

Toward a Welcoming Congregation

BY PAUL J. WADELL

In a world that has grown frighteningly guarded and harsh, Christian congregations are called to imitate the “table manners” of Jesus by being sacraments of God’s hospitality in the world. How do we become these kinds of congregations IN THE CHURCH and FOR THE WORLD today?

In a world increasingly characterized by fear and suspicion, what is the Church called to be? I recently saw an icon that gave a poignant and eloquent answer to this question. It was in an abbey in Austria. In the background of the picture was a small town or community. People could be seen walking the streets of the town as they attended to the tasks of the day. In the foreground was a large table. Seated around the table were people sharing a meal. Everyone in the icon looked quite ordinary except for one thing—a glow or halo encircled the head of each person. The icon was entitled “Xenophilia,” love and friendship for strangers.

This title invited me to look at the icon differently, for it suggested that not everyone walking those streets or sitting at that table was a citizen of the town. Some were strangers and outsiders, immigrants from elsewhere. But they were able to enter the town because there were no walls surrounding it, nothing to suggest that some were welcome but others were not. Anyone could feel at home in this town because everyone was welcomed as friend. Instead of “xenophobia,” the fear of the stranger that increasingly grips our society, this little town embodied the befriending hospitality of God. Everyone who walked its streets glowed with holiness because they truly had learned to love whatever neighbors came their way, especially those neighbors it is easy to fear and, therefore, exclude. Everyone in the painting radiated the goodness of God because whether they were host or

guest, citizen or stranger, love was being given and received. It was a holy exchange that characterizes all true hospitality.

How do we convert hostility to hospitality, exclusion to embrace? How do we create Christian congregations and communities that do not mimic and mirror the discords, divisions, and discriminations of our societies, but work to overcome them by witnessing something more hopeful and promising,

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something truly of God? How do we forge bonds of friendship with the very persons we are trained to view suspiciously? The fundamental work of God in Jesus, particularly through Jesus' cross and resurrection, was reconciliation and peace, and anyone baptized in his name is called to do the same. God works to open our world by

taking down the walls and barriers that divide us (Ephesians 2:11-22). We build barriers because of ethnic and racial differences. We build barriers on the basis of economic, social, or political differences. Barriers pop up when differences of gender, physical or mental ability, education, or religion render us closed and inhospitable. Or we settle behind barriers on account of prejudice, grudges, unhealed hurts, or painful memories. Instead of nurturing friendship and intimacy, we foster disconnection and estrangement.

We live in a world of insiders and outsiders, a world where some are welcome and others are permanently shunned. Human beings are experts at exclusion because we prefer the comfortable and familiar neighbor over the "stranger" whose presence may not only challenge us, but also completely remake our world, which is always a risk with hospitality. This desire for the comfortable and familiar also impacts our faith communities. Like society, churches too have walls that shut people out. We may not consciously construct these walls—in fact, we are probably hardly aware of them—but they are there. Most Christian congregations are fairly homogeneous. As Patrick McCormick writes, "Christians tend to break bread within socioeconomic monocultures, homogenized enclaves where nearly everyone is of the same color and tax bracket."¹ There may be many explanations for this but it is, at least from the gospel's perspective, a dangerous predicament because it directly contradicts the behavior of Jesus who gladly sat down at table with anyone. Sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, they were all welcome at the table of the Lord.

In a world that has grown frighteningly guarded and harsh, Christian congregations are called to imitate the "table manners" of Jesus by being

sacraments of God's hospitality in the world. But this is not easy because the hospitality of God is radically unlike the hospitality of Martha Stewart. *Christian* hospitality is modeled on the hospitality of a God, who "even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:5), and patterned on the hospitality of Jesus, whose fearless love knew no bounds. Christian hospitality is a matter of welcoming, caring for, and befriending the stranger, the poor and needy, the homeless and destitute, the unloved and the unlikable, the weird and the strange, in gratitude to God and in imitation of Christ. It may be the most important Christian calling for our times, but it is one we easily neglect unless we are part of faith communities who make it their aim. For Christians, hospitality is not an occasional gesture but a whole way of being. It is not an interruption to our normal way of life but a habit, practice, or virtue that ought consistently to characterize our lives. How do we become this kind of person and these kinds of congregations *in the Church* and *for the world* today?

