

Untamed Hospitality

BY ELIZABETH NEWMAN

While our culture reduces “hospitality” to friendliness and private entertaining, Christian hospitality remains a public and economic reality by which God re-creates us through the places and people we are given. How do we shift gears to practice this untamed hospitality?

My grandfather, a Baptist pastor who served small rural churches in Louisa County, Virginia, for forty years, bequeathed to me upon his death a number of books from his student days at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. One of these, *A Short History of the Baptists* (1907), opens with a colorful picture of Perpetua, a saint in the early Church who was brutally mauled by wild beasts as punishment for her conversion to Christianity. Her father, holding Perpetua’s young son, desperately pleaded for her to renounce Christianity, but she refused.

The oddness of including Perpetua in a history of Baptists is as strange as beginning an essay on hospitality with the gruesome death of an Christian martyr. After all, hospitality typically brings to mind, as Henri Nouwen notes, “tea parties, bland conversation and a general atmosphere of coziness.”¹ Many in our culture readily equate hospitality with a generic friendliness. The picture of God that sustains such hospitality, if there is one, is that God is a kind of therapeutic nice guy who asks only that we be nice too.

Yet a saint like Perpetua was not martyred for being too nice. Rather she *refused* to sacrifice to the gods, a sacrifice required by the Roman emperor, Severus, for his health and safety. In other words, Perpetua would not offer hospitality to pagan gods. Her refusal was grounded in the conviction that the Triune God alone is worthy of the sacrifice and gift of our lives.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF HOSPITALITY

Such a witness – the meaning of “martyr” – makes it clear that Christian hospitality is not a private practice. Yet popular magazines such as *Southern*

Living or Ladies' Home Journal assume hospitality has to do with delicious dinners and polite conversation in one's own beautiful home. Hospitality is reduced to private entertainment, almost always extended to people more or less like oneself in terms of status and class. This notion of hospitality as a private practice has led us to construct a public space where Christian hospitality seems not to belong.

Why could Perpetua not satisfy the emperor's concern that all citizens sacrifice to pagan gods in public (thereby securing the emperor's own power) and still worship their own personal god(s) in private? I imagine most of us would be tempted to do this, especially if the prospect of being torn apart by wild beasts were hanging over our heads. Perpetua rightly understood, however, as did the early Church more broadly, that Christian hospitality, like other Christian practices, constitutes a public way of life together. This way of life includes all "spheres" so that Christ's body will be visible to the world on its behalf. If Perpetua had given in to her father's pleas and worshiped foreign gods for the sake of the empire, the Church increasingly would have been erased from public view. She would have practiced "empire hospitality" – giving and receiving on behalf of the emperor – rather than Christian hospitality, which embodies faithfulness to Christ.

Given that any institution (including the Church) is grounded in "house practices,"² when its practices weaken or decline, then the institution will follow suit. The privatizing and sentimentalizing of hospitality has opened the door for other distorted conceptions of this practice, which have in turn distorted the Church.

An institution that has hijacked hospitality in a public and visible way today is the market. Google "hospitality" on the Internet and thousands of sites appear having to do with the "hospitality industry": cruises, hotels, and other such services. I recently was on a cruise in Hawaii, a wonderful gift from my parents to our family in honor of their fiftieth wedding anniversary. While we enjoyed the time together and the beautiful surroundings, I could not help but reflect on the cruise "experience" and how the hospitality industry marketed this to us.

For example, the "cruise hospitality" carried us into a different time, as reflected in some of my family's questions: "Was today Sunday?" "When was Christmas?" "Was Christmas when we were at the luau?" A marketed hospitality depends upon each day being just like every other, so that all days are interchangeable. Time is defined by consumption rather than by history, tradition, or personal relations.

What the market conceals, however, is telling. On New Year's Day morning I overheard one crewmember say to another, "I think it should be a rule that adults have to clean up their own barf." A marketed hospitality, focused on consumption, does not know or even care what goes on in time "behind the market scene."

WORSHIP AS HOSPITALITY

By contrast, and simply put, Christian hospitality serves God and not the market. Further, unlike the market, all days are *not* interchangeable. Christian hospitality rather relies upon an understanding of time and space as given and redeemed by God. This means that the Christian calendar and Sabbath keeping matter. Nowhere is the gift and redemption of time and space more fully enacted than when we gather to worship on the day of the Lord's resurrection.

