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Hospitality and The Kingdom of God: Our Invitation to Join the Work of Restoration

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

HOSPITALITY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD:
OUR INVITATION TO JOIN THE WORK OF RESTORATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF LEADERSHIP AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

BY
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 11, 2016
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All Scriptures quoted in the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

*To my Grandmother Frances and Velva,
whose hospitality and warm welcome provided an early example and mentoring,
and to my Grandfather Albert and Jack, who generously joined them on the journey.*

*To John, who followed his parents,
generously welcoming outsiders into his home, his heart,
and the community God has called him to gather.
I am deeply grateful for three decades of deepening friendship
and your willingness to confidently follow God into the mysteries
which provide the foundation for all the work explored here.*

*To my children, Timmy and Maggie,
who, accidentally, yet unavoidably, became generous hospitality and genuine care
as they ministered alongside me these past fifteen years.
Your love, graciousness, welcome, kindness, tenderness, and courage challenge me every
day.
I am a better and richer person for the time God has entrusted you to my care.
May your lives continue to live out God's warm welcome
and to embrace those God brings to you.*

*To Howard, thank you for walking this adventure with me and for your friendship
of quiet, engaged, gracious care in the best of the Friends tradition.
To Howard, Ron, Paul, Susan, Tim, Cathy, Harold, & Ken,
who warmly offered me a much-needed home within the academic community.*

~ Blessings ~

*We must learn to listen to the cock-crows and hammering and tick-tock of our lives
for the holy and elusive word that is spoken to us out of their great depths.*

-Frederick Buechner

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The church needs an image large enough to capture our hearts and minds. Too long we have served, prayed to, and fought over a single-culture God small enough to fit in a theological box. Torn apart by war, mass migration, and the fear of terrorism, our world needs a God big enough to love each person who walks or stumbles along this earth, a God strong enough to stand with the weak and broken and heal them, a God rich enough to feed all who starve from the storehouses of creation, a God wise enough to listen to heartache before rushing in anger to destroy someone, and a God large enough to love both the oppressed and the oppressors. Hospitality recognizes and embraces the heart of a Creator God who still passionately loves the Creation. Hospitality engages a world imagined by God, taking on the heart of God, and choosing to live in ways responsive to the active presence of God in the world. Hospitality acknowledges God as the first host who welcomed humanity into a lavish Garden. Hospitality recognizes that while the Creator's heart was broken over the sins of humanity, the Creator never stopped loving or working toward restoration with humanity. Hospitality is the active and attentive work of the people of God in the world who pattern their lives after Christ—those who attend the sick, feed the hungry, welcome the poor, seek the marginalized, shelter the homeless, and challenge religious and civil structures which degrade, oppress, and cast away people. Hospitality, by nature, is subversive as it restores creation through seemingly minor and simple actions which effect healing, health, and wholeness. Practitioners of hospitality take on the ministry of Christ fashioning their lives and

choices after his, attending to the needs of others, trusting in the abundance of God, and living in rhythm with God's work in the world. Hospitality is not ministry engaged for its own sake, nor for the numerical benefit of heaven. Hospitality is God at work in the world restoring creation through common people in common places making extraordinary choices for extraordinary results. Hospitality engages the Table Ministry of Christ in the world inviting all who would dine to come and partake of God's lavish abundance. Hospitality sees the Kingdom of God as the Creator's restored gathering with humanity taking form around the Banquet Table as it is both present now and coming in the future. Hospitality understands that the work of the Incarnation happened not so God could merely die, but that God could walk and talk with humanity showing us how to live into the life God has for us and to invite us into that ministry of restoration and co-creation. Hospitality, attentive to God, invites and welcomes all who would come and dine at the Banquet Table co-creating the Kingdom of God as it pushes out into the liminal places of the world where strangers are welcomed, guests become hosts, and the Body of Christ continues to incarnate the presence of God in this world. The Banquet Table, the Kingdom of God, and the Incarnation of God on earth together form the ministry of hospitality—an image large enough for a wild, creative, and passionate God to love the whole of creation into healing, wholeness, and restoration—and to invite us to join in the fun.

Hospitality: An Introduction

Long time practitioner of hospitality and social ethics professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, Christine Pohl notes, “today most understandings of hospitality

have a minimal moral component—hospitality is a nice extra if we have the time or the resources, but we rarely view it as a spiritual obligation or as a dynamic expression of vibrant Christianity.”¹ She then goes on in her book, *Making Room*, to explore the theology, history, and ethical concerns of hospitality. Published sixteen years ago, this book remains a watershed work on the theology of hospitality. Exploring and implementing a contemporary theology of hospitality necessitates a thorough reading of this book as well as an exploration into a small body of works which seek to understand, explore, and further the life of hospitality within the Christian faith. If the reader assumes that all theological works and applications must, by necessity, be the same for all believers, then there remains a certain amount of division, even among authors who appear to respect one another, as to what our motivations for hospitality ought to be and to whom they ought to be primarily addressed. If, however, the reader willingly gives up his/her right to choose what right theology and practice looks like universally, to allow God to guide the day to day specifics on local hospitality, then current and historical works give ample space and stories to begin building a personal, community-based theology out of which to practice hospitality.

Hospitality rightly falls within the center of contemporary discussions on community, presence, practices, liminal space, tolerance, success, failure, strangers, and differences. Hospitality reveals the Incarnation and the Table Ministry of the Kingdom of God beyond our common, simple, human-centered theologies. Hospitality also fully engages the absurdity of prosperity theology; the fallacy of the church growth movement; the failure of ecological stewardship; and the travesty of colonialism, racism, sexism, and

¹ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 4.

ageism. Hospitality, biblically defined and pursued, plunges us into the depths of God's incarnate redemptive work in the world bringing forth the Kingdom. While our fears, apathy, and loss of a collective community Christian story worth living have caused us to all but forget hospitality in our affluent, addictive, and narcissistic American church culture, God's love continues to recklessly burst into our world, surprising our cultural expectations and defying our theological assumptions. The One who creates, knows, loves, and calls each one of us by name simultaneously draws us into the Triune dance to know and be known and to join in the on-going and co-creative redemptive work of God's hospitality in the world. While the Protestant church has narrowly defined the primary work of God in the world as individuality-centered evangelism, a more holistic view of Scriptures and orthodoxy reveals that God's work is community-centered and redemptive of all creation. In this, a faithful heart is compelled to ask whether an individually-focused faith tradition and its corresponding individuality-obsessed culture may have lost its way, wedded as they are to each other. What if salvation is not about me? What if God is at work within the whole of creation? Even more, what if God truly does invite us into the work of redemption, incarnation, and co-creation? If salvation, rightly, is more than God poaching one sinner at a time for heaven, then the work of hospitality moves to the center of faithful living. God's welcoming love and care for each one of us becomes the invitation and calling to welcome one stranger and then another and then another into Table Ministry. Parallel to this, co-creation and redemption, holistically understood within the Scriptures and the traditions of historical faith, reveal hospitality as the central call and work of the Kingdom of God as the Body of Christ incarnates not just the mission, but the being of Christ on earth.

Hospitality Defined

Hospitality itself can be very simply defined as intentional acts that welcome and provide resources for one who is previously unknown. Hospitality also entails “caring for a shared space,”² “participation in the life of God,”³ and “human exchanges that restore the spirit.”⁴ Practitioners and theorists of hospitality all speak to several basic components of hospitality as well as several common pitfalls in hospitality. Within both the theology and practice of hospitality, Henri Nouwen is often used as a launching point for discussion. In *Reaching Out*, Nouwen states,

At first the word “hospitality” might evoke the image of soft sweet kindness, tea parties, bland conversations and a general atmosphere of coziness. Probably this has its good reasons since in our culture the concept of hospitality has lost much of its power and is often used in circles where we are more prone to expect a watered down piety than a serious search for an authentic Christian spirituality. But still, if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality. It is one of the richest biblical terms that can deepen and broaden our insight in our relationships to our fellow human beings.⁵

By necessity, hospitality includes at least two people: a host and a guest. These people meet in what Matthews calls “shared space”⁶ where they interact and the host welcomes

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

³ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*, The Christian Practice of Everyday Life (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 13.

⁴ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 1.

⁵ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 66.

⁶ Victor H. Matthews, "Physical Space, Imagined Space, and "Lived Space" in Ancient Israel," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 33, no. 1 (2003).

the guest to be who they are, not to pretend to be something other. This act, while it occurs between two people, or a small group of people, is always included within the larger story of hospitality, somewhere between the community of faith which nurtures these actions and the individuals welcoming others.⁷ Elizabeth Newman notes, “it is a mistake to imagine hospitality as an isolated activity done by an individual.”⁸ While hospitality for us today conjures up images of hotels, restaurants, and perfectly manicured tables, Pohl reminds us that “welcoming strangers into a home and offering them food, shelter, and protection were the key components in the practice of hospitality.”⁹ She goes on to remind us that

in many other societies – and in a few distinct communities in our own society – hospitality to strangers remains a highly valued moral practice, an important expression of kindness, mutual aid, neighborliness, and response to the life of faith. But even those of us who do not depend on hospitality for basic needs know something of the joy of being welcomed warmly. We also know the pain of being excluded. Although hospitality has lost much of its earlier significance, memories and feelings associated with it can still be very powerful.¹⁰

This is a timely reminder. As Newman notes, “If we locate hospitality fully in the Christian story as embodied in the church and its worship, rather than in other stories and ideologies, we will begin to recover a sense of how extraordinary Christian hospitality really is.”¹¹

The “liminal zone” is a key concept within hospitality. The liminal zone is the place where guest and host meet. It is the place where we act out hospitality as a

⁷ Pohl, 12.

⁸ Newman, 19.

⁹ Pohl, 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Newman, 14.

reflection of God's hospitality to us and as a partnership with the work God is doing in establishing the Kingdom of God within our midst. Within liminal spaces, the host knows his or herself to also be a guest and the guest comes to know that he or she becomes a host as the gift of self is shared. "Created is a liminal zone of mutual sharing, a kind of covenantal exchange that both receives and gives. In this exchange something counterintuitive happens. As the host gives to the guest, the host paradoxically gains a gift, unexpectedly becoming more than he or she was before."¹² Within liminal spaces, at the edge of the Kingdom of God, true hospitality does not minister to unknowns. It ministers to individuals who become known as unique individuals. "Hospitality welcomes 'the stranger' as one worthy of being considered a household member, marking a willingness to make room for another's unique presence."¹³ As a result, hospitality does not merely tolerate another person, it "eagerly engages the other."¹⁴ "Within acts of hospitality, needs are met, but hospitality is truncated if it does not go beyond physical needs" because it also provides "people with the human connections that give them a place in the world."¹⁵

The exact practice and purpose of hospitality as it is implemented in real life, its relationship to and within the Kingdom of God, and the very nature of the Kingdom of God within time and space becomes the crux of the concerns on which theorists and practitioners somewhat differ:

¹² Thomas E. Reynolds, "Welcoming without Reserve? A Case in Christian Hospitality," *Theology Today* 63, no. 2 (2006): 198.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁴ Ralph C. Wood, "Hospitality as the Gift Greater Than Tolerance," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought & Culture* 12, no. 4 (2009): 165.

¹⁵ Pohl, 31, 48.

For years, Christians have struggled with how to understand what living in community means. What does it mean to be a guest or a host? How should one respond to strangers, exiles, and the imprisoned? What are the boundaries of my obligations? Are they set by physical or social markers (my house, my street, my family, my country) or are they nondeterminate? These questions are so dogged that it is virtually impossible to find a theologian who has not argued that hospitality was an essential mark of what it means to be a Christian.¹⁶

Heirs of our Protestant, American culture, bombarded by the real, practical concerns of hospitality, we are tempted to control the definitions, structures, and outcomes of hospitality and the Kingdom of God, to define them in terms of failure or success. Amy Oden notes that mining the depths of the stories, theology, and writings on hospitality and the Kingdom of God give ample room for the imagination and for God's abundance if we allow ourselves to plunge into the mystery of God:

Rather than try to determine an official position on hospitality, we can listen to the many stories the mothers and fathers in the faith have to tell about the many ways hospitality has been enacted within the Christian community. ... we must simply step back and let them have the floor. They not only tell us stories about hospitality and its embodiment, they also articulate a well-developed spiritual and moral economy in which hospitality thrives.¹⁷

Immersion into the Triune Dance and co-creation of the Kingdom requires that we not only allow stories to speak, it also requires that we step back from our cultural assumptions and allow a variety of questions to remain unanswered or allow the questions to yield a variety of equally correct answers, all within the mystery of God's being and incarnation.

Hospitality & the Bible

¹⁶ Sutherland, xi-xii.

¹⁷ Amy Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 29.

Individual acts of hospitality do not occur within a vacuum; rather, they stand firm in the stream of God's continuing, creative, redemptive work in the world. Walter Brueggemann notes, "These encounters with individual persons are characteristically not ends in themselves, but concern Yahweh's larger purposes. Individual persons are recruited for great risks."¹⁸ Abraham is considered the quintessential host within the Jewish and Christian faith traditions. All the streams of thought and theological controversy within hospitality flow back to the various retellings and interpretations of Genesis 18. Andrew Arterbury contends that "there is a growing need for a more complete understanding of the custom of hospitality in antiquity as illustrated by ancient sources."¹⁹ Abraham, resting outside his tent, looks up to see three strangers approaching. He welcomes the guests. He and Sarah then hurry to provide refreshment and nourishment for the travelers. In the course of conversation, Abraham is told his promised son will arrive. What is at stake is the manner and speed with which Abraham greets his guests, the fact that they are unknown to him yet welcomed warmly and deserving of the best Abraham had to offer, and the "gift" or news of the promised son which the guests bring.

When we look at the story of Abraham within hospitality, we see he lived and acted out of physical, cultural, and spiritual spaces. Matthews notes,

Yet another way of marking off space can be found in the protocol for hospitality, which is so much a part of the obligation to maintain social reciprocity in the ancient and modern Middle East. Hospitality customs originated as a form of

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 572.

¹⁹ Andrew E. Arterbury, "Abraham's Hospitality among Jewish and Early Christian Writers: A Tradition History of Gen 18:1-16 and Its Relevance for the Study of the New Testament," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30, no. 3 (2003): 53.

social responsibility, an expected behavior in which travelers/strangers are provided with food, water and rest by their host.²⁰

Buried within this expectation, however, became a principle and lived-out example of hospitality which was taught to later generations of Israelites. The law required caring for aliens and strangers. Abraham welcomed and cared for strangers. Abraham was the “father” of the Israelite nation. What better example could the people have? John Koenig notes that Abraham was often singled out as the ideal picture of hospitality.²¹ Arterbury traces this story through its multiple retellings and recontextualizations through Jewish and Christian history from Philo to Clement because he is “primarily interested in how Jewish and Christian writers built upon, altered, and utilized this story for their own purposes.”²² He finds Abraham became a “living law” from Philo onward. In Hebrews 13:2 the Early Church was

exhorted to live out something they already know to do ... based upon the tradition history of the story of Abraham’s hospitality, it is reasonable to assume that the recipients would not have considered hospitality to strangers to be an optional gesture. ... Thus, the tradition of Abraham’s hospitality appears to have taught Jews and early Christians that they were supposed to extend hospitality to strangers.²³

Some Old Testament scholars, on the other hand, seem frustrated with the reinterpretations of Genesis 18. Hobbs points out that Abraham merely acted within the accepted, standard practice of ancient near eastern nomadic hospitality. He contends that

²⁰ Matthews: 15.

²¹ Koenig, 15.

²² Arterbury: 359.

²³ Ibid., 376.

Abraham's actions really only had "to do with honor."²⁴ He reminds us when nomads invited strangers in they turned potential enemies into guests bound by the rules of hospitality:

Cultural and social meanings have little to do with the ancient Mediterranean notions of food and shelter that are implied in the First Testament stories of hospitality. ... in small-scale societies morality functions more as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself. It would be important to bear in mind this 'functional' aspect of hospitality when dealing with this topic in relation to the world of the First Testament. ... Hospitality in the way it was practiced in ancient Israel/Judah had little to do with the modern practice.²⁵

This fundamental disagreement among scholars as to Abraham's motivation and his choice in welcoming the strangers coupled with God's written Law to Moses regarding the treatment of aliens and strangers in the land brings us to the crux of this discord. Who then is a stranger? The answer to this question partially determines to whom we are required to act out in hospitality. Within the layers of hospitality we know we are to welcome all as we ourselves have been welcomed by God, but Old Testament law included specific commands for extra care given to strangers. In our current culture, strangers frighten us profoundly and frequently constrict our hearts and minds into complete inaction rather than attentive care and concern.

The Old Testament Law, given while the Israelites were wandering in the desert, provided protection and resources for aliens and strangers living among the people²⁶ as well as those in "powerless groups" including widows, orphans, freed slaves, and

²⁴ T. Raymond Hobbs, "Hospitality in the First Testament and the 'Teleological Fallacy'," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 95 (2001): 29.

²⁵ Ibid., 8.

²⁶ Lev. 19:9-10, 33-34.

strangers.²⁷ Pohl, Newman, and other practitioners of hospitality interpret the concept of “stranger” to include immigrants and refugees. They further point out that it is the Egyptian sojourn and desert experience itself of Israel which God uses to teach the Israelites that “the experience of marginality” is “normative for the people of God.”²⁸ Reynolds notes, “The resounding message is this: As the covenanted people of God were themselves aliens, and remain vulnerable sojourners with God, provided for and loved by God (Lev 25:23), so too they should love others. The memory of being an outsider and subsequently being welcomed thus provides impetus to empathize with other outsiders.”²⁹ Hobbs, however, again disagrees. He points out that what we would now classify as migrants and immigrants are cared for under parts of the law and so the term “stranger” is used as a “romantic notion” and not accurately used in application to refugees.³⁰ He summarizes the Old Testament law and Abraham’s action noting that

hospitality, then, is directed at those relatively unknown travelers who are assumed to be members of one’s larger community, but not immediately recognized as such. In no cases are threatening foreigners (*nokrîm*) or resident aliens (*gērîm*) offered hospitality. Universalization of the practice, so that it might suit later altruistic agendas, is not a helpful interpretation of the First Testament.³¹

With this fundamental level of disagreement, it can be frustrating sorting out the practical application of hospitality if we confine ourselves to structures and categories. However, God breaks into our world in outrageous abundance as Christ welcomes both Jew and Gentile, stranger and friend, rich and poor to the Banquet Table.

²⁷ Matthews: 13.

²⁸ Pohl, 105.

²⁹ Reynolds: 197.

³⁰ Hobbs: 18.

³¹ Ibid., 24.

More important than Abraham or discussions regarding the stranger is the example of Christ. What did Jesus teach and live out during his sojourn on earth? Who did Jesus welcome? It is quickly evident that Jesus took the Jewish people, even with their high regard of Abraham, to task over their lack of hospitality. Jesus turned every meal into a celebration, he believed all should be included, and he harshly condemned those who excluded others on the basis of commonly accepted stereotypes or infractions against the Law. In short, Jesus lived as a non-conformist and “seems to have acted as a catalyst for unusual rejoicing.”³² As Jesus taught, he used parables and held up specific people as examples of what he called the “Kingdom of God,” where God’s rich abundance welcomed all who would heed the invitation, come, and partake of the Banquet Table. Koenig notes that for Jesus “the kingdom takes precedence over everything else” and “the images of God’s kingdom that predominate overwhelmingly in Jesus’ teaching are those associated with the production of food and drink or homelike refuge for God’s creatures.”³³

Hospitality & the Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God which Jesus describes is a wonder, a mystery, and a paradox all rolled up into one. “The paradox is indeed that new life is born out of the pains of the old. ...when Jesus asks us to take up our cross and follow him (Mark 8:34) we are invited to reach out far beyond our broken and sinful condition and give shape to a

³² Koenig, 27.

