consider what kind of place helps us engage spirit first hand. If the maestro is right, any new location will need to be a haunted house with a hall of mirrors. Our new space needs to be a place where we are willing to meet our fears face to face. There is no better way to work with fear than to pay it attention. Perhaps a haunted house is too strong an image, but this space needs to encourage us to use what scares us as a way to recover our connection with the Sacred. And it needs to have a hall of mirrors that reflects our habits back to us. We are so well trained that it is not until we can see ourselves caught in the glue of habit that we have the option to choose a first hand experience of spirit. If our space provides the safety to explore what scares us and mirrors our habits, it may help us recover our sense of Sacred Presence.

The recovery principle is at the heart of my work with spirit. As I've struggled with how to develop a relationship with the Sacred I've come to realize that spirit is not something I can claim once and for all. There are conversions but quickly my fears and my habits get in the way. I get in touch with the Sacred, and then lose contact. The challenge is to find ways of staying in touch longer, and getting back in touch more often and more quickly after I lose contact. Recovery is at the heart of the matter. And paying attention to the ways in

which I lose contact with the spirit, to my fears and my habits, is very useful to recover the first hand experience.

## **B. Practice Compassion**

Jesus practiced compassion. Rather than live from the outside in by a code of 613 rules, he sought from the inside out to find ways to move beyond a fixed morality. He preached love of enemies and practiced forgiveness. A place he often used to do this was the dining room table. This earned him a reputation as a winebibber and a glutton.

Eating is a place where Jesus practices compassion. The dining room table is inside out space for him. He welcomes strangers to dinner. He is willing to sit and share food with Zaccheus. He allows a woman of ill repute to wash his feet while feasting with others. Jesus kept an open table. Social deviants, Pharisees, rich and poor were alike welcome to eat with him. In doing this he took one of the longest journeys of his time: the step across the threshold of a stranger's home.

This too is a difficult word for me. I have bad habits around food. I fear fat. I eat too fast and too much. I eat out of habit more than hunger. I seldom choose to eat with strangers. To see Jesus use the dinner table as inside out space challenges me. Eating is not a place I often look for God. There is a lovely version of one of our early Biblical stories that reminds me why we should. Let me share a part of it with you,

*In the beginning of the story Grandmother Eve is a little girl ...Life goes on in the garden, much the same from day to day. Very little is asked of Eve. All the animals and plants live there together with Eve, including a tree of great beauty in the center of the garden called the Tree of God's Wisdom. God has offered Eve some very clear guidelines about this tree. She can eat the fruits of all the other trees, but the fruit of this tree is forbidden. In the beginning she*

*accepts this without question, even though the very purpose of life may be to grow in wisdom. As time goes by, even though the garden does not change, Eve changes. She begins to grow up, to become a teenager. One day, as she is passing the most beautiful tree, a snake coiled in its branches speaks to her, "Eve," he says, "here is one of the apples of this tree. Why not eat it?"*

At this point my grandfather would always explain that the snake was not really a snake but a symbol for the human yearning for wisdom, the seductive power of the unknown, and the endless fascination that the mysterious has for human beings. The snake is the first teacher, and he addresses that part of Eve which is no longer a little girl, but a seeker.

*Eve thinks back upon what God the Father said, The fruit of the tree is forbidden. But Eve is an adolescent. Like most people her age, she needs to find out for herself. She feels the magnetism of the apple. Drawn toward it, she reaches out for it, takes a bite of it.*

The food we eat becomes a part of every one of our cells and is woven into the very fabric of our being. "This apple is no different from any other food," said my grandfather. When Grandmother Eve eats it, the wisdom of God becomes a part of her inner life, a holy wisdom she carries inside her and not something she speaks to outside herself. She now carries the voice of God inside every one of her cells like a little compass. As her descendants, so do we.

Like most children, the literal aspects of the story bothered me. "Why, Grandpa," I asked, "did God tell Grandma Eve that she mustn't eat the apple in the first place if it wasn't true?" One of the finest things about my grandfather was that he did not change his response to a question just because the person asking was very young. He answered me as if I was a fellow kabalist. "Nashume-le," he said, "this is a most

difficult question, a question worthy of much thought. The Bible is full of the images of God: God as an authoritarian father, God as a lover, God as angry, God as jealous, God as faithful, God as loving. In one place God is walking on the earth and in another His breath blows over the waters. In yet another He is a pillar of fire. But God is none of these things. These are all images of God in the midst of men. Knowing God may require us to question all of these things."

The God within seemed to require a day to day, moment to moment sort of inner attention rather than just a simple obedience. I felt sorry for Grandma Eve. It seemed much harder than obedience to me.

The complexity of the real world requires us to struggle to hear the Holy and develop a personal responsibility to live a good life. It demands that we stay awake. Grandfather presented Eve to me as a grown up rather than a sinner. It was years before I heard the official version of the story.

Perhaps there is something for us now in my grandfather's version of the story. We have expected a great deal of our experts and authorities...We have offered them obedience for the hope that they would become responsible for providing us with a good life. It is time to find the spot of grace within.

The inside out space of a dining room table can offer us that spot of grace. Perhaps we should explore having whatever structure we inhabit available to others for food and fellowship on a regular basis. Might this provide a foundation for Feed the Homeless work as well? Perhaps this means each of our mission groups assuming responsibilities for a breakfast and dinner once a week for whoever shows up at our new location. Maybe this means we should be looking for a restaurant-like facility that has the flexibility to be used in a variety of ways: feeding the hungry on an ongoing basis, serving communion on a monthly basis, and continuing to nurture our learning in a School of Christian Living setting

as well.