Rightly understood, worship itself *is* hospitality. We do not gather ourselves; God gathers us; God invites us in. More fully, we are brought by the power of the Holy Spirit into a worship already taking place in the life of God. As Geoffrey Wainwright states, "The classical movement of Christian worship has always meant a participatory entrance into Christ's self-offering to the Father and correlatively being filled with the divine life."³ To say that worship itself is our participation in divine hospitality is also to say that worship is the primary place where we learn to be guests and hosts in God's Kingdom.

In worship, then, God is our host. To describe God as host, however, is not to domesticate God. We only need to recall the familiar burning-bush scene from the life of Moses to see that God's hospitality challenges our typical expectations. God does not superficially welcome Moses, but rather commands him, "Come no closer!" (Exodus 3:5). Even more, God demands that Moses remove his sandals since he is standing on holy ground. Upon hearing God say, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," Moses hides his face, for he is "afraid to look at God" (Exodus 3:6).

In this instance, hospitality involves not our usual pleasantries but rather command, terror, and, not least of all, a puzzling calling from God — a *political* rather than private calling through which God works to create and sustain the nation of

Israel. And unlike marketed hospitality, this divine hospitality extended to Moses is defined not by consumption as personal choice but by relationship and identity with God and a people.

As divine host, God through Christ in the Spirit draws us into communion with himself and others, giving us desires we had not previously even imagined. We are like the woman at the well (John 4:1-42) — we are blind

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and confused about what we really need. Jesus, the perfect host, knows the true needs of the guests and offers gifts to meet those needs: "The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14b). Baptism is the living water that transforms. As host, God offers food in the form of word and table. But will this food satisfy? The Psalmist exclaims, "O taste and see that the LORD is good!" (Psalm 34:8). When guests

taste God through word and table, they are nourished and satisfied.

But what if persons are physically hungry? Is worship a spiritualized hospitality that ignores their material needs? In our scientific world, we might be tempted to think that worship/hospitality is not real

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in that it does not meet the physical needs of the hungry and the poor. Seen in this light, worship is little more than a kind of idealized dream world with little connection to our real lives. Yet, as Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly reminds us, life together in Christ is not "an ideal but a Divine reality."⁴ Life together is not an ideal that we must strive to realize; it is rather a reality that God creates through Christ in which we are invited to participate. Far from being otherworldly, this Christ-centered hospitality is as deeply worldly as is possible since through it we are enabled to see and live in the world truthfully – seeing Christ in the poor, the hungry, and the naked, and addressing their physical needs (Matthew 25).

In worship or the liturgy (understood as the work of the people) then, we receive more fully the truth of *whose* we are even as we offer in return our prayers and thanksgiving, indeed our very lives, to God. Such hospitality is not an individual or even a communal achievement. It is rather a gift to be received, and its faithful reception makes us part of something larger than ourselves: Christ's own body.

To sum up, worship is the most important thing there is because it is what gathers, forms, and feeds the people of God. We know ourselves in and through this gathering, this living water, and this sacrificial meal. Apart from worship, we would not know what Christian hospitality as a way of life looks like.

Yet even in worship, to the degree that worship itself is less than full, we can still get a distorted picture of hospitality. Like many Southern Baptists, I grew up celebrating the Lord's Supper infrequently (four times a year) with a sip of grape juice and a 'chiclet' of bread. A far more enduring image of the abundant feast of God's hospitable Kingdom were the seeming *miles* of tables at our Sunday "dinner on the grounds," all of them groaning

under the weight of the wonderful dishes of food. For me, that great day when God gathers people from north, south, east, and west will look like one of those dinners. What it will not resemble is the sip of grape juice and the crumb of bread that was my portion when we observed the Lord's Supper. In worship, as God's guests, we open ourselves and delight in the abundance of God.

HOSPITALITY AS ECONOMIC

Such hospitality, of course, does not stop when the worship service ends. The Orthodox Church has a phrase to describe the time after the church gathers: "the liturgy after the liturgy." If we worship faithfully, we will extend the hospitality that is worship through all the other days of the week to our neighbors, to strangers, and even to enemies. This hospitality is at once economic and political.