³³ Ibid.

life that intimates the great things that are prepared for us.”³⁴ The Kingdom of God is not merely coming, it is also present. While preparing for it, we also live into it. “We do not create or introduce the kingdom. The kingdom of God is within and all around his followers, who joined together to incarnate the image of God through Jesus Christ.”³⁵ While Jesus will return and eat with us in the future at the Banquet Table, the Holy Spirit even now welcomes others through us to the feast God provides for us today. This is the heart of true hospitality. Our act of welcoming another person is a portal, an invitation for him or her to come and dine today at God’s table. Participation has nothing to do with securing salvation; rather, it ushers guests into a space where they experience the tangible love of God and come to know God’s welcome. At the edges of this Kingdom, as we welcome guests, we push the boundaries of the Kingdom further and further out into the world.³⁶ Indeed, hospitality is the heart and soul of the Kingdom of God. Regardless of how we define the word “stranger” and whether we justify their care under rules of the Law or hospitality, we know that Christ consistently lives in the liminal spaces of humanity, Christ invites all to the Banquet Table, and the Creator God invites us to share the co-creating, in-breaking work of the Kingdom of God.

When the boundaries to the Kingdom of God expand through liminal spaces, strangers become friends and enemies become allies. Ironically, the more we give, the more we find that the riches of God’s abundance overflow so that there is enough for former guests to become hosts and to welcome in their own strangers. Somehow, in this

³⁴ Nouwen, 19.

³⁵ MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space and Influence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 28.

³⁶ Koenig, 9, 36.

process of sharing and serving, being served and loved, “the abundance of God opens up new possibilities for sharing, and a restored humanity begins to take shape.”³⁷ The Kingdom of God also becomes a place of community, a place of healing. The salvation that comes is a deeper, richer, more formative change. This is most clearly seen in the “stranger.” Once we were all strangers.³⁸ One by one we come into the Kingdom to be known and loved. Rohr reminds us we go together, not apart.³⁹ Still we find this to be disorienting. It defies the notions on which we base our cultural rules of who is “in” or “out.”

The effect is subversive. It disorients and overturns standards of value founded upon status, race, gender, or religion The model of hospitality dramatized by Jesus, therefore, undercuts self-righteousness or self-protection, postures that treat with condescension, suspicion, or outright hostility those others—those outsiders—whose difference threatens the status quo. The stranger, the despised, the poor, the unclean, and the sick are all invited into the household of God. Radical implications follow. ... This identification affirms humanity to the core by embracing it at its most vulnerable points. It disrupts the human tendency to secure itself by strength, power, domination, wealth, status, and even religious association. ... Matthew’s Jesus states it bluntly: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (25:40).⁴⁰

In the midst of all being welcome to come to the banquet table, we find that Jesus does put forth some limitations.⁴¹ The invitation must be responded to—God will not force the presence of anyone in the Kingdom. Additionally, those at the table or ministering in the

³⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁸ Lev. 19:34; Eph. 2.

³⁹ Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 50.

⁴⁰ Reynolds: 199.

⁴¹ Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Hell and Hospitality,” *Word & World* 31, no. 1 (2011): 13.

name of Christ are expected to welcome others to the table.⁴² Amy Pauw points out the consequences of non-participation and inhospitality are severe:

The refusal of table fellowship is one of the most haunting images of divine judgment in Scripture, with damnation often depicted in terms of God's ultimate inhospitality. God's practice of hospitality demands from us a hospitable response. The eschatological warnings reflect the urgency of a hospitable response to divine hospitality, a "saying yes" that affects both our relationships to God and to neighbor. There is a deep congruity between God's yes to us and our neighbor, and our yes in response.⁴³

As we welcome guests we struggle with our own limitations, our own finiteness in the face of overwhelming oppression, hunger, and loneliness. All practitioners agree: we are not God, we cannot minister to everyone, but God invites and compels us as co-creators to join in ushering in the Kingdom and gathering around the Banquet Table.

Hospitality & Table Ministry

Food is central to the Kingdom of God. A lavish Banquet Table welcomes all who respond both in the parables of Jesus and in the present and coming reality of the Kingdom of God. The Table is a place that our shared humanity can nourish our bodies and our souls and God's abundance over-flows. We know Christ as both human sojourner needing a host and as the ultimate divine host inviting each of us to God's Table.⁴⁴ As the disciples, we too find that we must take up "the table ministry of Christ."⁴⁵ We can agree with G.K. Chesterton that hospitality is not tolerance. We do not "put up with others;"

⁴² Matt. 25:31-46.

⁴³ Pauw: 14-15.

⁴⁴ Lucien Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 31.

⁴⁵ Koenig, 41.

rather, we “put them up” where even “potential enemies are guests and thus our potential friends.”⁴⁶ “Christian hospitality is not a ‘lifestyle’ but a way of life in which we allow our desires, tastes, and choices to be formed by the drama of God’s grace-filled kingdom in our midst.”⁴⁷ Working with youth retreats hosted by a Benedictine monastery, Lonni Pratt reflects,

We’re accustomed to easy answers. Hospitality is not an easy answer. It requires that we take a chance and we change. It requires us to grow. The moment we engage with another person, everything gets messy. Our time becomes not quite our own; we can count on others interrupting us. We become subject to a whole hoard of emotional dangers. Because hospitality always involves giving something of ourselves to others, it is a spiritual practice. Spirituality is about relationship. When you and I become confused about the meaning of spirituality, remembering that spirituality is about relationship will bring us back to the basics: relationships.⁴⁸

Paul reminds the Corinthian church that the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God,⁴⁹ but the Incarnation, the foolishness of the cross, is the power of God.⁵⁰ Food for all? An over-flowing Banquet Table in the midst of a dry and weary world? What is a more foolish image to lie at the center of God’s welcoming love for us? A bountiful table. An engraved personal invitation. An opportunity to become a host and invite our own guests. “Chesterton believed that only those art forms that have the destabilizing power of farce and mime and even melodrama can capture the Gospel’s outrageousness, its fantastic eccentricity, its scandalously joyful claim that God himself has entered the human fray in

⁴⁶ Wood: 164.

⁴⁷ Newman, 30.

⁴⁸ Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, New expanded ed. (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011), 72.

⁴⁹ I Cor. 3:19a.

⁵⁰ I Cor. 1:18.

Jesus Christ and his Church.”⁵¹ The Cross is a scandal. God as a helpless baby is ridiculous. Abundant food in a world of abject poverty is a farce. And God’s hospitable love, which welcomes and bids us to come and dine, to heal, and to be made whole, is the greatest power in the world.

Hospitality & the Incarnation

The Israelite nation anticipated a mighty king. The God of Yahweh was conqueror and defender. The birth of Jesus as a helpless baby painted a new picture of God for the people of God. This baby needed clothes, food, and shelter—the hospitality—of a working class couple. No riches. No apparent birthright. No throne. No sword. This baby grew up with siblings, made friends, and learned a trade. God came to earth not to right wrongs, not to establish a people. God came to earth to live a human life and die a human death that we might see, taste, hear, and know Life itself. The Incarnation of God as a common person contrasted with the mighty and sovereign works of Yahweh. Whereas the Old Testament texts never tried to justify the intrusive or potentially destructive acts of Yahweh,⁵² the Church has tried to embrace and swaddle baby Jesus so tightly the Incarnation has no room to grow. The Incarnation brought restoration not through death, but through the restorative work of Life. Jesus ate, drank, and partied with friends, enemies, and social outcasts. Jesus taught his disciples, men and women alike, to grow attentive and responsive to the very real and human needs around them. He created miracles of abundance to demonstrate the rich and inviting nature of

⁵¹ Wood: 166.

⁵² Brueggemann, 540.

God's Banquet Table—then he invited them to participate in those miracles. The incarnation show-cased not the depravity of fallen humanity, but the restorative and inviting, lavish and abundant, generous and free, love of the Creator God for humanity. The Incarnation draws us in wonder and amazement not because it dazzles us or overwhelms us with its brilliance far beyond us; rather, it compels our attention by its absurdity. God as a baby? The Creator as creation? Life in the midst of apparent death?

The Table Ministry of Christ within the Kingdom of God reminds us that we are the Body of Christ incarnate still in the world today. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”⁵³ The Word came in flesh. Christ lived, died, and returned to the Father not that we might fret our existence or embrace religious acts of piety to draw others to faith with only a future reward; rather, Christ came to show us, in human form, the restoration of God, here and now. Christ came to invite us into common, human work with eternal significance:

Nowhere is the theme of reciprocity of relationships more evident than in the incarnation. Incarnation is God's ultimate missional participation in human life. The Word was made flesh in Jesus Christ, and the church as the body of Christ must continue to be enfleshed in every human culture and moment in mission. Yet the church's incarnate ministry is not merely an imitation of what Jesus did; it is a participation in a much larger movement in which God is the primary actor.⁵⁴

Through his death, Christ broke the human bondage to death, but through his life, he invites us into the restoration of Creation. Hospitality does not minister or act in order to draw people into the Church; rather, hospitality welcomes the stranger, feeds the hungry,

⁵³ John 1:14.

⁵⁴ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 114.

and shelters the homeless that we might join Christ, as the Body of Christ present in the world today, co-creating the Kingdom of God. The redemption of the world did not happen in the past that we might experience it in the future; rather, the God who exists apart from time as a human construct, walked upon this earth to invite here and now to step into the restoration of humanity that is both present and coming. God chose to come incarnate, to enter the world in flesh, that we might have eyes to see the Creator's vision for God and humanity dwelling again together—eating, drinking, laughing, and enjoying friendship.

Hospitality & Spirituality

As God's creative and redeeming work in the world, acts of hospitality never simply just happen; rather, they are conscious and unconscious responses to the creative impulses endowed within each individual. The Imago Dei draws us into both community and creativity as activities resonant with our created form. "It's impossible to discuss true hospitality without delving into spirituality. Real hospitality isn't about what we do—it's about who we are."⁵⁵ Created to be creators in community and called to co-create the Kingdom of God, we easily engage the simple practices of hospitality with family or friends: a smile, a hug, a shared meal, a conversation. While, as fallen and fearful creatures, we easily welcome those like us, we wrestle with welcoming a stranger. What if she hurts us? What is his intention? I am uncomfortable or busy. Can it wait? As fallen humanity, living redeemed, awaiting the final consolation, spirituality calls us back to the

⁵⁵ Pratt and Homan, 4.

deeper truths of faith and out into the liminal spaces on the edges of the Kingdom of God beyond the light around the Banquet Table. Faith is not merely religion. Religion fits easily with a human culture; rather, faith requires both abandonment and trust. Hospitality within the Kingdom of God knows “faith is more than learning to live in the reality of God’s invisible presence. Rather, faith is living in the reality of God’s visible presence.”⁵⁶ Faith gives God permission to be wild and free. Faith binds us in obedient harmony to the Creator’s design. Joan Chittister, living in a Benedictine cloister, reminds us, “The spiritual life takes discipline. It is something to be learned, to be internalized. It’s not a set of daily exercises; it’s a way of life, an attitude of mind, an orientation of soul. And it is gotten by being schooled until no rules are necessary.”⁵⁷ Many of the disciplines of faith are uncomfortable, foreign and threatening to the Protestant love of freedom and self-determination. “Benedictine spirituality says that if you want to be whole, you have to let the other in”⁵⁸ because a “Benedictine is not merely gracious; he is available.”⁵⁹ The question for disciples today remains, are you available? Are you prepared? What practices of faith form the discipline of your life? “God’s call to hospitality is one of the specifics within the general call to discipleship. Hospitality is an essential part of being a disciple.”⁶⁰ Whether we live in a cloister or surrounded by the

⁵⁶ Leonard I. Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 93.

⁵⁷ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (New York: Crossroad, 2010), 21.

⁵⁸ Pratt and Homan, 52.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁰ Michele Hershberger, *A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises*, The Giving Project Series (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 129.

freedom of our culture, to live in faith binds us into practices which enable welcoming the stranger among us through personal and specific acts of hospitality.

Disciplined immersion in the practices of faith draw us deeper into the Triune Dance, they open our hearts and ears to the rhythms of God, they reveal the Imago Dei in our created beings, and they expose the lies of our broken souls to the fiery redeeming and healing love of God. The practices of faith enable us to become present to ourselves, to God, and to the people around us. They give us eyes to see the celebration at the Banquet Table, but they also illuminate the dark liminal spaces in our hearts and at the edges of the Kingdom where Christ beckons us to follow. Both in the darkness and around the Table, we are equally given opportunities to be present to our own soul and to the people in our lives. Presence has become increasingly challenging with the rise of easily accessible distractions such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter feeds. Living in an instant world has atrophied our hearts and souls to the expanse of space and time. Presence beckons us to create an open space in which we simply welcome another person. Just you. Just me. A space where guest and host meet. A space where a stranger can become a friend. A space where we attend to God's presence. "Hospitality is a way to help others discover their true selves. They need to see that precious person reflected in your eyes sometimes, before they can believe it for themselves."⁶¹ Jesus' life models presence for us. He was aware, attentive, and welcoming both to his own relationship with the Father and in creating space to attend to those around him. Szews notes,

One of the amazing things Jesus did while he walked among us was to assert that the kingdom of God is disclosed in the ordinary and likable events of daily life. Bread broken and shared, a cup passed among friends, the emotional attachment of a woman to her wedding coins, the poor, the pain of death, the very breath of

⁶¹ Pratt and Homan, 199.

life became paradigmatic of the new order Jesus preached. How good (and unsettling) it must have been to hear that news. No one was excluded by lack of knowledge, experience, or station in life. God's kingdom was not so far off as everyone thought, as they had always been told.⁶²

Presence allows us to minister in ways that co-create, honoring the Creator and the creation. Presence illuminates the Kingdom of God. Presence draws the stranger to the Table and the self deeper into the Dance.

Hospitality: God as First Host

Within the work and presence of hospitality, we experience the living, breathing reality of the Triune God. The Father God who broke into the history of the Israelite people, calling forth Abraham and Sarah to a new land, to establish a new people; Jesus the Son who interrupted human history as God incarnated upon the earth, helpless as a baby with human parents, inviting as a man all who were weak, who hungered for the God of Abraham to come and feast at the Banquet Table; and the Spirit God whose presence was unleashed on the early followers of Christ, the very breath of God drawing in and binding human hearts and lives into the Triune God:

From the beginning, God eternally poured all of Himself and his Son by the Spirit, and the Son eternally poured Himself into his Father by the Spirit. Immanuel Kant could not have been more wrong when he wrote dismissively of the Trinity in the eighteenth century, "The Trinity has got no relevance to practical living." The eternal dance of divine life, love, communion, participation, self-emptying within the triune God is central to the Christian life, to ministry, to the community of faith and the faithfulness of its mission.

⁶² George R. Szews, "Ministers of Hospitality and Greeting," *Liturgy* 1, no. 4 (1981): 21.

It is only through Jesus Christ that we enter into this eternal dance. And it is only through Christ that we come to know the triune God and the loving fellowship of the Father, Son, and Spirit.⁶³

As Newman notes, God's triune hospitality is "at once extraordinary and strange."⁶⁴

Compared with the gods of human religions, who are self-serving at best and abusive of humans at worst, the God of Abraham is not crafted in the likeness of humanity or limited to the small window of finite reality, the Creator God is generous, lavish, recklessly in love with the Creation, passionately hopeful that humanity will join in the grand interdependent relationship of Creation. "God's presence gives courage for the risk hospitality entails"⁶⁵ as "God's own life involves the circulation of gift."⁶⁶ "The images, metaphor and stories of the triune God fund Christian moral imaginations in a way that enable a different construal of the world that has transforming potential."⁶⁷ While western culture, today embodied in primarily Protestant faith traditions and the Catholic Church, assumes distinct and separate, individual identities as the primary locus of understanding the Godhead, the Orthodox Church focuses on the interrelationship with the Triune God, the perichoresis which conveys "a hospitable participation between the divine 'persons.'"⁶⁸ Eyeing the relationship, rather than the humanly comforting idea of

⁶³ Leonard I. Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 161-162. Kant explores the Trinity in his book Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties = Der Streit Der Fakultäten*, trans., Mary J. Gregor, Janus Series (New York: Abaris Books, 1979).

⁶⁴ Newman, 15.

⁶⁵ Amy Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 20.

⁶⁶ Newman, 142.

⁶⁷ Robert Vosloo, "Identity, Otherness and the Triune God: Theological Groundwork for a Christian Ethic of Hospitality," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 119 (2004): 83.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

separateness, the Orthodox Church offers a gift of vision, an ancient way of seeing not only God, but understanding ourselves and God together within the Dance of the Divine:

Many Trinitarian theologians view the doctrine of the perichoresis as a creative image for portraying both relatedness and particularity, both identity and otherness. ... It calls up the image of the Triune identity as not a self-enclosed identity but as a self-giving and other-receiving identity. If we believe that humans are created in the image of this triune God, these perichoretic relationships serve as a powerful model and source for lives that challenge the notions of the isolated individual, enclosed identity and cozy homogeneity. Furthermore, the notion of *perichoresis* is a rich spatial notion that implies movement and mobility.⁶⁹

If God is indeed more than “just friends” within the Godhead, if the Trinity truly yearns to draw humanity into the on-going life of God, if humans are willing to be more than just “me,” then new, deep, and unfathomable depths emerge. Hospitality becomes the lifeblood of relationship, relationship becomes the core of our human identity, and the Kingdom of God breaks forth on the earth as humans enter into a Garden relationship with their wild and passionate Creator.

Hospitality: Our Part in God's Work of Restoration

Many of the constructs of hospitality seem simple and clear; many of the visions of humanity, strangers, community, the Triune Dance, the Incarnation, Table Ministry, the Banquet Table, and the Kingdom of God resonate with the deeper streams of spirituality. Day to day life, however, coupled with a fractured, self-serving, and an, ultimately, ungratifying Protestant Judeo-Christian ethic, continuously distracts us both from the life God offers and Christ came to redeem and from the practices and presence

⁶⁹ Ibid.

wherein we find and experience God in ourselves, God in the stranger, and ourselves together in the life-breathing, incarnate life of God on earth. “When Jesus invites us into the dance he asked us to embrace our creative and whole selves and then to share those selves with others in the circle. To be in the Jesus dance of life is to be part of the *imago dei*—the image of God—in the universe.”⁷⁰ “The body of Jesus becomes a whirling life force, wherein each member of the growing body becomes aligned with Christ and at one with God. The implication of the dance of the Trinity is that all persons dance a dance of mutual love, breathe together the breath of life, and pour out to one another in mutual giving.”⁷¹ Our fallen, human nature draws us back into ourselves, living for ourselves alone, fearful of the stranger and the unknown. Deeply embedded within us lies a consuming desire to know and understand all things. So unwilling are we to live as finite creatures, infinitely loved. We still grasp for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Daily we continue to commit the same sin of Adam and Eve. We want to know, we need to know, before we will consent to live in peace and relationship with the Creator. But to know all is to be God and we will never be God. The Creator yearns for us to willingly or even fearfully re-enter the Garden, to join in the Dance, to learn to live content as humanity and in that to discover our true humanity mysteriously and outrageously swirled up with and within the Divine. The perichoresis beckons us with brilliant color, laughter, and light to join the feast at the Banquet Table, to grasp the Divine with one hand and a stranger with the other. To be caught up in Life itself.