What kind of space does the practice of compassion suggest to you? For me it brings up pictures of a listening and caring place. It is warm and comfortable. It encourages new beginnings and is rich in opportunities to start over. It can take spills, running and tumbles. It has places to hide. It washes clean easily and is user friendly. Compassionate space is a good place to share a meal. It is accessible. The gospel has been described as one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread. Dare we turn whatever space we claim inside out enough that this might be said of us too?

## **C. Teaching Wisdom**

Wisdom concerns life. Central to it is the idea of way or a path. There are two types of wisdom, conventional and subversive. Conventional wisdom provides guidance on how to live based on the dynamics of rewards and punishment. It is a domestication of reality lived according to the performance principle. Its dominant values are achievement, affluence and appearance.

Jesus is a wisdom teacher. He practices an inside out, or subversive wisdom however. He uses paradox and parable to introduce us to the way less traveled. He calls for a new heart that leads from a life of requirements and measuring up to a life of relationship with God.

Conventional wisdom on space is familiar to us. It is something to own, to fence in, to control. The more the better. The three little pigs knew the conventional wisdom about space. They built bigger, stronger houses. They looked at the issue from the outside in. They fence out danger, install bigger locks and improve their security system. They maintain their property so it increases in value.

Subversive wisdom teaches us about inside out space. Foxes

have holes, birds have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head. If a man wants your coat give him your cloak as well. Safety is not the absence of danger, but rather the ability to work with it. You don't get rid of the butterflies in your stomach, you teach them to fly in formation. It is what the three little wolves discovered in their house of flowers.

This is hard. None of us has sold all that we have and given it to the poor, so why should we take the paradoxical unconventional wisdom of inside out space any more seriously? Here is where we need to be careful. Jesus does not ask for imitators. He asks us to be in touch with the One he called Abba about what is right for us. He asks us to allow God's domain to challenge us and change our hearts and minds. For some of us this may mean reconsidering the virtues of shared space. Others will find a need to re-examine their budgets to see if they can give more generously. For me it has meant reconsidering long cherished opinions today. For some it will mean taking more time to look at property options. Others will hopefully articulate their dreams and visions of how we can best use space.

For me wise space is full of books, a warm den with a full library and a roaring fire. "A room without books is like a body without soul." The living room space at Wellspring comes to mind almost immediately. Wise space encourages curiosity and creativity. It is capable of transformation, understanding that wisdom sometimes involves play, sometimes dreams sometimes work. It is space that feeds the soul—rich in music and art, often willing to make place for new expressions and mixtures of spirit and matter.

Let me share a story with you that captures a sense of this,

*"When Jacob turned over, he could feel the sun on his face. He saw morning as a triangle of blue sky framed in the limbs of a large oak. The tree that had taken Jacob into its curve*



*during the night stood guard over him.*

*"A voice called out, "Are you Jacob the baker?" The voice cut like an ax, and Jacob fell from the forever back into the now. Jacob was unsure what was expected of him. He said nothing.*

*"I was told I could find you on this path," the voice persisted. Directly opposite him, Jacob saw a man whose eyes searched others as if rummaging drawers for gold coins.*

*"Let me ask you a question," said the man, fueled by his own encouragement. "Why is it that, even though I am rich, my life feels empty?"*

*"Some people have nothing because they have the courage to reach out and take it," said Jacob.*

*"The man, less sure of himself, looked at Jacob with suspicion. "Well, when others turn to me for help because I am rich, what should I say?"*

*"Say thank you," said Jacob, fingering the edges of a leaf that had fallen from the canopy of the oak.*

*"What?" said the man. "Why should I say thank you?" His voice again grew louder as if to boost his confidence. "What can the poor give me?"*

*"Have you ever met a man whose success is not also a burden?" said Jacob. "Charity allows you to lessen your load. In this way, having less can add to your life."*

*Now the stranger took a new tone. "I feel like a fool," he*

*said.*

*"A fool is someone who knows too much to learn anything,"  
said Jacob.*

*"I don't understand," said the man.*

*"Good," said Jacob, turning once again to the path before  
him. "Only a man who is not filled with himself can be  
increased by others."*

## **Conclusion**

We are a people who like lists. In conclusion I offer a short  
**Inside Out Space Checklist:**

1. Is this space that helps us contact spirit directly?
2. Does it allow for the principle of recovery and include a haunted house and a hall of mirrors?
3. Is this space that helps us feed the hungry?
4. Does it use the dining room table and eating to practice compassion?
5. Is this space that encourages continual learning?
6. Does it allow God's domain to challenge us to change our heart and minds?
7. Is this a place for laughter, for humor, that encourages clowning?

God's domain is here. It teaches us to live from the inside out. Instead of getting fixated on place, time, country or morality, Jesus invites us to access spirit, practice compassion and teach wisdom. When we look at space through these sacred windows, our search for a new place will keep us on the path to the Kingdom of God.

Talking about space means talking about Jesus. Jesus taught

the kingdom of God is an inside out place that calls for us to change our hearts and minds. Inside out space are places that invite us to experience spirit, practice compassion and teach wisdom. A haunted house with a hall of mirrors can help us experience spirit first hand as we let our fears and our habits teach us. The inside out space of a dining room table can help us find the spot of grace within which feeds the hungry and practices compassion. The inside wisdom Jesus taught encourages us to listen for the ways in which God invites us to change our hearts and minds about space. When we look at space through these sacred windows, our search for a new place will keep us on the path to the Kingdom of God.