EMBRACING HOSPITALITY IN A CULTURE OF FEAR

We need to recover the conviction that hospitality is essential to the Christian life. In *A Christian Theology of Hospitality* Arthur Sutherland says, "Hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls."² Sutherland suggests that hospitality *makes* the Church, so much so that the Church disappears without it. He argues that the Church, as Christ's body in the world, comes to life through hospitality; that it lives and flourishes when it participates in, imitates, and extends the hospitality of God, but withers when it neglects it. Far from being a gospel option—something more socially conscious Christians can embrace but the rest of us ordinary Christians can ignore—hospitality is a quintessential practice of the Christian life that is a responsibility of all the baptized. Traditionally, Christians have spoken of four crucial identifying marks of the Church: the Church is one, holy, catholic or universal, and apostolic. But hospitality should also mark the Church because it is the practice by which we continue to bring the generosity, love, and compassion of God to life in the world.

There may be no better and more urgent way today for Christians to follow Jesus' command to love our neighbors than to become communities skilled in the risky hospitality of God. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his followers to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-14). He envisioned his disciples forming communities of faith whose very way of life stood in hopeful contrast to the often deep darkness of the world.

Today that darkness commonly takes the form of distrust and suspicion, of fear and anxiety. In a world of terrorism and war, school shootings, road rage, and pervasive anger and discontent, it is no wonder that concern for safety and security frequently triumphs over hospitality to the stranger. It is no wonder that we are encouraged to build walls around our homes and

communities, along the borders of our country, and even around our hearts. But is that the kind of community the Church should be? More and more people view life through a lens of fear, anxiety, and suspicion. And while this may be understandable, it is toxic for the hospitality and generosity that enables us to see the poor, the homeless, the hungry and the needy, immigrants and refugees and prisoners, not as dangerous threats, but as Christ's presence among us (Matthew 25:31-46).

The “human way out” of the despair of our age is through hospitality because a person well practiced in Christian hospitality chooses love over fear, trust over suspicion, and even risk over security.

Fear constricts our world. Fear teaches us to pull back, to become wary and disengaged. And fear, fueled by anxiety, teaches us to attend to our own needs before ever considering the needs of others. In a culture of fear, the open hand of hospitality easily becomes the clenched fist

of hostility. Too, fear and uncertainty imperil the generosity required for hospitality because by insisting on the priority of one's needs and security over the needs of others, they foster the accumulation and hoarding that make us increasingly oblivious to our neighbors. Fear counsels that we cannot afford to think of our neighbors without first having secured all the wealth and possessions needed for ourselves. Too, the constant refrain of a culture of fear is that we cannot risk openness, we cannot risk vulnerability, and we cannot risk generosity and sharing because the resources of the world are scarce and each person must look out for his or her self.

Unlike the people in the gospel story who shared the bread and fish that they had, and whose generosity made Jesus' miracle of feeding the tired and hungry crowd possible, fear of scarcity closes our hearts and tightens our grip on what we have. Anxiety's central message is that we cannot afford to share because we can never have enough. Put more strongly, in a culture marked by anxiety and fear, the very things we have traditionally called sins or vices (hoarding, greed, suspicion) become wise and prudent virtues. Fear, rather than love, governs our lives. But such fear is a kind of idolatry because it suggests we are giving more attention to our own security than we are giving to God. As Scott Bader-Saye warns, “the ethic of security produces a skewed moral vision. It suggests that suspicion, preemption, and accumulation are virtues insofar as they help us feel safe. But when seen from a Christian perspective, such ‘virtues’ fail to be true virtues, since they do not orient us to the true good—love of God and neighbor. In fact, they turn us away from the true good, tempting us to love safety more than we love God.”³

The primary aim of the Christian life is not to feel safe but to be faithful. If hospitality to the poor and needy, the homeless and the troubled and the stranger, distinguished the early Christian communities from their surrounding society and became a characteristic of authentic discipleship, then perhaps that is the calling of Christian congregations today.⁴ Societies built on strategies of exclusion, societies that train their citizens to be anxious and fearful, hardly give us confidence for the future. Human beings are not created to be anxious, they are not created for fear and isolation; rather, human beings are created for the communion and intimacy that are the fruit of an ever-expanding love. The “human way out” of the despair of our age is through hospitality because a person well practiced in Christian hospitality chooses love over fear, trust over suspicion, and even risk over security.