⁷⁰ Leonard I. Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 227.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Hospitality is the work of Life. The Kingdom of God is the presence of Life. The Garden re-created, beckons and welcomes all who will re-enter. The Banquet Table nourishes our souls and continues to give lavishly that we may, in turn, generously welcome strangers and friends alike to join us. Table Ministry embraces our cooperation and co-creation with the Divine, bringing forth the Kingdom further and further into liminal spaces. Strangers are welcomed; guests are hosted; guests become hosts; and Christ is known powerfully and personally as guest, host, and the meal itself. The Incarnation challenges and comforts us with God's presence in the world and our continued presence as the Body of Christ in the world. Human constructs of community, swirling around selfish desires to get more for the self than giving to others, are abandoned as cheap and life-draining imitations of the Divine Community, the Dance where all enter shattered by pure love and bursting forth with love for others. Tolerance explodes as the lie of a pluralistic culture too cheap and lazy to love the stranger, to recognize the breath of God in another person. The Dance clearly reveals that God revels in each being, never settling for the mere body of a person, but longing for the soul of that person to enter the Dance, aware and celebratory of the created differences in each one. The differences, lavishly endowed by the Creator God, blaze forth in the Dance, as the colors and textures of the tapestry, a rich reflection of the Creator God. Within the Kingdom, hospitable invitations and forays into liminal spaces know neither failure nor success. Passionate love keeps no tally mark for how often or how long love flows until it is acknowledged, understood, or returned. The wisdom of God knows the limitations of human understanding. Surely, the created humanity will never succeed at pure divine knowledge or being. Pure love knows no such foolishness. That game, those structures

and constructs, reflects human design. Love is not a game nor can it be measured. It simply exists, exploding forth from the Creator. The paradoxes of divine mystery, the puzzles humans allow to distract their finite hearts and minds from the Dance, from the work of hospitality, are celebrated, living, pulsating mysteries within the Kingdom. God is larger? Grander? More powerful? More loving? More reckless? More than a dualistically-defined construct? Wonderful! Glorious! Within the Dance, paradox is the music of the Dance, the space-abounding depth of the relationship. Mystery is the heart of every relationship, ever-deepening the participants within each other.⁷² Through the practices of hospitality, God invites us to join in the work of redemption and co-creation, the rhythms of the Kingdom of God; searching out and welcoming in the stranger, attentive and aware both of our former presence as stranger and our new life as guest and host; over-flowing God's abundant love; and joining, hand-in-hand, the eternal Triune Dance.

Table Ministry, Incarnation, & the Kingdom of God: An Image of Hospitality Large Enough for Creation

Maybe the world has always been this way, but it seems like people are so much more disposable than ever before. We live in a time and culture where people teach and protest for the rights and freedoms of individuals. At the same time, we live in a place where the culture and church alike least value the actual people in their midst. In a world now filled with billions of people, we need a God and a vision of God's restoration of

⁷² Sweet and Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*, 85.

humanity large enough for the world that assaults us in the news and on social media every day. A world full of war, refugees, hunger, disease, and despair. Our God of history is too small, too cemented in past encounters, too constricted to expand as our vision of humanity and the world has expanded. We live in a global society with a single culture God. The Church has taught the Christian message for two thousand years, but we are much better speakers than participants. Hospitality is the work of the People of God. When we invite in the stranger, we embrace a different ethic than marginalization, ignorance, or feigned concern. When we believe that we are co-creating the Kingdom of God, we live as if God is with us not as if we are frittering away our time on religious activities until Christ finally returns. When we believe that God's resources abundantly exist for all, we freely share shunning the fear of running out. When we embrace our place within the incarnate Body of Christ in the world, we see more than our individualist selves, we know ourselves and our local community of faith as the hope of redemption and restoration on our street and in our neighborhood. What more could we want for ourselves and our disposable culture than the promise and reality that all, every one of us, is valued, sought after, and has a home—a forever home—where our differences and our gifts for ministry are gifts to own, to share, and to co-create the Kingdom of God.

When do we need an image large enough for a globalized world, a call to ministry and life, more than we do now? A Kingdom of God for all. All. Not just those the Church approves. All. Love and beloved of God. A Banquet Table. A table abundant and rich not with poisonous words or unkept promises, but abundant, over-flowing, free, and nourishing, life-giving, to all who dine. And an Incarnation. An affirmation that we are the Body of Christ. We are what God desires, God promised. Not the fractious, jealous,

destructive human church, but the Body of Christ, receptive, open, and generous. Hearts bound in love, acceptance, variety, and promise to be together, to be in the world, for the world, but so very much more. We in Christ and Christ in us still alive and active in the world. Not some far-flung promise. God here. God now. For us. God in love in us. God present to us. Hospitality needs a voice, a call, an image large enough for God's promise, God's plan, God's future for restored humanity. Hospitality needs ordinary practitioners living ordinary lives with extraordinary choices for an extraordinary reality. To become the Kingdom of God, today, here, now, we need an image, a vision large enough, beautiful enough, promising enough to draw us into the very real work and heart of God in and for our world. The call and work of hospitality offers us an image of the Table Ministry of Christ where we incarnate the Body of Christ in our world in such a way that the Kingdom of God restores humanity and creation as it expands across the earth, abundant and free, welcoming all who come and dine at the Table of the King.

Chapter 2

Biblical Materials

Hospitality & Biblical Material: An Introduction

While commonly practiced around the world in specific rituals, Christian hospitality specifically anchors itself in Jewish tradition and finds its home in Christ. Christian hospitality encompasses acts of graciousness, kindness, love, and mercy whereby we welcome another person into our personal space as co-hosts of God's space. Hospitality can be broadly defined as all acts of kindness attentive to the needs of others or strictly defined in cultural terms in reference only to strangers. While Biblical scholars such as Andrew Arterbury retain a narrow focus on recipients, for this study we will use a broader definition of hospitality. Looking to God as first and primary host, we find Christ inviting and welcoming unknown strangers, but also attentive to further welcoming and mentoring his friends. These multiple layers in hospitality between host and guest is also reflective of Table Ministry in the Kingdom of God where we are invited to dine by Christ, but then Christ invites us to invite and host a guest as we are invited to join the Triune Dance. A narrowly defined hospitality remains useful for knowledge comparison, but our study seeks to move our focus from knowledge to the work of hospitality offered us by God co-creating the Kingdom of God.

Gracious hospitality remains simply a moral construct unless firmly embedded within the Godhead. Simple hospitality will naturally remain limited to our comfort zone unless infused with the power and welcome of the Divine. Sadly, we have allowed hospitality to become a stale, impotent side-note of our Protestant faith tradition, rather

than remain a subversive force of restoration and recreation. Hospitality, rightly engaged within the Scriptures and streams of spirituality history, fiercely and faithfully engages established cultural and religious traditions which marginalize, condemn, and seek to forget the unknown, the stranger, the one who is different from us. “Christian hospitality is not a private effort separate from politics and economics. It is rather a practice at once ecclesial and public, embodying a politics, economics, and ethics at odds with dominant cultural assumptions.”⁷³ Infused with the power of God, co-creating the Kingdom of God on earth, hospitality, faithfully engaged, illuminates dark places; exposes and names the motives of hearts and cultural assumptions; seeks the lonely and forgotten; and illuminates the living, breathing reality of the Kingdom of God in the simple, daily, loving actions of faithful believers.

Hospitality within the Scriptures reflects a broad spectrum of cultural viewpoints, assumptions, and working interpretations. Genesis begins with God as the first and ultimate host creating a world and inviting into life the humanity breathed from God’s heart and mind. Strangely, theologians do not engage Creation as hospitality nor God as primary example of Host. They follow the Israelite tradition and look to Abraham with his encounters with the three strangers, Melchizedek, and Lot. Practitioners, on the other hand, acknowledge the Creator as Host, but quickly move to human material as well. This underlying assumption that humans need a human host to mentor and articulate God seems to put blinders on the material before we engage it. Brueggemann and Heschel offer substantive and necessary reminders of Yahweh which firmly anchor the restorative work of hospitality within the Old Testament and reveal its continuing power through the

⁷³ Newman, 14.

present. With the New Testament Christ, God Incarnate, enters human history. Common theology views Christ's work as redemptive whose practical result becomes humanity engaging in religious practices to grow heaven until God finally works again in human history and returns to establish a new heaven and earth from which to rule forever. Hospitality argued here challenges this lawn chair faith. Christ came not to die so we could all live a waiting game. Christ came to bring life. Christ calls us to live as the continued incarnate Body of Christ on earth. Our human lives are not wasted living in a fallen world; rather, Christ invites us to live common lives in common ways just as he, but making extraordinary choices for extraordinary results—Table Ministry in the Kingdom of God which was both inaugurated by Christ and also coming.

Old Testament Hospitality: Creation, the Flood, the Kings, & the Prophets

The very first story of the Old Testament is the most powerful story of hospitality, “In the beginning God created...and it was good.”⁷⁴ These words, repeated over and over, illuminate the Creator God, intentionally making space, good and gracious, loving and relationally open, in which to welcome the creation. This creation included not only humans, but also plants, animals, and all the supporting elements creation needed to survive. Made in the image of God, the Creator provided humanity with a particular welcome and relationship to God. The Imago Dei, God's reflection in us, endowed humanity with the capacity and need to live in community and to engage in creativity. Together creation lived as a symbiotic whole, separate, yet needing each other. God

⁷⁴ Gen. 1.

called the forms and relationships of creation “good.” First and primary host to humanity, God’s generous and creative heart produced abundant living and created forms. As lavish host, the Creator offered abundant gifts. “The very existence of human beings comes from God” as we live on “given breath.”⁷⁵ Hospitality finds flesh when we acknowledge and accept “existence as gift. . . . Because God did not have to create but freely desired to, creation is not a necessity but a gift.”⁷⁶ God came, and walked and talked, and shared space in the Creation with the creation. While we should have been “grateful to the giver and attentive to the purpose for which the gifts are given,”⁷⁷ humanity yearned for more, humanity grasped for the Tree of Knowledge, as it continues to do today, for more knowledge, more understanding, to live beyond the limits of its created form.

Whether one believes in a literal seven day Creation or an extended creation, the Garden narrative offers rich insight into the relationship between God and humanity. “Images of God as gracious and generous host pervade the biblical materials.”⁷⁸ All that God made was “good.”⁷⁹ The Creator lavishly gifted all of creation. Humanity received particular gifts to relationally and creatively engage the Creator and creation. Creation requires both God and humans to cooperate in the work of creation.⁸⁰ Creation begins

⁷⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 34.

⁷⁶ Newman, 96.

⁷⁷ Volf, 36.

⁷⁸ Pohl, 16.

⁷⁹ Gen. 1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

⁸⁰ Volf, 34.

what Heschel refers to as the “drama unfolding the relationship between God and man.”⁸¹ Certainly, the story of Creation illuminates the high capacity of humanity for drama. God is infinite, loving, and sovereign by nature. Even with the *Imago Dei*, God created humanity as finite in knowledge and understanding, singular in physical form, and part of the created order not exclusive of it—this form of humanity, allowed the freedom to choose its own path, seeks self-determination and makes choices, which may or may not be in harmony with the created order. “Since all are created in [God’s] image, world-making is an expression of our divine nature.”⁸² As we know, the allure of knowledge, of “becoming like God,”⁸³ distracted humanity from intimate relationship with God and toward separation which resulted in expulsion from the Garden and estrangement from intimacy with the Creator.

As humanity multiplied, it wandered further and further from the memory and story of God’s hospitable welcome. Humanity sought its own glory, abused one another, and incited the sharp edge of God’s wrath, yet rather than destroying all God had created, Yahweh brought forth a flood and welcomed one family to rebirth humanity.⁸⁴ Brueggemann notes Yahweh was either unwilling or unable to terminate all of the Creation.⁸⁵ In contrast to the promise and hope of Creation, the Flood narrative displays all of the fierce longing and anger of a heart-broken God. “This view of Yahweh’s

⁸¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2 vols., Harper Torchbooks, Tb 1421, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 190.

⁸² James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 232.

⁸³ Gen. 3:5.

⁸⁴ Gen. 6-9.

⁸⁵ Brueggemann, 545.

potentially destructive capacity, however, is evidently a staple of Israel's sense of the world, for which Israel exhibits neither wonderment nor embarrassment.”⁸⁶ And so the ancient narrative continues, story after story, of people who sought after God and those who fled the Creator’s presence bent on their own ambition. This internal, human conflict of grasping for more and disregarding the relational substance of the Imago Dei haunts Israel’s history.

The stories of Creation, the Fall, and the Flood compel us to pause, to consider, and to learn. In his book, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Walter Brueggemann unpacks the on-going relationship of Yahweh with Israel, humans, nations, and creation noting that “speech about these partners is necessary to a proper understanding of Yahweh, because Yahweh is always Yahweh-in-relation”⁸⁷ which “opens up a huge conversation.”⁸⁸ While Yahweh, in love and sovereignty, designed and created the world, the actions of humanity brought strife and separation. Yet, because Yahweh always exists “in relation,”

all elements of existence are to come under the positive, life-yielding aegis of Yahweh. ... whatever is amiss in creation will now be restored and made whole, even the most deeply embedded distortions in Yahweh’s world. ...the new creation now promised concerns not only Israel, not only the entire human community, but all of creation, so the hostilities at every level and in every dimension of creation will be overcome.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid., 540.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 556.

⁸⁸ Rohr, 156.

⁸⁹ Brueggemann, 549.

Brueggemann notes, “It is not in Yahweh’s character to be a God who settles for chaos. It is in Yahweh’s most elemental resolve to enact blessing and order and well-being.”⁹⁰ The narratives of the Old Testament often shock us with their breadth of emotions—from abiding and tender love, to fierce brutality, to desperate clinging to promises.

Brueggemann affirms that all of these fall within the purview of Yahweh’s relationship with Creation in a world both under God’s blessing and the curse of the Fall. Israel’s record of its covenant with the Creator then must endlessly contend with these two qualifications: Yahweh’s complete sovereignty and the autonomous force of chaos unleashed in creation and Yahweh’s complete freedom to act in creation and the actions mandated by covenanted sanctions.⁹¹ The Creator as Host at creation moves forward in time revealed to Israel as Yahweh-in-relation for the future and hope of the world:

In this resolve to new creation, Yahweh promises to overcome all forsakenness and abandonment known in Israel and in the world. When creation is abandoned by Yahweh, it readily reverts to chaos. Here it is in Yahweh’s resolve, and in Yahweh’s very character, not to abandon, but to embrace. The very future of the world, so Israel attests, depends on this resolve of Yahweh. It is a resolve that is powerful. More than that, it is a resolve that wells up precisely in *tohû wabohû* and permits the reality of the world to begin again, in blessedness.⁹²

Yahweh in-relation with Israel on behalf of creation moves through three themes:

Yahweh’s generosity and blessing at creation under Yahweh’s governance, power relinquished to chaos and curse when humans fail their caretaking responsibility, and imagined newness of creation through Yahweh’s indomitable resolve.⁹³ Even as the history of Israel unfolds in the Old Testament, it carries seeds and revelations of Yahweh

⁹⁰ Ibid., 550.

⁹¹ Ibid., 543.

⁹² Ibid., 551.

⁹³ Ibid., 555.

and all of creation for the restoration of all humanity. As a result, Brueggemann emphasizes the importance of the Old Testament texts and the adaptability of Yahweh to all of creation in all times and places for the story of restoration is polyphonic, constantly unfolding in specific but variant cultures, times, and places in contextually appropriate ways.⁹⁴ Such a wild, free, and unpredictable God bound in relationship to Creation is frightening to those whose theologies claim to understand and explain:

Moreover, we have seen that this interrelatedness is pervasively unsettled and unsettling. The relationships remain unsettled and unsettling because of the character of Yahweh, who is at the same time nonnegotiable sovereign (incommensurate) and endlessly fruitful (engaged in mutuality). Israel can find no way in its testimony to resolve the jaggedness of a relationship marked by both incommensurability and mutuality. It is for that theological reason—a reason rooted in Yahweh’s own character without respect to socio-historical, cultural factors—that the relatedness of Yahweh is so problematic.⁹⁵

Restoration is for all of creation. Brueggemann reminds us that we must handle the text with great care for we do not possess God nor can we define or predict God:

We are able to draw two conclusions when we consider the text itself as mediator. First, in rhetoric as mediation, in the utterance that bespeaks this connectedness everything is possible, everything is imaginable, and everything is unutterable. Acts can be committed, miracles can be performed that in any other arena would be problematic. Second, the rhetoric of the text as mediation of Yahweh is enormously elusive, for the speech of the Bible conceals Yahweh even while it discloses Yahweh. Thus to say that the Bible mediates God is not to say that the Bible “hands God over” to the reading community as possession or as prisoner. The reading community has been wont, on occasion, to imagine that it possessed or imprisoned the God of the Bible. Such self-deception takes a Protestant form in bibliolatry and a Catholic form in magisterial infallibility. Such self-deceptions, however, are acts of serious disregard of the text in its daring specificity. The daring, maddeningly deconstructed temper of the text keeps its central character elusive and refuses to make Yahweh available in ways that violate Yahweh’s odd character. Thus the function of the text as a mode of mediation confronts the

⁹⁴ Ibid., 731.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 567.

reading community with all of the problematic that belongs to Yahweh's own unsettlement as a God who is both mutual and incommensurate.⁹⁶

As a result, when reading and interpreting the Old Testament, we must allow the text to retain its "polyphonic openness:"

One must recognize that the Old Testament is powerfully polyphonic in its testimony, both in its substantive claims and in its characteristically elusive modes of articulation. Nothing about the theological claims of the Old Testament is obvious or one-dimensional. They remain remarkably open.

The polyphonic openness of the Old Testament, in substance and in modes of articulation, insists on interpretation. It is in the nature of the text to require, in each new circumstance of reading, and interpretive act that draws the text close to the circumstance and horizon of the interpretive community. The elusive quality of the text, moreover, invites interpretation that is free, expansive, and enormously imaginative. Thus I insist that expansive, imaginative interpretation is not an illicit abuse of the text, it is rather activity permitted and insisted on by the text.⁹⁷

This testimony and promise to God as Host, Yahweh-in-relation as sovereign and active, and God as restorer of Creation in each new time and place binds the whole of Creation in covenantal community looking toward the Kingdom of God.

As we noted, Abraham is esteemed by scholars and practitioners as the first and foremost example of human hospitality. His attentiveness both to the God of his heart and to the strangers God brought into his life, gave Israel rich images and stories to anchor their theology of hospitality. In addition to welcoming the three strangers, Abraham encountered Melchizedek "King of Salem and priest of God most high."⁹⁸ The meals and significance of each is compared by Cohen who notes that Melchizedek went through the "motions of hospitality" rather than "the e-motions." While Abraham offered his guests "a banquet," Melchizedek offered "finger food." This was intentional, however, as

⁹⁶ Ibid., 573-574.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 731.

⁹⁸ Gen. 14:17-24.

Abraham enacted genuine hospitality, but Melchizedek remained concerned with a “token of religious fellowship.”⁹⁹ This comparison holds insightful reflections on practical hospitality as it continues in the life of churches today. Humans retain the capacity and freedom to invite and welcome in a stranger or to act out specific religious customs for specific ends. Abraham’s life also challenges us to think and live in new ideas of space.¹⁰⁰ The presence and comfort of one’s home are profoundly important, the ready availability of family and friends, the security of shelter and warmth, the familiarity of personally known and sacred places. Abraham left these in “order to find his home more fully before God and with God’s people. That home ... is defined by time as much as it is a space.”¹⁰¹ Intentionality and space remain important questions in practicing Christian hospitality.