Today we tend to think of economics on a grand scale – as having to do with things like the stock market, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and so on – and we suspect that only Harvard MBAs can really understand it. Indeed, this grand-scale view is one of the ways our advanced capitalist economy disempowers us. From this perspective it is easy to believe that hospitality has nothing to do with economics. However, that economics and hospitality are both related to *oikos*, the Greek word for "household," gives us a different perspective. Rightly understood, "hospitality" names the kind of giving and receiving that enables the *oikos* or household to flourish, and "economics" describes the rules that govern this practice. As we will see, the kind of *oikos* we envision as our primary dwelling makes all the difference in the world for how we understand and practice hospitality.

As we have seen above, the place of Christian hospitality is marked by an extraordinary abundance. Stated theologically, God creates not because God has to but because God desires to. That is, God as Trinity already has perfect and sufficient fellowship. Therefore, God's creating of the world, Israel, and the Church are fully gifts. Rightly understood, "the love displayed in God's life is not a zero-sum game but one of overflowing plentitude."⁵ Abundance rather than scarcity and competition mark the *oikos* and economics of Christian hospitality.

We have difficulty hearing and accepting these straightforward claims because we have been so deeply formed by living in a market society, a society completely dominated by market forces. Consumerism, competition, and individualism already shape our lives. How do we shift gears and truly practice a different hospitality?

While this is no doubt a large question, we might begin by considering the practice of "staying put." Our current economy shapes us to believe that any move for more money is a good one. Or moving to a new congregation because it meets "our needs" is better than staying in a place where one is

unfulfilled. Or getting out of a marriage that is unhappy only makes sense. If we do not like one place, thing, or person, why not choose another? Such an ideology is grounded in the conviction that through our choices we are our own creators, which is exactly what a market society with its relentless advertising campaign would want us to believe. Yet this kind of detachment fostered by our late modern economy makes it almost impossible to sustain

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the bonds and sense of place necessary to practice hospitality well.

By contrast, one of the most profound biblical accounts of hospitality, Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples, is possible because the disciples stay put. Despite their confusion, their perception that Jesus

was not meeting their needs, and their trials, they remain with Jesus. That they do so is made possible by Jesus’ faithfulness to them, a faithfulness embodied in his washing their feet (John 13). In this act Jesus shows them that even as he is their servant, they too are to be servants, looking to the needs of others. He wants them to know, with his time to depart drawing near, that he “loved them to the end” (John 13:1). Jesus remains faithful to his disciples to the end, even though they will not be entirely faithful to him. But as we know, the story unfolds: their lack of faithfulness cannot thwart the faithfulness of God, and the disciples eventually gain a deeper sense of their place before Jesus.

Christian hospitality does not aim for self-fulfillment through autonomous choice, but for staying put with Christ in the places we are given. It aims not for detachment from people, institutions, and traditions, but for allowing God to re-create us through the places and people we are given. The Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco, for example, not only practices economic sharing (twenty-four members own only seven cars), but they also practice “stability,” moving to another place in the city *only if* it will build the church. Such an example reminds us all that Christian hospitality flourishes when there is stability in the *oikos* or dwelling of Christ.

Pilgrimage and movement, of course, are also crucial for economic flourishing in the household of Christian hospitality. The practice of “staying put” is not intended to deny the idea that hospitality involves journeying together toward deeper faithfulness. In terms of economics, this involves looking for ways to practice both giving and receiving.

Jacques Ellul has said, “One way to subvert the power of money is to give it away.” Stated more broadly, one way to subvert the power of dominant economic forces is to look for alternative ways of both giving

and receiving in the household or dwelling of Christ.

Gilbert Bond tells of one such journey when he served as assistant pastor at Chicago First Church of the Brethren, where the congregation participated in a government-sponsored program to distribute surplus agricultural commodities to the poor. The government required the church to obtain a “proof of poverty” from every person who came through the door – usually the card issued to those poor enough to participate in the Medicaid program. “The comic absurd part of the requirement became apparent when one reflected upon who else would wait in the Chicago winter outside a church for several hours to receive a five-pound brick of processed cheese if they could afford to buy it or a better grade of cheese in a grocery store.”⁶ In this situation, counting and quantifying the really poor became terribly dehumanizing. As one young man who “failed to prove that he had failed” angrily erupted, “What in the [blank-blank] do you think all these people come here for?... Everybody lining up here is poor. If we weren’t poor we wouldn’t be here.”⁷

After much painful discernment, the congregation came to realize that this program, based on calculating who was really poor, was inherently violent and that some institutional structures are incapable of mediating God’s hospitable Kingdom. Bond goes on to tell how the congregation developed an alternative ministry of neighborhood fellowship meals that involved eating, singing, and praying together. (The Brethren practice that formed the basis for this alternative ministry was the Anabaptist love feast, which includes a foot-washing ritual and an agape meal.) Fewer people were served, but neighborhood children eventually started coming to church. Sitting down at a common meal with the folks in their neighborhood was much more risky (and less controlling) than giving food to people in line, yet it also made possible genuine hospitality. The economic practice of First Church moved from an impersonal handout to a faithful hospitality that enabled receiving as well as giving.