By embracing a vocation of hospitality, Christians help move the world “from the ‘destructively familiar to the creatively strange.’”⁵ To those who first heard his message – and to those of us who hear it today – Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God sounds “creatively strange” precisely because it is marked by unbounded hospitality. In the reign of God, all are welcome and all are embraced. There is no fear in the Kingdom of God because there are no strangers there. To suggest that there ought to be communities in the world today that aim for such trust and concord can sound not only far-fetched and utopian, but after September 11, 2001, perhaps even irresponsible. After that Tuesday morning in September, the temptation is to retreat to our churches as places of safety and security in an increasingly frightening and dangerous world, instead of seeing our churches as centers for challenging and transforming that world. Hospitality is the vocation of every Christian because it is through hospitality that we offer the most compelling witness of who God is, who we are called to be, and what the world through God’s grace can become.

ENCOUNTERING GOD’S HOSPITALITY IN WORSHIP

It is principally through worship that Christian congregations learn, are formed in, and become living instruments of the hospitality of God. But this only happens when worship is rightly understood and enacted. Too often today Christians forget that the focus of worship should be God, not ourselves. We deform and diminish worship when we think the primary aim of worship is to uplift us, to satisfy us, to entertain us, or to meet our needs and make us feel good about ourselves. Such worship is a sham, an affront to God, because it turns worship away from praising and glorifying God to consoling and affirming ourselves. When this happens, worship is little more than an act of communal self-deception.

Real worship is different. In a memorable sentence Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp wrote, “The Eucharist, like God, is good – but not safe.”⁶ Worship should never be safe because genuine worship schools us in the upside-down ways of God. At worship we hear the story of a God who is

passionate about justice to the poor, vigilant in concern for widows, orphans, and refugees, and jealously protective of the vulnerable of the world. But we hear the story of God in order to become part of the story of God. Worship is a ritual of remembering; however, we remember the great deeds of God – God’s justice, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and endless generosity – in order to reenact them in our lives today. If at worship we

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hear stories of Jesus forgiving sinners, showing justice to the poor, the shunned, and the forgotten, then we who have been baptized in his name are to witness those same gospel virtues in our lives.

Nothing schools us in the divine hospitality more than Christian worship and

the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the preeminent sacrament of hospitality because at the Eucharist God is the host who gathers us in order to feed us. Worship *is* the hospitality of God because at worship God welcomes us into the divine life, nurtures us, forgives us, and blesses us. Too, at the Eucharist we rehearse stories of God’s hospitality as we hear again of God rescuing the Israelites when they were strangers and aliens in a foreign land, feeding them with manna in the desert when they were famished, and constantly watching over them. We see God’s hospitality enacted when Jesus not only feeds the multitudes, but also calls despised tax collectors to follow him, sits down at table with people known to be sinners, and is lavish with forgiveness. Christian worship is centered around a meal, but it connects us to all the biblical scenes of feeding, welcoming, sheltering, and caring – scenes that vividly reveal *who God is* and *who we are called to be*.

So many of Jesus’ parables involve hospitality being given or ignored. There is the famous story of the Good Samaritan where a wounded and beaten man is ignored by two who should know better but is rescued by one compassionate enough to allow the needs of another to rearrange his life (Luke 10:29-37). By contrast, there is the baffling and troubling story of the rich man whose sumptuous lifestyle has so blinded him that he does not even acknowledge the starving beggar Lazarus who sits outside his door (Luke 16:19-31). Jesus makes it clear that it was the rich man’s lack of hospitality that placed him outside the life of God. Thus, hospitality is not only a definitive quality of Christian discipleship, but is also the love that makes us most like God. By contrast, to lack hospitality, to show little or no regard for the needs of others, is to live an ungodly life.

Worship should help us become hospitable persons and hospitable congregations by reminding us that everything we have, including our lives, is

a gift. Each of us lives in and from the hospitality of God; we live only because God never stops sharing life with us. Our life is not our possession because it is always something we continue to receive from the extravagant goodness, creativity, and generosity of God. As Elizabeth Newman puts it in her marvelous book, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*, "Our lives are always gifts of God; the divine spring continually supplies what we need. There is never a time when we can sit back and say, 'Ahh, now my life is mine.' Such a way of thinking distorts not only our lives but more fundamentally the nature of God, whose superabundant giving never ceases because it lies at the heart of God's triune identity."⁷ Newman suggests that hospitality *names* God because God *is* an endless outpouring of grace, life, and love, because God is most rightly understood as gift-giver, a God whose most hospitable act to us is the redemptive gift of Jesus his son.