Hospitality embedded within Kingdom work resonates the Israelite call to welcome the stranger; the one formerly feared, unknown, or socially marginalized; the one who does not have access to relational and economic resources necessary for survival. “The expectation that Israel would understand and respond to the plight of sojourners, based on its own experience of having been mistreated aliens in Egypt, is clear in Exodus 23:9—‘You shall not oppress a resident alien, you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.’”¹⁰² Israel’s experience of crying out to God for deliverance from Egypt and its time in the wilderness infused the community

⁹⁹ Jeffrey M. Cohen, "Abraham's Hospitality," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2006): 169-172.

¹⁰⁰ Victor Matthews offers an excellent reflection on space in Matthews.

¹⁰¹ Newman, 56.

¹⁰² Christine D. Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 19, no. 1 (2006): 87.RSV

story with marginal experiences in which God firmly anchored the call and law to welcome, include, and provide for the needs of strangers. In commandments five to nine “neighbors, all kinds of neighbors, are to be respected and protected and not exploited”¹⁰³ while the tenth commandment “is about predatory practices and aggressive policies that make the little ones vulnerable to the ambitions of the big ones.”¹⁰⁴ The commandment to rest includes “slaves and resident aliens.”¹⁰⁵ Brueggemann notes,

Sabbath is an occasion for community enhancement, free eating together and remembering and hoping and singing and dancing and telling stories—all activities that have no production value. ... Sabbath, in the first instance, is not about worship. It is about work stoppage. It is about withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh, the refusal to let one’s life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of private well-being.¹⁰⁶

“It is in gracious hospitality to the widow, orphan, and stranger—those most vulnerable in kinship societies—that Israel realizes her distinctive covenant identity.”¹⁰⁷

Hospitality calls us not only to consider the stranger, but also the economy in which the stranger lives. While much of the Old Testament stories appear irrelevant to the everyday, decision-making of Americans, significant insights into God’s economy lay ready and waiting for a receptive and attentive heart. A person can be a stranger merely because he or she is unknown, as our common vernacular defines, but a stranger within the spiritual tradition of hospitality primarily encompasses one from whom human selfishness has withheld basic resources. Calling the Israelites to remember their own

¹⁰³ Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 24.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁵ Exod. 20:10, 23:12; Deut. 5:14-15.

¹⁰⁶ Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, 27, 36.

¹⁰⁷ William R. O'Neill, "'No Longer Strangers' (Ephesians 2:19): The Ethics of Migration," *Word & World* 29, no. 3 (2009): 229.

marginality; their slavery, poverty, and political impotence; the Law structures Israelite society and faith to naturally include strangers by anchoring God's people within God's abundant economy rather than the natural outflow of human selfishness. "The number of references to the requirement for justice for the poor is far greater than any other social issue."¹⁰⁸ "If we look closely at the specific categories of people who warrant hospitality in these texts, we will see that they have one thing in common: they are all vulnerable populations. They exist on the margins, both socially and economically. They can easily be ignored and seldom bring status or financial gain to those who reach out to them."¹⁰⁹

Israel's experience in Egypt brought the people under the economic system of the Pharaoh. Exploring this idea, Brueggemann notes that the Pharaoh, like most humans, lived under the fear of economic scarcity. Pharaoh reacted by hoarding. Hoarding in turn always creates actual scarcity whether it truly existed before or not.¹¹⁰ Owning nothing, without land or power, marginalized as strangers on the earth, the Israelite slaves, within their covenantal relationship, begged Yahweh for deliverance:

So they came to Sinai. They came from the *nightmare of paucity* by way of the *miracle of abundance*. What they discovered, as they approached the dread mountain of covenant, is that the gift of shalom had freed them from the pharaonic scarcity so they could have energy for the common good. They discovered at Mount Sinai that they could give energy to the neighborhood because the grip of *scarcity* had been broken by God's *abundance*.¹¹¹

The Old Testament anchors itself, reflective of the whole Jewish identity, within this Exodus deliverance. The powerful Creator God, mercifully drawn to Abraham's

¹⁰⁸ Hunter, 133.

¹⁰⁹ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 20.

¹¹⁰ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 107.

¹¹¹ Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, 22.

descendants, calls the people forth out of Pharaoh's power and scarce economy into the wilderness where God's abundant economy reminds the people that God, in lavish and loving welcome, distributes daily resources intended for the community rather than personal hoarding:

What Israel discovers in the wilderness—and again in the exile—is that there is an alternative. Indeed, it is fair to say that the long history of Israel is a contestation between *Pharaoh's system of paucity* and *God's offer of abundance*. Surely it is a legitimate extrapolation that the long history of the church is a contest between *paucity* that presses to control and *abundance* that evokes patterns of generosity.¹¹²

God intended the manna experience to teach inner spiritual rhythms of abundance and care to later generations to see “in that silence and solitude, alone with the Alone, the world's vision of scarcity is ... a snare and a delusion, while God's promise of abundance comes to us not as future possibility but as a present reality.”¹¹³ Established in its own land¹¹⁴ once again, however, Israel moved back into a scarcity economy forgetting the wilderness as “a place of viable life, made viable by the generous inclination of YHWH”¹¹⁵ where “we need only turn toward it and live our lives in ways to make it manifest.”¹¹⁶ From the Judges on, this scarcity economy continues as standard form throughout Israelite history enticing the human heart away from a generous and abundant welcoming of the stranger. Our own western culture extends the scarcity economy

¹¹² Ibid., 21-22.

¹¹³ Parker J. Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, New , 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 114-115.

¹¹⁴ For an insightful discussion on land see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

¹¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, 15.

¹¹⁶ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 115.

beyond hoarding to the place where resources become intrinsically individually-centered. Resources are no longer for the good of the larger created community, they “belong,” a sign of divine blessing, to the one who is powerful enough or socially-postured to acquire them.

Living in its own land, the Israelite community sometimes cared for its own, sometimes cared for the stranger, and at other times ignored both. The ancient writers include stories of both as well as interpretive suggestions for kingly decisions, prophetic words, and Yahweh’s direct interventions. There was to be no “permanent underclass in Israel” rather “the practice of economy shall be subordinated to the well-being of the neighborhood. Social relationships between neighbors—creditors and debtors—are more important than the economic realities under consideration.”¹¹⁷ The year of jubilee intended to free all debt and returned familial property.¹¹⁸ Inheritance laws guaranteed that all families had access to resources for food, shelter, and engaging the local economy.¹¹⁹ Kingly instructions limited the acquisition of resources.¹²⁰ The Law demanded aliens and strangers in the land receive care before excess sharing to those within Abraham’s lineage.¹²¹ Kings struggled to live under the abundant distribution Yahweh demanded. They preferred the common trappings of comfort and wealth of their neighbors. Solomon himself accumulated each of the excesses specifically prohibited by

¹¹⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 123.

¹¹⁸ Lev. 25.

¹¹⁹ Lev. 25.

¹²⁰ Deut. 17:16-17.

¹²¹ Lev. 19; 23.

Yahweh.¹²² As kings sought power, wealth, and acceptance among their peers, the poor and destitute grew in numbers. Rulers exchanged hospitality for social order, civil accumulation of resources, and regional power.

Into the world of the ancient kings, Yahweh manifested once again a call to hospitality. Heschel reminds us “the central message of the prophets is the insistence that the human situation can be understood only in conjunction with the divine situation.”¹²³ While Brueggemann unpacks the habit of Yahweh to unexpectedly intrude on human history and impose sovereign acts which the Israelites consider normative for Yahweh, Heschel sees the streams of YHWH’s continual actions as a farmer tilling the soil, unnecessary for constant flair.¹²⁴ The striking feature of the Prophets remains the covenantal right of the Israelite nation to call on Yahweh to enact justice. God’s intimate “relatedness to man” offered the “victims of oppression” the right to call on God whether their oppressors were foreign kings or their own.¹²⁵ Brueggemann notes that in the midst of prophetic exhortations calling kings to repentance, Josiah embodied an “astonishing exception in ancient Israel of a power agent who responded to covenantal truth, who insisted that public policy must cohere with the covenantal traditions of love of neighbor.”¹²⁶ Likewise, “Elisha refuses to participate in the scarcity system that is created and exploited by the creditor in a way that victimizes the widow. He breaks the social

¹²² 1 Kings 4:26, 10:23, 11:1-8.

¹²³ Heschel, 190.

¹²⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 540; Heschel, 178.

¹²⁵ Heschel, 204, 209, 219.

¹²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*, First edition. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2013), 135.

disease of scarcity by an awesome act of abundance.”¹²⁷ It is difficult for our imaginations, embedded as they are in our scarcity economy affectionately called “capitalism” or “consumerism” to fathom the land able to produce enough to feed all, clothe all, and shelter all if providing rather than accumulating is the purpose of created resources. In contrast to economic scarcity, “the most elemental passion of the prophetic tradition assumes that evangelical faith has little to do with private piety and everything to do with the systemic maintenance of a humane infrastructure.”¹²⁸ “Adherence to patterns of scarcity produces a world in which the generosity of God is nullified. The narratives attest otherwise and invite the listening community into an alternative mode of existence, one that is ordered according to divine generosity.”¹²⁹

New Testament Hospitality: Christ the Incarnate God

The life of Christ reminds us that God’s first act of hospitality, God’s creation of the world and its living parts, made available to humanity freedom to live in harmony with God or not, to offer hospitality and resources graciously to one another, or to withhold them seeking rather our own selfish betterment. Christ came to earth to do more than simply individually redeem individuals for heaven as our American Protestant theology teaches us. Christ came to live out, incarnationally, the created order. His life opens new possibilities on the horizon of imagination. God as a helpless baby. Broken humanity welcomed by God. God’s abundance available and free to all. “Jesus’

¹²⁷ Ibid., 92. Additionally, this widow was not an Israelite, but a foreigner.

¹²⁸ Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, 119.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 19.

proclamation of the kingdom of God demands a radical decision in favor of our neighbor. His proclamation is related to the Shema, with its dual command of God and neighbor: ‘hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:4-6).”¹³⁰ Christ lived an ordinary life with extraordinary intentionality that we might see the extraordinary Kingdom of God as not only possibility, but that we might taste divine community, that we might choose to take on the incarnated form of Christ in our lives, and that we might understand hospitality to be the posture in which we join in Kingdom co-creation here and now.

Christ welcomed all who came and actively sought out people for the Kingdom of God reminding us “the right of protection for all peoples is derived from God's holiness and provides the basic theological understanding of hospitality in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures: Human beings are created by God and are to be holy, and to be treated as holy or sacred.”¹³¹ Sutherland reminds us,

Any attempt to construct a Christology must keep in mind that once Jesus began his mission, there is no indication that he ever stayed under his own roof again. When this is done, it underscores the importance of hospitality for those who would be his disciples.

The gospel writers ask the reader to develop not just a remembrance of the facts of his homelessness but also to develop empathy for Jesus’ plight. By feeling for Jesus, the reader gains insight into Jesus’ own empathy with the distressed of the world and his gifts of hospitality toward them.¹³²

Living into hospitality in the world brings forth the Kingdom of God on earth, but it also stirs up the same fear, anger, and resentment that Christ faced. While “the only criterion

¹³⁰ Richard, 45.

¹³¹ Letty M. Russell, J. Shannon Clarkson, and Kate M. Ott, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 87.

¹³² Sutherland, 2-3.

Christ gives us for our judgment before God is hospitality,”¹³³ sadly, today human emotions and reactions still push against an inclusive, welcoming, and forgiving kingdom. Similar to Christ’s time, the religious faith community, which God intends to be the source and fountain of hospitality, is often the least welcoming place for a battered or broken person needing a welcoming and warm embrace.

Within each human, cognitive, emotional, and relational tensions simultaneously pull both toward open, welcoming inclusion and closed, self-serving, self-protecting exclusion. Christ came to bring healing, to provide a living example. Simultaneously, the Holy Spirit remains available to stabilize our emotions and relations, to anchor our faith in the Divine which is larger and stronger than our human form. “We are not independent in relation to God. Our power to be and to act comes from God. Faith merely recognizes this. Hence faith doesn’t tell us how little we are and what we can’t do. On the contrary, it celebrates what we most properly are—God’s empowered creatures—and it frees us to our greatest accomplishments.”¹³⁴ Both the Old and New Testaments identify a duty of hospitality”¹³⁵ as the “biblical tradition itself sets up a complex relationship between responding to vulnerable strangers and the anticipation of divine presence.”¹³⁶ “Jesus’ own table fellowship with sinners and socially marginal people witnesses to the power of

¹³³ David Kirk, "Hospitality: The Essence of Eastern Christian Lifestyle," *Diakonia* 16, no. 2 (1981): 104.

¹³⁴ Volf, 44.

¹³⁵ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 16. Gen. 18:4, 19:7; Judg. 19:20; Matt. 10:40-41; Rom. 12:13.

¹³⁶ Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 93.

the hospitality of the realm of God.”¹³⁷ The Triune Dance is wide enough that “the whole of creation can find space, time and freedom in it.”¹³⁸

God descended to earth, incarnate in Jesus, breaking into the established patterns of economic scarcity which strengthen the natural fears of humanity toward strangers, promote the separation of interdependent relationships, and diminish responsibility toward one other. Christ’s full-bodied incarnation of God’s own hospitality confronted and enraged established social and economic systems:

As you study the four Gospels, it is obvious that Jesus often uses the small meal setting to present many of his major teachings, his major criticisms, and his major rituals. The meal seems to be his audiovisual aid whereby he redefines and realigns the social order. It has been said that he is always eating the wrong thing, with the wrong people, in the wrong place, in the wrong table setting, and after not washing his hands! He uses meal settings and several of his most poignant parables, and often uses food or kitchen language as his primary metaphor ... The will of God itself is described as his “food,” and the word of God more nourishing than bread. This is not clerical language; in fact, it is not even typical male language. Jesus is a most unusual founder for a religion that became very religious, very liturgical, very clerical, and very patriarchal. In fact, one wonders sometimes how the two are even connected.¹³⁹

Jesus saw each person. Jesus invited people to share in a new way, a new set of relationships, a new sense of the beauty of community life.¹⁴⁰ Hospitality recognizes and acknowledges the stranger standing in front of us. Like Jesus, a hospitable heart also remembers to look around for the forgotten stranger who may be too scared, too marginalized, too sick, or too weary to join the meal. By nature, God “recruits outsiders

¹³⁷ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 14.

¹³⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 109.

¹³⁹ Kathleen Casey, *Meal Stories: The Gospel of Our Lives* (Allen, TX: Thomas More, 2002), 10.

¹⁴⁰ Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus*, 48.

to be partners.”¹⁴¹ Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus reminds us of Abraham as he received his guest quickly and joyfully.¹⁴² The welcome of God resonates a welcome from an attentive and open heart. Hospitality, however, is not merely about God’s welcome to humanity, it is also “a lens through which we can read and understand much of the gospel, and a practice by which we can welcome Jesus himself.”¹⁴³

Most practitioners and theologians center their New Testament study of hospitality on Christ’s Last Supper and the Eucharist we share today. They share similar interpretations of Christ’s meal as the central act of Christ’s hospitality and the primary place of our hospitable gathering today. This view, while traditional, seems to push aside the extraordinary daily actions of Christ in welcoming, inviting to dine, healing, and teaching his disciples to do the same as they lived their ordinary lives in favor of a one time, exclusive event. In her recent book, *small “e” eucharist*, Mary Therese Winter explores the traditional theology of the Eucharist with these extraordinary, intentional, everyday rhythms of Christ’s life. Living as a nun with an exclusive and highly-structured Table, her life experiences and her spirituality, however, offer her a much broader and richer understanding of the Eucharist. She wonders if Christ wanted the disciples to think differently about daily actions and interactions. Regarding the feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle important enough for record by all four Gospel authors, “For example, a number of people who shared that meal should not have been eating together, according to the law. They were not only given something to eat, but

¹⁴¹ Richard, 43. Josh. 2; Ruth; Matt. 4:18-22, 28:1-10; Rom. 15:27; Gal. 2:9-10; Phil. 1:5-7, 2:1, 3:10; 1 Cor. 1:9, 8:23; 2 Cor. 1:7, 13:14; Heb. 10:33; 1 Pet. 4:13; 1 John 1:3, 6.

¹⁴² Arterbury: 374.

¹⁴³ Christine Pohl, "Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life," *Vision: A Journal for Church & Theology* 3, (2002): 35.

given permission to eat together. Jesus may have been reminding them of that. ... We are much too enamored with what is literal and concrete, thereby missing the messages that metaphors convey.”¹⁴⁴ The only miracle recorded by all four Gospels, the feeding embodied “the presence of God’s kingdom as a feast.”¹⁴⁵ Likewise, “Jesus sought out the company of those who had been segregated by society and designated as sinners and was prepared to accept the consequences for the principles he upheld.”¹⁴⁶ When Jesus mentioned the sick needed a doctor, maybe it was not those who were physically ill or sinners, maybe it was those relationally sick, those too ill in spirit to welcome a stranger. The Gospel narratives focus on Jesus satisfying physical and relational hunger as much as spiritual and physical healing. As a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, to exemplify its in-breaking into the world, “Jesus invited everyone to sit down and share a meal together. That in itself was a miracle.”¹⁴⁷

Anchored in these prolific stories of Christ sharing manifold abundance, Sister Therese invites us to also look again at the Last Supper. What if Jesus was not inviting the disciples to remember one specific act of sharing food which was exclusive and looked nothing like the hundreds of inclusive meals they had shared with the local communities? What if Jesus was asking them, as they looked at him, to see the towel wrapped around his waist, the towel which humiliated their self-reliance. What if Jesus was asking them to see him, to see the wholeness in which he lived, a wholeness which

¹⁴⁴ Miriam Therese Winter, *Eucharist with a Small "e"* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 75.

¹⁴⁵ John Koenig, *Soul Banquets: How Meals Become Mission in the Local Congregation* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2007), x.

¹⁴⁶ Winter, 72.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 74.

reserved space and included practices that invited in rather than excluded strangers. Wrapped in a dirty, servant's towel, "when Jesus said, *This is my body*, wouldn't it make a world of difference to know where he was looking? Christian art and Christian tradition fix his gaze on the bread and the cup. However, he could have been looking directly at his disciples as he offered them the bread, saying to those who were gathered around him: this is my body—yes, you are my body—an extension of my spirit, a continuation of my mission."¹⁴⁸ What if Jesus asked them to see his choices, his lifestyle, his posture toward people and relationships as choices they too could make, living out and joining in co-creating the Kingdom of God. "The other, eucharist with a small 'e.' is reflected in the experiences of Jesus eating and drinking with others while he was still alive."¹⁴⁹ It "gives witness to Jesus as eucharist with a small 'e' for it is his Spirit that nourishes us in the fullness of our humanity, revealing to us an integration of both human and divine."¹⁵⁰ This broader reflection on the Last Supper opens the doors on a dusty theology of hospitality. Jesus did not live for nor minister to an exclusive group, why would he ask us to remember him that way? Jesus continuously reminded his disciples that the Kingdom of God, rather than redemption, was coming as he called them to follow him in welcoming, healing, feeding, and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Our reflections on hospitality open the rich streams of God's abundant love as we reflect and embrace practices of living rather than dying, as we look to the extraordinary choices possible in an ordinary life.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 133.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 76.