HOSPITALITY AS POLITICAL

As this story also illustrates, hospitality is political as well. The use of the word “political” to describe a practice like hospitality might sound rather jarring. Doesn’t politics have to do with elections, legislation, and procedural polity? A more ancient understanding, however, defines “politics” in terms of how a community, a *polis*, is ordered to produce a common good. Indeed the purpose of a *polis*, Aristotle believed, is the creation of a people who are better than they could be without the *polis*. The politics that sustains Christian hospitality is not based on “individual rights” and “legislative procedure.” As the previous story shows, reliance upon rights protected by the state does not insure faithful hospitality. Even more, as Perpetua well knew, the politics that sustains the empire or the nation-state differs from the politics of Jesus.

The politics of Christian hospitality looks to the good of the Body of Christ. This politics is ordered so that “the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor” (1 Corinthians 12:22-23a). In the Brethren story, the gathering around the table honored those most deeply in need in a way that the distribution of cheese did not. Such hospitality is a way of *being* before it is a way of *doing*. Rightly understood, the faithful practice of hospitality begins with what our larger society will tend to regard as of little consequence. As a political practice, it attends to what in the world’s eyes might seem inconsequential but from the perspective of the gospel is a manifestation of God’s politics: the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps no one today better displays this politics of “small gestures” than Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche Communities, places where those with handicaps live in community with those without such handicaps. Vanier emphasizes the importance of “being with” rather than “doing for” the handicapped, which to outsiders might appear to be wasting time. Vanier’s emphasis, however, is not first on giving, but on learning to receive. “We have discovered that we have a common spirituality of humility and presence, close to the poor and the weak; a common call to live with them, not to change them, but to welcome them and share their gifts and their beauty; to discover in them the presence of Jesus—Jesus, humble and gentle, Jesus, poor and rejected.”⁸ The politics of L’Arche hospitality embodies the conviction that discerning the common good involves learning to receive from the other, especially the other who by society’s standards appears to have nothing to offer. Such hospitality, as Vanier readily admits, is not normal.

Vanier tells a delightful story about “Mr. Normal” and a mentally handicapped young man.

I don’t know whether around here you have some normal people, but I find them a very strange group. I don’t know—I remember—well, one of the characteristics of normal people is that they have problems. They have family problems, they have financial problems, they have professional problems, problems with politics, problems with church, problems all over the place. And I remember one day a “normal” guy came to see me and he was telling me about all his problems. And there was a knock on the door and entered Jean Claude. Jean Claude has Down’s syndrome and, relaxed and laughing, ...he just shook. I didn’t even say, “Come in.” He came in, and he shook my hand and laughed and he shook the hand of Mr. Normal and laughed and he walked out laughing. And Mr. Normal turned to me and he said, “Isn’t it sad, children like that.”

He couldn’t see that Jean Claude was a happy guy. It’s a blindness, and it’s an inner blindness which is the most difficult to heal.⁹

Christian hospitality flows from the strange truth that in Christ God has entered and redeemed our time and place. This truth frees us to practice the spontaneous and joyful hospitality of Jean Claude. Christian hospitality is not about the extraordinary deed nor about heroic self-effort. Neither is it something we accomplish. Hospitality is rather a life we receive as we rely upon and respond to God and one another for the sake of God's Kingdom.

In so doing, might we, like Perpetua, witness to a political hospitality that makes martyrdom possible?

NOTES

1 As quoted from Henri Nouwen in Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 3.

2 James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 193.

3 Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 23.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1954), 26.

5 Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 222.

6 Gilbert I. Bond, "Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger," in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 142.

7 *Ibid.*, 143.

8 Jean Vanier, *An Ark for the Poor: The Story of L'Arche* (Toronto, ON: Novalis, 1995), 57.

9 Jean Vanier, *Our Journey Home: Rediscovering a Common Humanity Beyond Our Differences* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 4-5.



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