Knowing this should make Christians people of gratitude and generosity. Gratitude must inspire and accompany hospitality if hospitality is not to be seen as an onerous burden and duty. With gratitude hospitality rightly remains an expression of thanksgiving and love to God for God's extravagant and delightful blessings toward us. With gratitude, hospitality is not so much something we ought to do, but something we want to do so that our lives are lived in grateful remembrance of God. But devoid of gratitude our hospitality, even when it serves and meets the needs of others, is much more likely to be given grudgingly, and such resentful hospitality "exhausts hosts and wounds guests even as it serves them."⁸ But it also dishonors God whose hospitality toward us is always joyfully and liberally given, never grudgingly bestowed.

More than anything, worship should foster gratitude and generosity because it teaches us that the whole universe reflects an economy of grace and abundance, not one of stinginess and scarcity. Worship should help us see that to know life is to know a gift, and that we are given one another as gifts, entrusted with one another as each day we live from, and hopefully extend, the hospitality of God. In this respect, worship should free us from the depressing dynamics of consumerism and materialism by enabling us to trust in God's never ending abundance and by loosening our hold on all that we own. Persons and congregations formed in the hospitality of God know that nothing we have is really ever our own because the earth and all that is in it belongs to God. In the household of God we are not owners but stewards, people entrusted to do good with whatever we have, especially to those strangers who are most in need.

RISKING A DANGEROUS LOVE

Finally, a third way of growing in the hospitality and generosity of God is by becoming persons and congregations formed in charity. This may sound like a rather limp recommendation because we typically equate

charity with people who are thoughtful, nice, tolerant, and kind. Things do go better in the world when people are thoughtful, nice, tolerant, and kind, but none of these admirable qualities sufficiently describes charity. Thomas Aquinas famously defined charity as a life of friendship and fellowship with God through which the “friends of God” model their lives on the incomparably expansive love of God.⁹ If to love someone is to make a place for her

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or him in our lives, then God is the exemplary lover because God makes a place for all of us—indeed, the whole of creation—in the divine life. That is the world of charity and it is what the friends of God strive to do. Animated by charity, they work to show to others the same befriending love that God shows to us. Any love modeled on

the divine love cannot be cautious, narrow, or safe. It must always be willing to make room for the other, especially those others who come to us hungry, forsaken, homeless, or alone. Any love modeled on the divine love must continually expand (and never shrink) the horizons of our love.

The antithesis of charity is “safe neighbor love,” a love that is calculating, selective, and restricted to all those we prefer to love because they are easy to love. Safe neighbor love is easy to practice because it does not ask much of us, least of all that we make space in our lives for those sons and daughters of God who might need our attention, our resources, and our time. Safe neighbor love sets up the barriers and boundaries that God’s love works to tear down. Safe neighbor love is a temptation for all of us (and all too often a habit), but it sabotages the fearless and expansive love of God that inspires true Christian hospitality.¹⁰ And perhaps most importantly, safe neighbor love is at odds with the love we see in God, a love so bold and adventuresome that it entered our world and became one of us in Christ.

Christian congregations will be hospitable and welcoming when they envision themselves as fellowships of charity, communities of the friends of God who persevere in the creative and hopeful ways of God. Such a community inspired the icon “Xenophilia.” We need more such communities today if we are not to be defeated by the dismaying and unpromising strategies of a culture of fear. Christian congregations have another calling. Instead of being communities marked by fear and mistrust, they ought to be communities formed in the charity and hospitality of God, communities that do not see the strangers of our world as threats to overcome, but as

guests to welcome just as God always welcomes us. When our churches become skilled in this liberating hospitality, they will be like the people in that captivating icon. They will glow with the goodness and holiness of God. And everyone who comes to them will see it, even if they do not see it themselves.

NOTES

1 Patrick T. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide to the All-Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 51.

2 Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 83.

3 Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 102.

4 Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 33.

5 Robert E. Webber and Rodney Clapp, *People of the Truth: A Christian Challenge to Contemporary Culture* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1988), 61.

6 Webber and Clapp, 3.

7 Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 170.

8 Pohl, 172.

9 I develop this theme in Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 39-41.

10 Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 32.



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