Reflecting on Jesus' humanity serves "as a valuable resource for the construction of a Christology of hospitality."¹⁵¹ When asked "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus "does not talk about the person who lives nearby or the one who shares the same vision of life and of religion. He tells the story of a man who was walking from Jerusalem to Jericho and who was beaten up by thugs."¹⁵² "Unlike those who looked at the externals of life and judged the worth of a person according to their occupation, ethnicity, appearance, or physical and mental condition, Jesus saw everyone through the lenses of God's love. He enacted healing where others saw brokenness and he called persons to experience the wholeness and beauty that God planned for them."¹⁵³ Jesus did not act or take on the mantle of the finely constructed image of a conquering Messiah. Jesus was born in a barn, his human form reliant on the hospitality of a common, working class couple. Jesus ate, slept, played, and grew with siblings who did not always like him.¹⁵⁴ Jesus intentionally moved into the margins of society, living without home or secure income. Jesus acknowledged the presence and God-given value in women, lepers, the blind, the lame, children, and the working class.¹⁵⁵ "The Gospels want to ensure that Jesus' humanity is seen as whole, complete, and total. It is what allows us to understand hospitality as an aspect of Christology. To the degree that we understand Jesus as a

¹⁵¹ Sutherland, 21.

¹⁵² Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 65-66.

¹⁵³ Bruce G. Epperly, "Healing and Hospitality in Jesus' Ministry," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 7, no. 3 (2003): 87.

¹⁵⁴ John 7:1-9.

¹⁵⁵ Matt. 9:1-8, 18-26, 15:21-28, 19:13-15, 20:1-16, 29-34, 28:8-10; Mark 1:40-45, 9:14-29, 10:46-52; Luke 5:12-26, 7:11-17, 36-50, 8:1-3, 10:38-42; John 11:1-12:11. Epperly: 92; Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 56.

homeless stranger we will understand the parameters of the problem, what does it mean to welcome those who wander among us?”¹⁵⁶

While Christ lived and breathed everyday acts of intentional and generous hospitality, Christ’s death focuses the heart of hospitality to the core: it is not about me, it is about the one separated from me: the stranger. “Jesus is presented as a wanderer without a home and in need of hospitality, yet Jesus is also the supreme host, welcoming strangers to the Kingdom of God.”¹⁵⁷ The arrest and subsequent death of Christ came as a shattering betrayal to the disciples. They believed in him. They followed him. They accepted him as their king. They engaged his life as far as their finite, human minds could experience and understand. Christ’s willing death, as means whereby humanity is restored to life in the Kingdom, lies beyond human wisdom. It exemplifies God as infinite, generous, and reckless. Paul reminds us that once we were all strangers¹⁵⁸ lost in sin and darkness. “The fundamental image of the New Testament that creates, nourishes, and sustains the Christian vision is that of the Kingdom of God.”¹⁵⁹ The Creator God willingly left the illumination of the eternal Triune Dance to enter a human form whose dance was not as free and full as the divine to live and to die in created form, reliant on the often inhospitable creation, that the free invitation to the Kingdom of God might be issued; that humanity might rejoin the dance of the divine; that humans might co-create the Kingdom of God on earth; that humanity might walk and talk freely with God in the

¹⁵⁶ Sutherland, 4.

¹⁵⁷ Richard, 31.

¹⁵⁸ Eph. 2:19.

¹⁵⁹ Richard, 38.

Garden again; and that strangers might be warmly welcomed to dine at the Banquet Table by hosts that were once guests themselves.

Personally touched by the Creator God interrupting human time and calling forth the Kingdom of God, through the abandonment of power rather than the enforcing of it, Jesus' friends and disciples fled and hid at his death. Defeated, confused, and seemingly abandoned, they sneaked back to their fishing boats and villages. Was Jesus just another mentally unbalanced or self-focused messiah? He seemed so authentic. His words, while profoundly confusing and painfully accusatory, resonated with the deep, inner longings of the human condition. The Messiah was to re-establish the Israelite kingdom. He was to show the world that they were God's chosen people. While the infinite Divine understood the form and wisdom of Israel's hospitable calling, humans in their finite form, grasping for knowledge from the Tree rather than relationship with the Creator and the creation, looked to themselves rather than the stranger as the locus of God's call. Yahweh had not called forth Abraham so that one family and one people might be more special, might hold more privileged access to the Creator than the rest of creation; rather, Yahweh called forth Abraham, revealed parts of God's being to Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and David, that a community, centered around the Divine Dance, might share with those in liminal spaces that the Creator God exists, the Creator God abundantly cares for creation, and the Creator God beckons every stranger back into relationship.

Into the anguish of confusion and loss the risen Christ appeared not to those in the center of the social circle as defined by cultural standards; rather, the angels spoke and Christ first appeared to those considered outside and marginal: the women. In life, in death, in resurrection, Christ still intentionally lived, breathed, and exemplified the

Kingdom to those who anticipated least access. We easily miss the reality “that hospitality is disruptive and dangerous.”¹⁶⁰ Why invite the poor? Why heal the lepers? Why include women? Because the Kingdom of God is not formed or defined by fallen creation. The Kingdom of God is the heart-song and imagined reality of the Creator God. The Kingdom of God is for all. It distributes to all. God’s rich and abundant love welcomes all. Where greater need exists, greater and faster distribution occurs. No exceptions. “Through the incarnation, God has welcomed the stranger, human nature, invited it home, and restored it. . . . God genuinely experiences human finitude, and human being genuinely experiences divine healing.”¹⁶¹ “The paradox is indeed that new life is born out of the pains of the old.”¹⁶² Comforted by the resurrected physical presence of Jesus, the disciples, men and women alike, learn they cannot cling to God in human form. They experience the wonder that the simple action of breaking bread reveals his form previously overlooked. Saddened by Christ’s ascension, but mysteriously transformed by his intermittent meals with them, these friends of God gathered as instructed to wait for the promised coming of a further gift from God.

New Testament Hospitality: The Early Church

The Holy Spirit makes a memorable appearance within Creation alighting on Christ’s disciples and empowering them with the vision and passion of God. Whereas a few minutes earlier they had huddled together in fear of arrest, now filled with the

¹⁶⁰ Amy G. Oden, "God's Radical Welcome," *Mutuality* 15, no. 1 (2008): 19.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁶² Nouwen, 19.

presence of God, they burst forth into the streets speaking boldly of Jesus' death and resurrection, inviting others to believe what they too had seen and heard, not just as a welcome healing or a nice distraction from the hardship of daily living, but rather as an opportunity to join not an kingdom of earthly power, but a Kingdom of love and welcome and healing. The disciples lived their lives together as community in a way the exemplified "hospitality ... at the heart of Christianity" and recounted stories that reminded the people "no one has ever been more radically welcoming than Jesus, who was always accused of associating with the wrong kind of people—people we wouldn't want in our living rooms, or next to us worshipping."¹⁶³ Their everyday lives and boldly proclaimed stories and messages of God reminded the people "God took on mortality in order that mortals could take on God's life."¹⁶⁴ The early church refused the *cultus privatus* protection of the Roman Empire,¹⁶⁵ empowered rather to live fearlessly as fellow sojourners on earth and known as adopted heirs within the Kingdom. Oden notes,

... early Christians practiced hospitality, not because they were trying to be good, but because they were profoundly moved by God's welcome in their own lives and wanted to share it in concrete ways—tending to the contagious sick that no one would help, receiving foreign refugees seeking aid, welcoming the poor and outcasts in their communities. They offered hospitality because they believed God really had new and abundant life to offer everyone.¹⁶⁶

The Early Church remains the clearest and most human example of hospitality. The disciples did not change their personalities, their professions, or even their families; rather, they fully embraced Life. They joined the Triune Dance. Their everyday simple

¹⁶³ Pratt and Homan, ix.

¹⁶⁴ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 134.

¹⁶⁵ Newman, 138.

¹⁶⁶ Oden, "God's Radical Welcome," 8.

gestures of shared meals, open invitations, and attentiveness to strangers co-created the Kingdom of God in their midst as they incarnated the Body of Christ on earth. They regarded “hospitality to strangers as a fundamental expression of the gospel,”¹⁶⁷ remembering Jesus challenged narrow definitions of hospitality, attending to those who were inconvenient or could not repay, for each welcome anticipates and remembers our own welcome by God.¹⁶⁸ Their shared meals “combined the ordinary with the sacred and challenged covenantal relationships with heavenly expectation.”¹⁶⁹

Today we esteem the Early Church as a more perfect example of Christian living. So enthralled by it we conveniently forget these people remained themselves even when filled by the Holy Spirit. Peter still spoke loudly, frequently, and often before he fully worked through the ramifications of his words. The women, accepted by the men present at Pentecost, still did not own property or engender respect among government officials or even the majority of New Testament historians. We perch the early church on a pedestal so high we bless ourselves to excuse our existence as too ordinary to achieve such Kingdom living. Again, we grasp at the Tree, eager that knowledge will replace the Imago Dei’s capacity for relational community. Our Hellenistic minds eagerly turn away from the costly, relational call of Christ and the early disciples to the structured, educated, articulated instructions of Paul. We find endless solace in the knowledge of how to live. We obsessively extrapolate Paul’s situation-specific instructions into universal “spiritual truths” while conveniently ignoring the real inter-relationships between people that Paul loving attended. Focused as we are on the instructions of how to

¹⁶⁷ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 5.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 56.

eat at the early eucharist meal, we forget that the meal was simple, common, and made of ordinary food. The sharing of the body of Christ was not in a cup of wine and a piece of Passover bread; rather, it was in the simple gathering of people around a table:

The eucharist in Jerusalem is referred to in Acts as the breaking of bread. It is important to say again that this eucharist of the first Christians was an ordinary meal. In fact, the phrase “to break bread” usually meant “to take a meal.” That meal itself consisted of whatever food happened to be served. In the process of eating and drinking together, of sharing memories, telling stories, interpreting the scriptures, articulating prayers, their fellowship was strengthened. There were no words of instruction, no hint of anything associated with a collective participation in Christ’s sacrificial death. Constitutive of the earliest eucharist was a resurrection spirit and an aura of hope. This shared experience of the presence of the risen Jesus in their midst was manifested in the expression of unmitigated joy.¹⁷⁰

Engaged in the everyday, common work of hospitality, intentionally venturing into the dark places of accepted culture where the poor were conveniently forgotten, unwanted babies were abandoned, and foreigners invoked exclusion, the early believers plunged into the Divine Dance and gathered around the Banquet Table, living out the Table Ministry of Christ, discovering themselves the truth that deep living remains elusive until one’s life is abandoned for the sake of others.¹⁷¹ When seemingly irreconcilable differences emerged, the disciples followed the example of Christ “where mercy and kindness are more important than ideology.”¹⁷² Now focused on the relationships within the Kingdom rather than the knowledge of the structures and rules of a kingdom concept, the original vision of Yahweh which called forth Abraham found concrete form on the earth. The untouchables, Gentiles, were eagerly welcomed and these strangers also

¹⁷⁰ Winter, 36.

¹⁷¹ Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 154.

¹⁷² Vanier, 66.

become hosts at God's Table.¹⁷³ The Early Church exploded across the earth not from its message, but from its everyday living.

Hospitality: The Divine Invitation for Human Participation

Hospitality, rightfully imagined and known within the Biblical stories, illuminates the sweeping and incomprehensible abundance of the Creator's love and passion for the creation. Neither human pride, nor selfishness, nor reckless abandonment, nor intentional neglect to divine gifts deters the desire of God to draw the Creation back into the Triune Dance. Surely, the ancient Israelites wanted to forget the experiences of marginalization and poverty.¹⁷⁴ They preferred the occasions of powerful triumph and anticipated the return of their king to conquer and subject all others. But God wanted them to remember the stranger.¹⁷⁵ To intentionally enter into the world of the marginalized that they might make known the Creator's love and care through their own actions, to take up the Imago Dei living inter-relationally in community. Yahweh's intentionality with the Israelites reminds us "if we want to love the stranger, it's important to stay in touch with the experience of being the stranger."¹⁷⁶ Even today, "God gathers us, provides for us, and leads us toward the promised land. As a people, we journey into the time and place of

¹⁷³ Andrew Arterbury explores the welcome of Cornelius as hospitality in Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting*, New Testament Monographs (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005).

¹⁷⁴ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 27.

¹⁷⁵ Richard, 33.

¹⁷⁶ Oden, "God's Radical Welcome," 85.

God's kingdom that is both 'now' and 'not yet.'"¹⁷⁷ Recalling the scarcity economy of Pharaoh and identifying its form in our own compulsion to hoard rather than share invites us to recover the practices of resourcing the whole community rather than personal over-indulgence at the expense of a hungry, naked stranger. "In our time we know about being scattered in anxiety and violence. Josiah stands as a reminder that it could have been otherwise among us. Indeed, it still could be otherwise!"¹⁷⁸ Including the poor, the sick, the aged, and the widows, the Hebrew prophets remind us "in all these stories, hospitality centers in the household and the sharing of its resources with strangers. All of these acts of hospitality play a role in furthering God's movement in creating and redeeming God's people."¹⁷⁹ Extrapolated to our time, the "prophetic witness becomes the net effect of a lived vision of the shalom of God within every place in every sphere where Christians are present."¹⁸⁰ Casey notes,

When we share our stories with each other we can begin to see that the men and women of the Bible are still with us. Those stories are not just myths of the past that have no relationship to us today. Those men and women were like us. They were living ordinary lives, trying to teach their kids right from wrong, support their families, and get along with the neighbors. Like us, they too were searching for the universal truths, the meaning of life, and unconditional love.¹⁸¹

The Gospels expose Jesus as "an untamed lover"¹⁸² conjoining healing and hospitality creating "a circle of healing that welcomed all persons."¹⁸³ Jesus' welcome of outsiders

¹⁷⁷ Newman, 40.

¹⁷⁸ Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*, 147.

¹⁷⁹ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 17-18.

¹⁸⁰ Hunter, 248.

¹⁸¹ Casey, 107.

¹⁸² Rick McKinley, *Jesus in the Margins* (Sisters, Or.: Multnomah Publishers, 2005), 88.

¹⁸³ Epperly: 92.

into God's life defined his ministry and ours also¹⁸⁴ for "Luke knows both the table of Jesus and the feast of God and considers them altogether compatible."¹⁸⁵

The everyday, simple Table Ministry of Christ becomes the focus of our hospitality in the world. As the Creator God beckons into the Triune Dance, Christ simultaneously invites us into the liminal spaces where strangers await invitation to join the abundant Banquet Table. Strangers are not categorized on merit, social status, education, wealth, physical shape, privilege, or lineage; rather, strangers are recognized as God's dearly beloved creation. God's welcome is for all. God, incarnate in Christ, has gifted us new ways to live, the Spirit empowers new eyes to see, the heartbeat of the Father sings new songs resonate with our created form. Success and failure dissolve as constructs to measure invitational response. Abundance, generosity, and lavish love remain the order of the day. Everyday practices bring form to welcoming and grow deep places, finding solace rather than anxiety in embracing finite humanity. Paradox and mystery are revealed as the Creator God becomes a helpless child, as Jesus dies humiliated at the hands of those he came to serve, and as the Spirit binds human hearts back into the Divine. Space is opened up in the fallen creation for the Kingdom of God both to come and to be coming already. The homeless God invites strangers from liminal spaces to the Table where guests become hosts and new hosts invite more guests. Community breaks forth based not in what we receive but embodied in what we share and how our lives intertwine as resources are generously distributed. Beyond the realm of our imagination, the Creator God stepped into this world that we, too, might join in the

¹⁸⁴ Oden, "God's Radical Welcome," 36.

¹⁸⁵ Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*, 116.

co-creation of God's original design. When we step back from the Tree and embrace God's hospitality, content to live in the abundance of creation, and welcome the stranger separated from us, the Kingdom of God takes form upon the earth.

Chapter 3
Historical Materials

Hospitality in History: An Introduction

Hospitality, the very essence of creation, arguably remains the most ancient practice of the Church as God crafts human form, welcomes Adam and Eve into a lavish garden, breathes life into their souls, and invites them to live in intimate fellowship with God's own self.¹⁸⁶ From this poignant birth of humanity, God invites each of us to daily engage in the practice of hospitality, a practice which resonates with our own reflection of God's nature. As God lives within Trinitarian community, we, too, are fashioned to live in community; as God creates, we, too, hold the capacity to create. Within the Church, hospitality, engaged with a broken world, changes form slightly, nuanced by an invitation to join the work of the Holy Spirit. This work, or "Table Ministry," involves actions which engage the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God into a broken world. Table Ministry encompasses actions and attitudes which reflect the hospitable welcome of God to all to come and to feast in the Kingdom, to find life, healing, and wholeness as we incarnate the Body of Christ.

Table ministry involves several key components. The first is the host, attentive to the possibility and presence of a guest. The second is the guest, the person God invites into the Kingdom, into relationship. Third, is the church universal, for the guest is welcomed into a sphere where the host already lives in established relationships. Beyond

¹⁸⁶ Gen. 1:27-28, 2:15-25.

the host, the guest, and the church community also lies the Kingdom of God, seen where God breaks into our broken world. At the boundaries of the Kingdom of God is “liminal space,”¹⁸⁷ the marginality where new people meet established people and both are changed in the process.¹⁸⁸ Without liminal space, the church cannot grow; it only exchanges labels on established members. Table Ministry is the work of hospitality that occurs within liminal space. It is the place where the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, as present and ever-coming, is experienced as lives are changed. Any theology of faith that views salvation and getting people “into heaven” as the primary purpose of the church misses what God is about in the world. As the boundaries of the Kingdom of God spread out, God invites us to share in the Holy Spirit’s work of life transformation. If we accept God’s invitation to join God’s work in specific times and places, we enter into the work of Table Ministry; we greet and dine together at God’s Banquet Table, rich and abundant, where both guest and host grow from being present to each other and attentive to God.

Hospitality in History: The Early & Persecuted Church

Arterbury notes in his writings that from the earliest Israelites through the Early Church, Philo to Clement, that Abraham is acknowledged as the quintessential host.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 56, 106; Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, (Chicago, IL: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969), 166.

¹⁸⁸ Christine D. Pohl, "Hospitality from the Edge: The Significance of Marginality in the Practice of Welcome," *Annual Society of Christian Ethics* 15, no. 121-136 (1995): 121-122.

¹⁸⁹ Arterbury, "Abraham's Hospitality among Jewish and Early Christian Writers: A Tradition History of Gen 18:1-16 and Its Relevance for the Study of the New Testament," 359.

Genesis 18 gives us a model for receiving guests in the best of both the nomadic and godly traditions. In this story, Abraham receives God as both presence and messenger.¹⁹⁰ Generations later, as Moses pens the story of the early Israelites and responds to God's continued work in the nation through the Exodus, he records God's instructions to be attentive to the needs of the aliens and strangers who dwell among the Israelites.¹⁹¹ This legacy, while not always lived out well by the Israelite people, is handed down to the Early Church. Jesus, as both guest and host,¹⁹² affirms the commands and examples God gave the people as Kingdom principles.¹⁹³ Harsh condemnations indict those who function as exclusionary rather than as hosts.¹⁹⁴ The majority of Jesus' parables are themed on hospitality as fundamental to God's Kingdom.¹⁹⁵ We see the greatest flourishing of Table Ministry in the history of the Early Church. In everyday life, in everyday places, ordinary people loved each other; they treated each other with respect; regardless of gender, class, or race; they made extraordinary choices to provide for everyday needs, food, shelter, and clothing; they shared what they had in common; and did it all in the name and for the love of their God.¹⁹⁶ Acts tells us that daily people were coming to Christ as the Early Church exploded.¹⁹⁷ Why? Ordinary believers remained

¹⁹⁰ Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 93; *ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Exod. 22:21-27, 23:9; Deut. 10:17-20, 24:14-15.

¹⁹² Pohl, "Hospitality from the Edge: The Significance of Marginality in the Practice of Welcome," 126.

¹⁹³ Luke 12:33, 14:12-14; John 4:1-38.

¹⁹⁴ Luke 20:9-19; John 5:16-30.

¹⁹⁵ Luke 14:15-24, 15:1-32, 16:19-31.

¹⁹⁶ Acts 4:32-37, 9:32-43; Rom. 12:13; Eph. 4:28; I Tim. 6:17-19.

¹⁹⁷ Acts 2:19-21.

open and prayerfully lived out their faith, sharing who they were and what they had, attentive to the Spirit's leading, co-creating the Kingdom of God as they continued to incarnate the Body of Christ on earth.

During the unpopular and persecuted years of the Church, Table Ministry remained deeply rooted in the everyday life of common believers. Individuals met and ministered among other individuals within the framework of their common lives. People engaged neighbors, relatives, business associates, even the slaves within their households, and travelling strangers needing food and shelter. "Hospitality addressed the physical needs of strangers for food, shelter, and protection, but also included recognition of their worth and common humanity. It almost always involved shared meals; table fellowship was historically an important way of acknowledging the equal value and dignity of people."¹⁹⁸ As people responded to each other, the Kingdom of God expanded into the liminal spaces around its edges. The church, as the current, present Kingdom of God within a community, flourished and spread. Travelers and those dispersed by persecution carried the message of God with both word and deed into new places:

Leaders insisted that although in conventional hospitality people welcomed family, friends, and influential acquaintances, Christian hospitality ought to focus on welcoming the vulnerable and the poor into one's home and community of faith. Followers of Christ should offer a generous welcome to "the least of these," without concern for advantage or benefit to the host. Such hospitality would reflect God's greater hospitality that welcomes the undeserving, provides the lonely with a home, and sets a banquet table for the hungry.¹⁹⁹

Influenced by their marginal place in society, both Jewish exile experiences and the example of Christ as a sojourner, the Early church naturally came to view themselves as

¹⁹⁸ Pohl, "Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life," 35-36.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 35.

strangers on the earth rather than citizens of Rome.²⁰⁰ “Because Christians were at times under threat from civil authorities, the act of harboring refugees who were brothers and sisters in Christ became imperative. Sheltering strangers was essential to the survival of Christianity in a hostile empire. “Significantly, hospitality was the context within which they worked through complex and troubling ethnic and status differences.”²⁰¹ Christians became well-known within the larger culture for their practices of hospitality and were often cited as examples of morality on this account.”²⁰²

When persecution ceased under Constantine, Christians become more settled in their local areas no longer keenly aware of themselves as “aliens and strangers.”²⁰³ Instead of welcoming travelers and the poor into individual homes, the Church, free to minister publicly, sought ways to be more efficient. With the best of intentions, Basil, Bishop at Caesarea, established *xenodacheia* as the common practice of the official religion of Rome.²⁰⁴ Hospitals were established to care for the sick and the poor. Hostels were opened to welcome strangers and those in need of shelter and food.²⁰⁵ Bishops often invited specific groups or monasteries to engage these ministries on behalf of the whole Church.²⁰⁶ “These efforts, as noble as they are, begin the process of

²⁰⁰ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 36-37.

²⁰¹ Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2011), 161.

²⁰² Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 38.

²⁰³ Exod. 23:9; Lev. 25:23.

²⁰⁴ Ivan Illich, "Hospitality and Pain," (paper presented to McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, 1987), 7-8.

²⁰⁵ Hunter, 55; Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 44-45; Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 99.

²⁰⁶ Richard, 68.

institutionalizing care. When that happens, our ability to see the stranger ‘as we are going’ is eroded.”²⁰⁷ While large-scale, institutionalized care appears to be so much more efficient to our Western worldview, it lost the key component to Table Ministry—individuals meeting other individuals within the liminal space of the host’s own life. Pohl notes, “the socially transformative potential of hospitality was lost”²⁰⁸ as “public shelters for ‘care,’ [replaced] the previously universal human practice of hospitality.”²⁰⁹ “The relation of the church and individual Christians to sociopolitical institutions was changing, and with it, the significance of hospitality. No longer at odds, the church and political authorities became intertwined and dependent on one another. Hospitality reinforced these relationships.”²¹⁰ In this seemingly benign statement, we are convicted. Where the Table Ministry of hospitality once held the confluence of deep transformation, God and humanity engaged together in liminal spaces, hospitality became the tool for stability within the church.²¹¹ In placing the liminal space of hospitality within the institutional setting, Table Ministry was lost. Hospitality, holding the greatest potential for cultural upheaval, became Christianity’s greatest weakness, declawed and domesticated, stripped of the Holy Spirit, content to maintain religious and civic power structures.

²⁰⁷ Sutherland, 79.

²⁰⁸ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 51.

²⁰⁹ Illich, 3.

²¹⁰ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 47.

²¹¹ Pohl, "Hospitality from the Edge: The Significance of Marginality in the Practice of Welcome," 130.

Hospitality in History: The Monastic Traditions

As many individuals within the church became comfortable with their faith, others balked at the loss of deep and formative spirituality. Many of these people began to seek places of discomfort to stir their souls and they found it, in the desert, the historical place of refuge and transformation for the people of God.²¹² St. Anthony was the most famous of the early Church Fathers to move into the desert. Over time, many others moved into the desert, some to join him, others to live on their own. The desert, a wild and unpredictable place, threatened both the physical and spiritual life and plunged Christians into encounters with the deep places of self and God.²¹³ Interestingly, while we might assume with our individualist Western mindset that the earliest monks and nuns would resent the intrusion of other individuals into their space, we find that the opposite was true.²¹⁴ Guests were welcomed warmly. In fact, we find that as these men and women re-entered the deep places of God, relational liminal space re-opened around the edges of the Kingdom. Burton-Christie notes, “Hermits were frequently seen to break a long fast when hosting visitors, as hospitality and kindness were more important than keeping the ascetic practices that were so dominant in the Desert Fathers' lives.”²¹⁵

“Mysticism fosters a new way of seeing, grounded in non-duality and expansive

²¹² Belden C. Lane, "Desert Attentiveness, Desert Indifference: Countercultural Spirituality in the Desert Fathers and Mothers," *Cross Currents* 44, no. 2 (1994): 2; Pohl, "Hospitality from the Edge: The Significance of Marginality in the Practice of Welcome," 127.

²¹³ Lane: 2.

²¹⁴ Joan Chittister, *The Friendship of Women: The Hidden Tradition of the Bible* (New York, NY: BlueBridge, 2006), XVII; Richard Valantais, *Centuries of Holiness: Ancient Spirituality Refracted for a Postmodern Age* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 146.

²¹⁵ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 161-163.

awareness of the limitless love and grace of God. ... This is why mystics tend to care for the forgotten members of society or reach across boundaries ... because mystics intuitively understand that (in the words of Richard Rohr) ‘everything belongs’ to God and in God.”²¹⁶

Many early Church Fathers and Mothers affirmed the need for hospitality including St. Basil, St. Gregory, John Chrysostom, and Augustine. Monasteries also made intentional lives of spiritual service accessible to single women. These women became “liminal persons—betwixt and between”²¹⁷ as they cast off social norms and embraced lives of prayer and community service and hospitality became integral to monastic identity and practice.²¹⁸ Church Mothers such as Teresa of Avila, Hildegard, and Julian of Norwich recorded mystical experiences which still speak deeply to those in liminal spaces today. Amy Oden has recently updated the language on an extensive number of Early Church writings to make them more accessible for today. Early in the third century, Pseudo-Clementine wrote in the *Recognitions*,

If, therefore, you wish truly to honor the image of God, we declare to you what is true, that you should do good to and pay honor and reverence to everyone, who is made in the image of God. You should minister food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, hospitality to the stranger, and necessary things to the prisoner. That is what will be regarded as truly bestowed upon God. And so much do these things honor God’s image, that the one who doesn’t do them is regarded as insulting the divine image.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Carl McColman, "Christian Mysticism and "Ordinary" Christian Spirituality," January 26, 2010, accessed December 2, 2012, <http://www.anamchara.com/2010/01/26/christian-mysticism-and-ordinary-christian-spirituality/>.

²¹⁷ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 107.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

²¹⁹ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 54.

The following century, Lactantius wrote about strangers in *The Divine Institutes* noting “What is more consistent with the heart of justice than our affording to strangers through kindness, the things we freely give our own relatives through affection?”²²⁰ In his *Homily 14 on 1 Timothy*, John Chrysostom wrote about our need to be attentive to Christ as we minister. “Observe, the hospitality here spoken of is not merely a friendly reception, but one given with zeal and full of life, with readiness, and going about it as if one were receiving Christ himself.”²²¹ Pohl notes that John Chrysostom actively engaged the work of hospitality.²²² “Let us pay attention, as many as are to receive Christ, for it is possible to receive him even now. Let us pay attention, and emulate, and receive him with as great zeal. For indeed, when you receive a poor person who is hungry and naked, you have received and cherished Him.”²²³ He further reminds us,

A loving Lord’s intention, you see, was that we should not be indifferent about such friendship nor be too picky about our visitors—hence his words, “whoever receives one of the least of these in my name receives me.” So don’t pay attention to the status of the visitor nor despise the person on the basis of what you can see, but consider that in the visitor you are welcoming your Lord.²²⁴

Their familiarity with common fears and struggles in engaging hospitality is surprising, though it should not be if we remember our common human fear of the stranger and our inclination to judge others. “Rather, the one who, because of their own inordinate pickiness, passes one that should be admired, will even suffer punishment. So don’t busy yourself with people’s lives and doings. For this is the very extreme of stinginess, to

²²⁰ Ibid., 57.

²²¹ Ibid., 64.

²²² Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 6; Pohl, “Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition,” 85.

²²³ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 60.

²²⁴ Ibid., 66.

nitpick about a person's entire life to avoid giving them one loaf of bread.”²²⁵ Influenced by the writing of Philo with his emphasis on virtue,²²⁶ Chrysostom reflects on Abraham in his *Homily 41 on Genesis*,

Stretch out your hand. Let it not be closed up. We have not been made judges into other's lives, because then we would have compassion on no one. ... Stop this unhealthy fondness for meddling, which is Satanic, which is destructive. ... Inquire, if you will, how Abraham showed hospitality towards all who came to him. If he had been over-curious about those who fled to him for refuge, he would not have “entertained angels.” For perhaps not thinking them to be angels, he would have thrust them too away with the rest. But since he received all, he received even angels.²²⁷

These historical works remind us that theologians and practitioners have continued to embrace the work of hospitality within their own cultures and faith traditions. In *Sermon 61* Augustine also wrote about strangers:

Acknowledge the duty of hospitality, for by this some have attained unto God. You take in some stranger, whose companion in the way you yourself also are, for we are all strangers. This person is a Christian who, even in his own house and in his own country, acknowledges himself to be a stranger. For our country is above, there we shall not be strangers. For everyone here below, even in his own house, is a stranger.²²⁸

As the unexpected needs of strangers within God's welcome intrudes into our structured lives, we are reminded that the Gospel is the work of hospitality. Christ came that invitations might go forth, that those who respond might be welcomed, and that the Body of Christ might continue to minister around the Banquet Table. Gregory of Nyssa writes,

The stranger, those who are naked, without food, infirm and imprisoned are the ones the gospel intends for you. The wanderer and naked, and ill person without

²²⁵ Ibid., 63.

²²⁶ Arterbury, "Abraham's Hospitality among Jewish and Early Christian Writers: A Tradition History of Gen 18:1-16 and Its Relevance for the Study of the New Testament," 362-365.

²²⁷ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 66.

²²⁸ Ibid., 45.

necessities stand in need by reason of their hardships. A homeless person or one with no work lacks life's necessities; they are nevertheless imprisoned by illness. You have the fullness of the Commandments with regard to these persons (Rom 13.10), so lend the Lord everything you have by showing mercy (Prov. 19.17). Why are you then so obstinate concerning your own life? He who does not wish to have the God of all as a friend possesses nothing except stubbornness towards himself.²²⁹

The practices of hospitality remind us that when we avoid our Imago Dei with its creative and relational substance, then our souls wither, we miss Jesus in the face of the stranger, the Church no longer incarnates the Body of Christ on earth, and we abdicate co-creation of the Kingdom of God.

Hospitality Finds a Home in the Benedictines

St. Benedict fully engaged the practice of hospitality when he wrote the Rules for Monasteries. Chapter LIII, *Of the Reception of Guests*, outlines the practice and structure of welcoming, housing, and interacting with guests who come to the Benedictine monasteries seeking shelter, lodging, and food.²³⁰ Benedict understood that guests would naturally come for physical needs, but he also knew that guests were important in the personal formation of the monks who lived in the monasteries, that spiritual growth was engaged within the sphere of relationships.²³¹ A Benedictine nun and prioress, Joan Chittister offers the church today a lifetime of wisdom, grown in the deep places of consistent spiritual practices focused on receptivity toward the stranger. Her writings and

²²⁹ Ibid., 59.

²³⁰ "The Holy Rule of St. Benedict," accessed December 2, 2012, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/benedict/rule2/files/rule2.html>.

²³¹ Pratt and Homan, 5.

thoughts affirm and focus the practices of Table Ministry, co-creation of the Kingdom of God, and the incarnation of the Body of Christ. “Benedictine spirituality says also that to know God in time and space we must regularly seek to find God in one time and space that enables us to recognize God more easily in every other one.”²³² “The function of the spiritual life is not to escape into the next world; it is to live well in this one. The monastic engages in creative work as a way to be responsible for the up building of the community.”²³³ “The way we answer doors is the way we deal with the world. ... Hospitality in the Benedictine community was attention and presence to the needs of the other.”²³⁴ “It is labor’s transfiguration of the commonplace, the transformation of the ordinary that makes cocreators of us all.”²³⁵ “Benedict obviously believes that life lived fully is life lived on two planes: attention to God and attention to the good of the other.”²³⁶ “Benedictine spirituality forms us to know our place in the world. When we refuse to give place to others, when we consume all the space of our worlds with our own sounds and our own truths and our own wisdom and our own ideas, there is no room for anyone else’s ideas.”²³⁷ “When we make ourselves God, no one in the world is safe in our presence.”²³⁸ “He tells us to keep this Rule, its values, its concepts, its insights. It is not

²³² Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 226.

²³³ Ibid., 211.

²³⁴ Ibid., 242.

²³⁵ Ibid., 211.

²³⁶ Ibid., 12.

²³⁷ Ibid., 74.

²³⁸ Ibid., 77.

what we read, he implies; it is what we become that counts.”²³⁹ In hospitality, like other ministries, “He does not want people in positions simply to get a job done. He wants people in positions who embody why we bother to do the job at all. He wants holy listeners who care about the effect of what they do to everybody else.”²⁴⁰ When we attend to others, “Justice, honesty, and compassion are the marks of those who dwell with God in life, he insists. . . . If we do good for the poor, it is because God has given us the courage to do good. If we speak truth in the face of lies, it is because God has given us a taste for the truth. If we uphold the rights of women and men alike, it is because God has given us eyes to see the wonders of all creation. We are not a power unto ourselves.”²⁴¹

Reflecting on institutional care, Chittister notes,

Welfare agencies give clothes; parishes collect food for the poor; flea markets provide rare goods at cheap prices. The problem is that too many of the handouts come with hardly a look and never a personal moment for the people they set out to serve. Benedictine spirituality sets a standard of comfort and care, conversation and respect—the things that make a human being human—as well as bed and board. And, as the presence of the abbot and prioress proves, none of us can afford to be too busy or too important to do the same.²⁴²

The fact is that we all have to learn to provide for others while maintaining the values and structures, the balance and depth, of our own lives. The community that is to greet the guest is not to barter its own identity in the name of the guest. One the contrary, if we become less than we must be then we will be no gift for the guest at all. . . . Balance and order and prayer in the life of those who practice Benedictine spirituality are keys to being a genuine support in the lives of others.²⁴³

Benedictine monasteries remain a gift to the church, a place where the wisdom and practices of hospitality flourish. “In the Rule of Benedict, there is no such thing as

²³⁹ Ibid., 302.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 14-15.

²⁴² Ibid., 243.

²⁴³ Ibid., 233.

coming out of time to the monastery. Come in the middle of lunch; come in the middle of prayer; come and bother us with your blessings at any time. There is always someone waiting for you.”²⁴⁴ “The message to the stranger is clear: come right in and disturb our perfect lives. You are the Christ for us today.”²⁴⁵

Hospitality Unchanged: The Eastern Church

By the tenth century, as the Eastern and Western branches of the church became increasingly divided, their theologies of hospitality took slightly divergent tones informed by the primary practices of their faith and intermingled within their respective cultural settings. While the Western Church saw hospitality come to reside most commonly within the sphere of the monastery, the Eastern Church drew hospitality within the domain of its theology of divinization. Kirk notes, “In Eastern churches, truth, liturgy, and life are one and they flow together when the Christian community of love celebrates God’s redeeming love, which manifests itself in humble service to humanity. Hospitality becomes the heart of every Eastern Christian diocese, parish and family.”²⁴⁶ Within the ebbs and flows of divinization, God’s welcome of us into the Triune Dance affirms and informs hospitality. John Chrysostom taught the centrality of hospitality as the place where we re-enact God’s welcome to us, “Let every family have a room where Christ is welcomed in the person of the hungry and thirsty stranger.”²⁴⁷ In the iconic language of

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 284.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 228.

²⁴⁶ Kirk: 104.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

the church, where the image invites us into reflective worship of the Creator, "... if you lift up your hands in prayer without sharing with the poor, it is worth nothing ..." for the poor are icons of Jesus.²⁴⁸ Eastern Orthodoxy firmly anchored its theology of hospitality within Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats.²⁴⁹ In a telling statement, "The only criterion Christ gives us for our judgment before God is Hospitality."²⁵⁰ "He who loves his human brother fulfills the love he does to God, for God accepts this love as shown to Himself."²⁵¹

The Eastern Church offers a faith that is beautiful in its depth and clarity. By building practice upon practice, instead of pursuing discord and inter-personal violence, the Eastern Church allows us to see a deep reflection of God's revelation within our midst. It also challenges our Western fragility and shallowness. Unfortunately, by focusing solely on the possible Christ, instead of the present, real guest, Eastern Orthodoxy marginalizes Table Ministry. A kind of paranoia over missing the possible Christ overshadows the invitation to redemptive ministry. There is no recognition in the Eastern writings that the stranger is indeed a person. If the stranger is not Christ in disguise and condemnation is not forth-coming for maltreatment, then what? How do guest and host meet in God's presence? The church fathers failed to wrestle with this question. Kirk notes that while hospitality to the poor remains part of the celebrated liturgy, the Eastern Church preaches the "Bad News" of the Gospel to the poor with its

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Matt. 25:31-46.

²⁵⁰ Kirk: 104.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 108. Basil and Verna E. F. Harrison, *On the Human Condition*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press "Popular Patristics" Series (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 118.

indifference.²⁵² Eastern Theology does not include the life-changing power of the Kingdom of God spreading as one life touches another within the liminal space of the guest/host relationship. “In short, the early Eastern church and the contemplative tradition in the West emphasized image, while the Western church, both Roman and Protestant, largely emphasized likeness. The Western church lost the ground and transformative center; the Eastern church lost the dynamic and cutting-edge that moved outward.”²⁵³

Hospitality within the Fractured Western Church

As we mine tradition, theology, and practice within the Church, we are reminded that the Eastern Church in its coherency is an anomaly within the larger Christian body. While the Eastern Church clung to its ancient roots, the Western Church became the incubator of rebellion and inter-personal violence in the name of Jesus. With the fall of the Roman Empire, scattered Christians introduced indigenous and nomadic European tribes to the Christian Gospel message. Increasingly, however, church leaders, separated by centuries and miles, from the origins of faith, relied more on themselves and their local influence and power than on the Holy Spirit as the One who empowers us. Table Ministry was lost in favor of organized and efficient methods of ministry.

The rise of hostels and hospitals in the early middle ages was heralded as an advancement of faith. Together, the Church, as a whole, would care for the outcasts, poor, and strangers. Unfortunately, in these places of organized care, strangers no longer

²⁵² Kirk: 104, 114.

²⁵³ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 123.

encountered individuals where there was space and time to develop relationships.²⁵⁴ Care was handed out as needed and, over time, it was increasingly administered by paid staff in a business relationship.²⁵⁵ Hand in hand with the loss of Table Ministry, lived in liminal space, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and engaged by specific individuals, came the rise of accumulated Church wealth. Resources were increasingly moved within the walls of the church and dispersed less for the care and well-being of the whole community. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, even the basic practices of hospitality become entangled in politics and a mosaic of reformation, counter-reformation, and re-reformation.

Rather than a solitary event, the Protestant Reformation encompassed a number of divergent streams simultaneously rising across the European continent and finally reaching a violent confluence. Sorting through the treatment and maltreatment of one church group versus another during this time is testimony to both the heights and depths of humanity. To the violent extent Protestants were rebuked for breaking away from the Catholic Church, they also reacted and over-reacted to the reformers birthed within their own groups. Caught most violently in the midst of this were the Anabaptists.

Calvin and Zwingli both modeled the Protestant assumption that civil and church authority should be combined.²⁵⁶ As Calvin became the leader of Geneva and Zwingli of Zurich, both modeled extreme hostility to those who questioned their theology which governed both the ecclesiastical and civil realms:

²⁵⁴ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 6, 48.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 45.

²⁵⁶ Justo L. González, *The Reformation to the Present Day*, 1st ed., The Story of Christianity (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 56; Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 52.

In spite of their radical views on other matters, both Luther and Zwingli accepted the notion that church and state must live side by side, supporting each other, and both refrained from any interpretation of the gospel that would make it a threat to the established social order. The Anabaptists, without seeking to do so, threatened the social order. ... All this the Anabaptist undid with their insistence on the church as a voluntary community, totally distinct from the civil community.²⁵⁷

As they were threatened to conform theologically, the Anabaptists refused. Sadly, Gonzales notes, “The martyrs were many—probably more than those who died during the three centuries of persecution before the time of Constantine.”²⁵⁸

Within their local communities, Anabaptists did not intentionally practice hospitality to engage those on the boundary of the Kingdom of God, they simply believed that “a faith that was merely creedal was meaningless.”²⁵⁹ However, because they lived in liminal and marginal spaces under persecution, many lives were changed encountering these simple hosts. Like the Early Church, the Anabaptists discovered “Hospitality carries a different power within an outlawed community than within a privileged one.”²⁶⁰ Anabaptists saw themselves as stewards of their possessions, not privileged, exclusive owners. Property was a sacred trust existing not for the owner, but for the benefit of all.²⁶¹ Anabaptists understood all land belongs to God and we remain its stewards only as long as we share it with others.²⁶² Anyone who prayed the Lord’s Prayer but then failed

²⁵⁷ González, 56.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Peter James Klassen, “Mutual Aid among the Anabaptists: Doctrine and Practice,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 37, no. 2 (1963): 78.

²⁶⁰ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 29.

²⁶¹ Klassen: 78.

²⁶² Kirk: 112-113.

to share bread with one in need was considered a hypocrite.²⁶³ “At the same time, no one was permitted to take unfair advantage of the generosity of others.”²⁶⁴ “This spirit of concern for the welfare of others stands in stark comparison to the bitter persecution that characterized the times.”²⁶⁵ “The harsh conditions resulting from persecution, famine, and political upheavals motivated the believers to gather into communities where they depended on each other for physical and spiritual survival. Sharing material goods and caring for each other's needs were major elements of the Anabaptist movement.”²⁶⁶ This sharing, known as Mutual Aid, included: a common purse, shelter, food and clothing, employment, and refuge. Faith “influenced the economic views of the Anabaptists” following the teachings of Jesus which “led to a ‘rediscovery’ of love for one’s neighbor.”²⁶⁷ “Salvation was not a singular moment, but a day-to-day commitment in the face of uncertainty.”²⁶⁸ As a result of the Anabaptist tradition, we are left a rich resource on the timely physical care that is to be given others as individuals and unique creations worthy of respect.

²⁶³ Klassen: 79.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 84.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 92.

²⁶⁶ J. Winfield Fretz, Harold S. Bender, and Laban Peache, "Mutual Aid," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, accessed December 2, 2012, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M88ME.html>.

²⁶⁷ Jeni Hiatt Umble, "Mutual Aid Among the Augsburg Anabaptists, 1526-1528" in Willard M. Swartley and Donald B. Kraybill, *Building Communities of Compassion: Mennonite Mutual Aid in Theory and Practice* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1998), 106-111, 114, 105.

²⁶⁸ Gilbert I. Bond, "Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger: The Practice of Encountering the Other in Two Christian Communities" in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 139.

Christine Pohl notes that John Chrysostom, John Wesley, and John Calvin all contributed significantly to the understanding of hospitality.²⁶⁹ This seems counter to the hostility with which Calvin, like Zwingli, dealt with his opponents, wielding both ecclesial and civil authority. Robert Vosloo tackles this apparent disparity by postulating with Heiko Obermann that Calvin's theology originally incorporated "a graceful hospitality"²⁷⁰ as he instructed civil leaders to provide municipal care for refugees.²⁷¹ Informed by Calvin's own personal experience in exile, election and predestination were originally rich theologies significant to the refugee experience of Calvin and his followers. Promises of God's election validated their place in the world.²⁷²

Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him. Say, "He is a stranger"; but the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you, by virtue of the fact that he forbids you to despise your own flesh (Isa. 58:7, Vg.). Say, "He is contemptible and worthless"; but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image. Say that you owe nothing for any service of his; but God, as it were, has put him in his own place in order that you may recognise toward him the many and great benefits with which God has bound you to himself. Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions.²⁷³

Unfortunately, Calvin failed to nuance his written theology with practical instructions for hospitable living. Calvin's heart was forgotten as time embraced his pedantic written theology. Anchored in absolute sovereignty, exemplified by aggression toward other

²⁶⁹ Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 85, 87-88.

²⁷⁰ Robert R. Vosloo, "The Displaced Calvin: 'Refugee Reality' as a Lens to Re-Examine Calvin's Life, Theology and Legacy," *Religion & Theology* 16, (2009): 36-37.

²⁷¹ Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 99.

²⁷² Vosloo, "The Displaced Calvin: 'Refugee Reality' as a Lens to Re-Examine Calvin's Life, Theology and Legacy," 47-48.

²⁷³ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book III, chapter vii, section 6.

streams of Protestant faith, and forgetting its graceful hospitality, Calvin's theological legacy quickly became graceless, brittle, and fractious.

Within the German Lutheran church, Pietism rose as a reform movement under the leadership of Joseph Spener. His work, *Pia Desideria*, published in 1675, outlined his concerns that faith had become a matter of academic discord and debate rather than a lived reality. The third element of pietism is "the overarching concern of love for one's neighbor. For the Pietists love of neighbor undergirded the practices of good faith and humility."²⁷⁴ "'Love' was no mere emotion, but the practice of real and genuine care through acts of service. ... For in both the practitioner assumes, affirms, and embraces the humanity of the other, and sees their adversary as loved by God, and deserving of respect, care and hospitality."²⁷⁵ Fragments of the wealth and depth of hospitality blossomed within the Pietist tradition as respect for people, love, and care were affirmed and integrated into the fabric of these faith communities. The manner in which Moravians and others treated one another testified to the hospitable God whom they loved and served. John Wesley had a great deal of interaction with the Moravians²⁷⁶ and through this the Methodist branch of the church was later gifted with this rich heritage of faith.²⁷⁷ In seventeenth century England, the Quaker movement also embraced the simplicity of hospitality. The Quakers believed that each person possessed an "inner light" facilitating

²⁷⁴ Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, Seminar Editions (Philadelphia,: Fortress Press, 1964), 102.

²⁷⁵ Chris Gehrz, "Pietism and Civil Discourse," *The Pietist Schoolman*, August 28, 2012, accessed December 2, 2012, <http://pietistschoolman.com/2012/08/28/pietism-and-civil-discourse-christian-collins-winn/>.

²⁷⁶ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 59-60, 68.

²⁷⁷ González, 208.

“the capability we all have to recognize and accept the presence of God.”²⁷⁸ This attentiveness to the inner light within others makes Friends some of the most welcoming, if not the most welcoming, people in the Church. By focusing on God’s presence in the I-Thou relationship,²⁷⁹ Friends naturally remain open to sharing life. The inner light and Wesley’s prevenient grace, while not exactly the same, like colored light thrown from the facets of a prism, give evidence of God’s ever-present hospitality to humanity.

The Reformation, primarily a reactive, versus proactive movement, did not intentionally incorporate hospitality like the monastics or mystics; rather, various branches seem to have been entrusted by God with bits and pieces. As the Protestant church domesticated and took on the local flavor of its culture and large refugee populations of splinter groups sought asylum in less-judgmental cities and provinces, it is difficult not to be struck by the disparity in behavior among the various Protestant groups. “Because of the large numbers of Protestant refugees fleeing persecution ... there was a significant resurgence of the moral credibility and practical relevance of hospitality to needy strangers.”²⁸⁰ Some groups sincerely welcomed seekers and new-comers, other fiercely guarded their own power. Common and taught understandings of hospitality as the work of civil rather than individual homes and churches diminished the sacramental nature of human care.²⁸¹ “As Protestant denominations increased, their diversity and their voluntary character meant that there was no institutional setting in which Protestants were

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 199.

²⁷⁹ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 90-91.

²⁸⁰ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 52.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 52-53.

pressed to welcome persons who were significantly different from themselves.”²⁸²

Intolerance was common and persecution readily embraced by church leaders in positions of civic authority.

At Oxford, Felicity Heal has explored the place of hospitality within the Medieval and late-medieval European cultures. Her reflections remain instructive as they are offered outside of the Church and reflect more honestly on the roles religious traditions played in forming culture. She notes that scholars believe that while the Church was commended to be charitable, it was also entrusted with upholding “the natural order of things.”²⁸³ This is an interesting comment in light of the fact that authentic hospitality disrupts established social structures. She notes, “The practical *raison d’etre* of the great household was that it provided a suitable support for its head; ... To justify such an establishment, however, contemporaries sought to integrate Christian values into its pattern of behaviour.”²⁸⁴ Hospitality “... was particularly required of the clergy, and of the bishops as the descendants of those who, in the early Church, were responsible for the care of the community.”²⁸⁵ Through Heal’s research and writings, we see that the radical nature of hospitality, as core to the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, was reduced, in both Catholic and Protestant cultures, to merely handing out enough food through one’s servants so that power structures could be maintained, justified, and possibly

²⁸² Ibid., 53.

²⁸³ Felicity Heal, "Food Gifts, the Household and the Politics of Exchange in Early Modern England," *Past & Present* 199, no. 1 (2008): 45.

²⁸⁴ Felicity Heal, "The Archbishops of Canterbury and the Practice of Hospitality," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 33, no. 4 (1982): 545.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

expanded.²⁸⁶ Additionally, Pohl notes that Protestant leaders like Calvin believed that the work of hospitality resided within the civic and home structures, emphasizing frugality, orderliness, and discernment, not the church community. This led to a loss of guest/host relationship within the larger proactive and protective context of the church community.²⁸⁷ Yet the radical nature of Table Ministry necessitates and fully resides in the notion that broken humanity cannot legislate a kingdom of God's design. Table Ministry is the fiery furnace in which the dross of civic power is pre-empted by the flames of God's passionate love carried and blown by the Spirit. As a result, the more the Kingdom is legislated, the less it comes to life.

Born on the heels of the Reformation, John Wesley's contributions offer us the unique gift of hindsight. Wesley was a scholar as well as a practicing minister. He was not afraid to learn from the mistakes of others. His life and theology deeply embody the practical wisdom of his mother Susannah Wesley and his experiences living with the Moravians. God's gift through him to the church was a keen theological mind held in tension with deep conviction and absolute adherence to practical application all steeped within the spirituality of the mystics. Where spirituality was lost in the abyss of alcoholism and the grinding poverty of industrialism, Wesley took to the fields to preach and call people to God's redeeming love. "Without intentionally reviving the ancient practices of hospitality, Wesley recovered many of the distinctive aspects of the tradition

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 547, 558.

²⁸⁷ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 52; Christine D. Pohl, "Practicing Hospitality in the Face of 'Complicated Wickedness'," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 42, no. 1 (2007): 38.

of Christian hospitality without ever describing what he was doing as hospitality.”²⁸⁸

Wesley taught that believers needed to offer hospitality personally, face-to-face, for the sake of both the host and the guest. He “deliberately employed early church and patristic institutional models. ... This blending of poor and weak persons with influential leaders was another significant return to early Christian understandings of hospitality.”²⁸⁹ For Wesley, “benevolence did not require conformity;”²⁹⁰ rather, it needed individual passions and gifts to accomplish the tasks Christ calls us to embrace.

Wesley’s deep conviction that God was at work in the life of each person granted freedom for the Holy Spirit to work and for that work to be recognized and affirmed by believers. Pohl notes that as he tackled the “complicated wickedness” of his time, he responded with a complex web of ministry. “Addressing the realities of complicated wickedness and complicated misery required a complication of love, holiness, justice, mercy, and truth.”²⁹¹ Alcoholism, poverty, abuse, illiteracy, prisons, and institutional poor houses informed Wesley’s practical theology. Methodists have been credited with saving England from its own demise. Methodism remains another testimony to the unique ways the Kingdom of God breaks in to the world. Pohl also notes the unique form of hospitality in Methodism where the host always went to the guest.²⁹² This form of Table Ministry seems to have been uniquely suited for the particular needs of the deeply structured and socially and economically fractured English culture. “Although Wesley

²⁸⁸ Pohl, "Practicing Hospitality in the Face of "Complicated Wickedness"," 10.

²⁸⁹ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 100, 54.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 82.

²⁹¹ Pohl, "Practicing Hospitality in the Face of "Complicated Wickedness"," 12, 14.

²⁹² Ibid., 22-23.

did not often use the term hospitality, he and the early Methodists were very dependent on its practice. Wesley's collected sermons remain today, an always blunt reminder to remain attentive to the basic practices of faith:

A poor wretch cries to me for an alms: I look, and see him covered with dirt and rags. But through these I see one that has an immortal spirit, made to know, and love, and dwell with God to eternity. I honour him for his Creator's sake. I see, through all these rags, that he is purpled over with the blood of Christ. I love him for the sake of his Redeemer.²⁹³

One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is, that, ... one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know; they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their hardness of heart.²⁹⁴

God's love and welcome were at the heart of Methodist theology. "By reintegrating household and the church, the small group meetings of early Methodism recovered the most liminal setting for hospitality."²⁹⁵ In addition, Wesley recovered dimensions of Christian hospitality that made it more likely for people to see others and their needs, and to resist blindness, hoarding and extravagance by sharing their lives with others."²⁹⁶

Hospitality & Christ's Church

With the rise of nation-states, colonialism became the order of the day. For nearly four hundred years kings and queens conspired with bishops, cardinals, and popes not only to explore the parts of the earth unknown to the heirs of the Roman Empire, but also

²⁹³ John Wesley, Sermon 100 'On Pleasing All Men', *Works of John Wesley Vols. 7-8 Sermons Vol. 3 Addresses*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986), 145-146.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., Sermon 98 'On Visiting the Sick', 119.

²⁹⁵ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 111.

²⁹⁶ Pohl, "Practicing Hospitality in the Face of "Complicated Wickedness", 15.

to forcefully bring indigenous populations into the confines of the established church while stripping the natural resources from the land. “Unfortunately, the rich tradition of hospitality is marred by Christian contributions to the language and practices of exclusion, and use of the Gospel to further hatred and human misery.”²⁹⁷ Rather than see the Garden as a relational gathering place of God’s design and resourcing daily distribution, civil and religious leaders reinterpreted the stewardship of creation into the acquisition of creation for personal profit:

The Constantinian error has been fatal in many ways. Rather than challenging the principalities and powers, the people of God became united with the powers; rather than proclaiming the peace, the church embraced an ethic of coercion, power and, thus, violence; rather than resisting the power of the state, the church provided divine legitimization for the state, which has invariably led to the hubris of empire, conquest, and persecution; rather than modeling a new kind of society, the church imitated the social structures of hierarchy and administration; rather than being a servant to the poor and the oppressed, the church has been complicit in wielding economic and political power over the poor and the oppressed.

Constantinianism is a multifaceted heresy that has surfaced and resurfaced throughout history. ... Constantinianism was reinvented in the Reformation of the 16th century. ... The error of Constantine was reinvented yet again in the age of nationalism, even when there was a formal disestablishment of church and state.²⁹⁸

Colonialism and the Western Church, philosophical and military heirs of Greece and Rome, influenced by the Enlightenment, brought all manner of thought and practices firmly within the grip of dualism as humanity now reached out to grab all the fruit on the Tree of Knowledge. Reflecting on his African American experience as a practicing Orthodox minister, Turbo Qualls reflects on how we are called to preach the Gospel outside the church. “[This has] sometimes fostered resentment amongst the ‘evangelized.’ Why is this? It’s not because these folk resent Christ, they resent being told they must be

²⁹⁷ Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 83.

²⁹⁸ Hunter, 153-154.

European, Spanish, English etc., in order to be Christian.”²⁹⁹ Ethicist Rebecca Todd

Peters and practitioner Letty Russell interact exploring the inhospitality toward indigenous peoples and the mistranslation of the great commission to create a global Christian empire:

Peters points to the false practice of hospitality as global mission as an example of the kind of hospitality we must move away from. Churches that understand Christianity as “universal truth” and assume a dualistic worldview in which the “others” are inferior to us in every way, also believe *those people* need to be saved, dominated, and controlled by people in the churches of the former colonizing nations. ... And once we begin to listen, we may discover that our assumptions are in error, which may in turn lead to new understandings that our previous frames prevented us from seeing or even imagining.³⁰⁰

While we are called to co-create the Kingdom of God, this work does not come from our own creative imagination, nor does it lie within paradigms we can fully grasp. It is God’s to design, ours only to co-create, as we warmly engage the stranger and freely resource the whole of creation. While we are called to preach the Gospel, around the Banquet Table hosts do not require that guests become like them; rather, strangers are accepted with the outrageous differences and gifts they bring from the Creator, reflecting the Divine.

As we speak of Table Ministry, we are forced to wrestle with the legacy of our own history of hospitality. We must look long and hard at its gifts as well as its liabilities.³⁰¹ Theology in the name of truth has often triumphed over the example of the One who was Truth but gave up his life for the sake of those who did not acknowledge him. Too often we have succumbed to the temptation of reaching for the Tree of

²⁹⁹ Turbo Qualls, "Catching Xenophilia: Contagious Hospitality in Orthodox Parishes," *Road to Emmaus* 12, no. 4 (2011): 70.

³⁰⁰ Russell, Clarkson, and Ott, 82.

³⁰¹ Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 83-84, 90.

Knowledge that we might understand enough to plan out the Kingdom of God instead of attentively responding to the relational and creative work of the Holy Spirit. The Table Ministry of true hospitality forces us to look deep within. Will we be people who follow instead of lead?³⁰² Will we live attentively? Will we learn from Christ who was both guest and host? Will we accept the invitation to come and dine in the Kingdom, realizing that call, even when we act as host, draws us also in as guests to heal, grow, and give up our brokenness? Will we exchange the security of planning out the Kingdom of God, to join the Triune dance in celebration around the Banquet Table, delighting in seats full of outcasts, now clothed in Christ's abundant love, recognizing that one of those guests is, in fact, us?

³⁰² For a compelling challenge to live as followers of Christ rather than leaders, read Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus*.

Chapter 4

Table Ministry

Table Ministry: An Introduction

A faithful and prayerful exegesis of hospitality illuminates several key eternal companions to hospitality and the intimate inter-relationships between them. While we begin with what appears to be simple historical practices of hospitality which show our care and attention to strangers as co-inhabitants of God's creation, we quickly find that we cannot explore the practices of hospitality without the larger context in which God established hospitality to thrive and share in creation. Spiritual practices are never important for their own sake; rather, they are vital and key to our growth and deeper relationships with self, God, and others. We have already explored hospitality from the perspective of God at creation, through the early Israelite history, the coming of Christ to earth, and the newly established Early Church. From there we followed the practices of hospitality through the desert and monastic traditions, the various times of persecution, the divergent streams between East and West and Catholic and Protestant, and in the practical theology of several faith traditions. In order to facilitate the remainder of our discussion, the several companions to hospitality will be explored within three larger theological constructs in an attempt to weave their intimate belonging with one another. Hospitality requires an open heart and receptive posture towards God, self, and others. It is in this spirit that we embark to plunge deeper into the paradoxes and mysteries of faith which both reveal and shroud the longings and being of a God far beyond our finite understanding but which resonate within the *Imago Dei* bequeathed to human creation.

This journey grasps not for the Tree of Knowledge, which diminishes the Kingdom of God, but willingly abandons itself into the mysteries of the Incarnation where the Table Ministry of God draws us into the life of the Triune Dance where we are exquisitely known as beloved of the Creator.

The historical practices of hospitality within its practitioners encompass the various components of Table Ministry. Christ's ministry on earth, while known within the larger knowledge-based Protestant church for his verbal teachings, was actually comprised primarily of consistent and attentive practices of welcoming others into opportunities for shared dining and healing. Both the physical activities of Christ and his primary form of teaching, parables, centered around the welcome of God to individuals and the welcome of individuals to one another within the larger community of God. Table Ministry broadly includes: the ministry of presence within intentionally established space, the guest/host relationship where strangers are welcomed rather than merely tolerated, the use of food and table imagery to embody relational welcoming, the celebration of the gifts strangers bring in their created differences, the over-whelming abundance of God's resources within creation, and the value of limits within public space that retain the mystery of individuality which empower the unique gifts we each bring to the Table to share with one another. All of these parts, interwoven, begin to create a tapestry reflective of the Creator God and the eternal Triune Dance where the Table Ministry of Christ and Christ Incarnate within the Body of Christ co-create the Kingdom of God in its coming and present form upon the earth.

Table Ministry: Space & Presence

Without attention to space and presence, especially within our current loud, frenetic culture, there can be no opportunity for a host and guest to meet much less form a welcoming relationship. More than previous cultures, we must consistently and faithfully attend to practices of presence which establish and enable space to welcome strangers and form relationship. As Americans we have inherited an entitlement to “take up all the space we need;” Mary Kate Morse reminds us that “being loud is a physical manifestation of being insensitive about the use of physical space.”³⁰³ This inheritance comes both from the rich and abundant physical space our land has historically provided (to the conquerors) and from our faith tradition which marginalized the stranger and needy ones from our homes into the institutions established for their collective rather than personally relational care. Sutherland reflects on this noting,

The most pernicious factor is the oldest of all: hospitality requires a conscious effort to be “your brother’s keeper.” As a consequence, we often overlook the fact that being our brother’s keeper requires that we give attention to the physical space that we share with others. Hospitality is the caring for that shared space. The hospitable person is making the assertion that when we live or meet together in that space, sometimes permanently and sometimes only momentarily, we strive to keep that space, whether public or private, inviting and welcoming. This is hard to do.³⁰⁴

The lifestyle and teachings of Christ, as well as the examples of historical practitioners, faithfully and painfully remind us that we must remain attentive to create and to care for space in which we may live peacefully and into which we can invite strangers. We easily forget we do not own our resources; rather, we steward them for God’s hospitable work

³⁰³ Morse, 134.

³⁰⁴ Sutherland, x.

of sharing. Dining out where we share the space of a restaurant owner is not the same as dining in where we share “our” space with a guest. Attentiveness to holding “our” space loosely as we share in the work of restoration is important and encourages us to remember that invitations into places of personal significance are meaningful and build deeper personal relationships. Hobbs reminds us in the ancient world guests were never invited elsewhere for a meal. Hospitality is in the invitation to share one’s personal space.³⁰⁵ Space gives us depth for vision. It also disempowers reactionary fear, for fear cannot dwell in space inhabited by the attentive presence of self and God. Space allows us the freedom to breathe. As we breathe, we see beauty. Depth adds perspective. Perspective illuminates beauty. Space is for community, creativity, and relationships. Space allows us to see beauty in our created self, in God, in the stranger, and in the Dance into which we are all invited.

Within the space we guard for the presence of Christ and the guest, we too must enter. Presence encompasses living in the space we have cultivated. Presence both exists in its own form and results in the existence of vital, life-giving relationships. The form of presence has historically taken shape within silence and attentiveness. Noise fills with self what God intended for others. The desert fathers and mothers illustrated how “solitude creates a place that is wide enough to make room for others.”³⁰⁶ The self is large and demanding. The Imago Dei within us looks not to self but to the joyful creation and sharing of life with others. Within the Imago Dei abundance and generosity fill space

³⁰⁵ Hobbs: 13.

³⁰⁶ Pratt and Homan, 136.

with presence which, paradoxically, does not actually fill space, but mysteriously expands space for the inclusion and celebration of others:

Further, God's gracious movement gives an orientation of spirit that accompanies hospitality so that all participants know themselves to be operating within and for God's life. This orientation of spirit focuses the Christian life on the crucial role of presence, both ours and God's, and hospitality. At its heart, the spiritual power of hospitality rests in simple presence. Hospitality, then, is a spiritual discipline that directs our attention to God's life, opens our hearts to participating in that life through presence and humility, and transforms our lives toward holiness and abundance. Seen this way, hospitality is the opportunity to give our life away in order to gain it, to lose it in order to find it.³⁰⁷

As we find our life, the Imago Dei reveals that our life is the Divine Dance replete with God and others. As our presence finds form in life, it concurrently finds attentiveness to others creating life within them. "To reveal someone's beauty is to reveal their value by giving them time, attention, and tenderness. To love is not just to do something for them but to reveal to them their own uniqueness, to tell them that they are special and worthy of attention. We can express this revelation through our open and gentle presence, in the way we look at and listen to a person, the way we speak to and care for someone."³⁰⁸ It takes courage to keep silence,³⁰⁹ but when we move past what we know and truly listen we grant dignity³¹⁰ allowing another person to share their story and reveal their created self.³¹¹ "Stories have a strange power of attraction."³¹² Houck painfully and gratefully discovered this while living in an intentional community of hospitality acknowledging

³⁰⁷ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 30-31.

³⁰⁸ Vanier, 22.

³⁰⁹ Anita Houck, "Hospitality and Courage," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 10, no. 3 (2007): 182.

³¹⁰ Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, The Wit Lectures (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 36.

³¹¹ Pratt and Homan, 271.

³¹² Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 90.

that the best she had to contribute to others was not her personal success nor her ability to teach, but rather her painful honesty of human failing.³¹³ Our deepest failings and fears long not to remain hidden, but to be known and accepted not as the defining part of our larger self, but rather as an acceptable part of our self which then has the space to incorporate, to grow, and to create a new definition beyond our failings and sufferings. “Recognition sees beyond what appears to be to what truly is. Recognition speaks to our deepest longings to be seen and known, and is at the heart of hospitality.”³¹⁴ Richard Rohr reminds us “The True Self is a shared and shareable self, or it is not the True Self.”³¹⁵

Presence requires constant attentiveness and faithful practice. Presence that comes and goes when it is more or less convenient or when it is not as costly wounds those around us rather than welcoming them in, it tells others your self is larger and more important than your selves living together. “Being a person of hospitality involves getting out of self for long enough periods that you can hear other people—really hear them—and pay attention to what they might need at this moment.”³¹⁶ The legacy of the Benedictine practices of hospitality is not how many people were physically cared for over the centuries, but rather the deep encounter with the eternal revelation that “if you want to be whole, you have to let the other in.”³¹⁷ “The humble person cultivates a soul in which everyone is safe. A humble person handles the presence of the other with soft

³¹³ Houck: 182.

³¹⁴ Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 27.

³¹⁵ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 160.

³¹⁶ Pratt and Homan, 172.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 52.

hands, a velvet heart, and an unveiled mind.”³¹⁸ Tenderness with others touches them in ways that co-create healing. Tenderness is not weakness; rather, it is life-giving force anointing wellness and wholeness, the blessing to be and to be well.³¹⁹ Presence does not always manifest immediate physical healing, but rather, we learn, uncomfortably, at first, to simply be with others in their suffering. Like Christ entering this world, we enter the world of others as we welcome them into ours. Together, living in God’s world, presence affirms life with, beyond, because, and around pain. “When vulnerable exchange happens, there is always a broadening of being on both sides. We are bigger and better people afterward. Those who never go there always remain small and superficial and unconnected to themselves.”³²⁰ Presence attends to pain not in the manner in which we reach toward the Tree of Knowledge to understand it, nor in our human inclination to forcefully conquer and demolish it; rather, presence attends to pain that we might share life together. God did not create a broken world, but God loves the Creation so passionately and longingly that God willingly lives within the pain of Creation that Creation might be drawn into the Triune Dance in such a way that the Kingdom is co-created and we find life-giving restoration. Reflecting on our common human pain, Dorothy Sayers notes, “here Christianity has its enormous advantage over every other religion in the world. It is the only religion that gives value to evil and suffering.”³²¹ As such, hospitality is the means by which we welcome each other within our shared

³¹⁸ Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 95.

³¹⁹ Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 98.

³²⁰ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 165.

³²¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2004), 61.

humanity. “The genius of the biblical revelation is that it refuses to deny the dark side of things, but forgives failure and integrates falling to achieve its promised wholeness ... The gaze of God receives us exactly as we are, without judgment or distortion, subtraction or addition.”³²²

Presence requires an active posture of listening which opens our broken humanity, freely and fearfully, to the broken humanity of the stranger. “As we see Jesus in others, we begin to see Jesus in ourselves.”³²³ As a host attends to the needs of the guest by listening to his or her story, guests are received into the larger community.³²⁴ “We are made in the image of God. God’s own presence is within us wherever we go, whatever we do. Presence ... is a natural God-given birthright.”³²⁵ Listening presence allows both the co-creation of life as stories, heard and celebrated, affirm existence and healing, as suffering and failure are met with abundant acceptance rather than marginalizing exclusion from the Dance. Len Sweet reminds us that when we remove ourselves from the center of attention, our focus on another person opens their eyes to see Christ at work within them.³²⁶ When we listen to someone we glimpse their soul, we “create an open page where they are free to write their story.”³²⁷ When we listen to another, one of the hardest things we struggle with, besides a short attention span, is the willingness to not

³²² Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 59, 159.

³²³ Hershberger, 97.

³²⁴ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 14.

³²⁵ Morse, 86.

³²⁶ Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, 54, 70.

³²⁷ Pratt and Homan, 273.

“fix” the other person.³²⁸ While we co-create healing, the work and time of healing is God’s alone. This is both frustrating, as God does not seem concerned with our hurriedness, and freeing, as we are unburdened with the results, the “success” or “failure” of our presence. Winter reminds us that Christ’s life, lived in a small “e” way, around tables and in homes, developed a quality of presence in a meaningful, relational way. “It is a quality absolutely essential...to be really present to another, to allow another person to be really present to me ... The key is focused attention. That which was at the periphery becomes the center of attention or the subject of our concern. Others who are with me are suddenly one with me. I am fully aware of them and they are aware of me. We are present to each other.”³²⁹

One of the greatest gifts of presence we can offer our world today parallels and echoes that of the monastic tradition: the vow of stability. We live in a frenzied culture which in its constant pursuit of more has lost value for constancy. Willingly taking a family vow to remain located in a particular neighborhood in Vancouver, B.C., Dickau honestly reflects, “If we are to overcome the fragmentation of contemporary life and contribute to the stewardship of creation within our cities, we need to recover an understanding of how God is restoring and redeeming places rather than discarding them.”³³⁰ This is painful to our ears and hearts. We live in a disposable culture. Increasingly goods are manufactured to be replaced rather than last; profit is the only

³²⁸ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 63, 64; Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, 22-23.

³²⁹ Winter, 130-131.

³³⁰ Tim Dickau, *Plunging into the Kingdom Way: Practicing the Shared Strokes of Community, Hospitality, Justice, and Confession*, New Monastic Library: Resources for Discipleship (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 10.

value and more goods sold mean more profit. Simultaneously, we have accepted the corollary assumption that people and communities too are disposable. Presence unmasks disposability as a lie that sucks life from creation. God loves and wants us to co-create the restoration of each person, each place. “New and shiny” is a distraction.³³¹ Purchasing cannot create. Being part of the on-going presence in a particular place “takes precedence over other considerations. This is a commitment to particularity for the sake of the Gospel.”³³² Whether you subscribe to the notion that the Kingdom of God is even now coming on earth or you remain theologically comfortable with the view that we are awaiting some future heavenly event, we teach and claim to believe that what we own, the stuff of our lives, does not accompany us beyond the grave. What holds form in heaven are people, beloved and known. Our obsession and distraction with material goods does not fit any orthodox Christian theology. Presence in stability chooses daily to put people over objects, careers, income, and the various trappings limited to the earth of fallen humanity. Presence in a place, in the life of another, attentive to pain, attentive to story, and attentive to the Dance, declares that we are willing to embrace this particular person or this particular place as “an expression of incarnation reverberating from Christ.”³³³

³³¹ John Stone.

³³² Dickau, xi.

³³³ Ibid., 9.

Table Ministry: Guests & Hosts

Presence, intentionally taken up and maintained, creates space in which a guest and host can meet in Table Ministry. Without the presence of the Spirit, human form remains fearful of the stranger, the guest. Distracted by the knowledge of “stranger” and the knowledge of “self,” our Protestant tradition has wandered from the practices of hospitality which plant us firmly within God’s presence rather than reaching longingly for the fruit. The Creator as the original host in the Garden lovingly attended to the needs of the guest creation. Abundant resources supplied daily living. Relationships and opportunities were available. As we co-create the Kingdom of God, the Creator still supplies abundant resources at the Table. Space and presence facilitate relationships and opportunities to co-create together. Within the guest-host relationship the host offers two primary gifts. The first is the host with his or her particular talents and personality. The second is the unknown gift the guest needs. To do this, hosts must embrace silence so that the story of the guest can bring his or her form to life around the Table. Space for story brings a divine exchange of gifts—where the gifts are selves in individuality and communion and resources the guest needs such as friendship, food, or shelter. This relationship becomes covenantal toward “greater inclusiveness” and “mutual giving.”³³⁴

“The gifts flow into us, and they flow on from us. ... We are simultaneously receivers and givers. We received from Christ, and we give to and receive from each other. ... It’s

³³⁴ Richard, 35.

not just that Christ sends the goods to flow into us; Christ makes the goods flow from us as well, truly indwelling, motivating, and acting through us.”³³⁵

The guest-host relationship both reflects and is incorporated within the Triune Dance. As a host receiving a guest, we discover we are also a guest received by Christ our host. Simultaneously, hosts and guests together are drawn into the life-giving Dance. “Instead of a fragmented and empty self, then, hospitality draws us into a richer context where we must make sense of ourselves as ‘guests’ and ‘hosts,’ acknowledge our dependence on others, and learn to live with gratitude.”³³⁶ Within silence the mystery of co-creation is revealed. While we as host do not know what the guest needs, the openness provides space for the Spirit to breathe abundance and healing. “Personal hospitality, while meeting physical needs, also [provides] people with the human connections that [give] them a place in the world.”³³⁷ Within the abundant economy of God, guest and hosts often exchange roles³³⁸ as a host gives and, simultaneously, receives; a guest both receives and, simultaneously, gives. “Radical hospitality does not keep a ledger of what is given and what is received.”³³⁹ Good hosts discover as they welcome strangers they become guests of God’s divine grace.³⁴⁰ The guest-host relationship is not merely a simple description of the practice of hospitality; it becomes the Incarnation of the Body of Christ as the Kingdom of God breaks forth.

³³⁵ Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, 50-51.

³³⁶ Newman, 38.

³³⁷ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 48.

³³⁸ Koenig, *Soul Banquets: How Meals Become Mission in the Local Congregation*, 121.

³³⁹ Pratt and Homan, xi.

³⁴⁰ Pohl, "Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life," 43.

Table Ministry: Our Differences, Tolerance, & Public Space

Despite our best intentions to remain constant and attentive hosts, our human propensity for fear easily distracts a heart not firmly anchored in the ancient practices of the faith which compel us to remain in the liminal places of the self where we consistently and constantly rely on God. The mystics and those who willingly bind themselves to monasteries and intentional communities create rhythms of self-attentive and reflective obedience which push back fear. Two practices seem to facilitate the passage to the second half of life: one is attention to a deep, painful crisis; the other is monastic-style rhythms of obedience.³⁴¹ Attentiveness to the shape of our spiritual form is necessary to wrestling with fear. We “know” fear is not “of God,”³⁴² but we do not live in relationship to others as if this is true. In one of the greatest ironies of creation, the very differences God hard-wired into creation and lovingly crafts into each human form remain the very substance of our fears. Our fallen human nature, broken from its life-giving and defining form in the Creator, grasps a cheap substitute for understanding the self: differences. “I am ... because I am not like” Defining ourselves apart from, rather than in relationship with others³⁴³ affirms and gives form to fear of others rather than rejoicing and living into and out of the Imago Dei.

³⁴¹ Rohr discusses the first and eludes to the second in his book Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

³⁴² 2 Tim. 1:7.

³⁴³ Richard, 75.

Committed practitioners of hospitality must face, name, understand, and submit the form of their fear of the stranger, the other, and the possibility that my similarity to the other might dissolve myself, to the Creator in order to meet the guest, the stranger, with abundant welcome rather than fearful dread. Merely repeating or verbally assenting without practiced form to the mantra, “Perfect love casts out fear”³⁴⁴ cannot and will not accomplish the healing each human soul needs in order to confidently and eagerly anticipate the stranger. Likewise, “tolerance” and “diversity” are untenable *modus operandi* for hospitable living. Tolerance kills. Abundant acceptance of differences breathes life. Chittister reminds us “Acceptance is never merely tolerance, it is vision. ... Acceptance is the universal currency of real friendship.”³⁴⁵ Diversity excuses differences rather than acknowledging and affirming their divine source. Tolerance does not recognize differences as lavish gifts of the Creator God. Tolerance lives not with someone, but despite someone:

The word “tolerance,” by contrast, originally meant “to endure pain or hardship,” and it eventually came to signify “putting up with the opinions and practices of others.” There is a decisive difference. Tolerance somewhat condescendingly declares that we will “put up with” others, even when their views and habits are noxious to us. Hospitality, by contrast, offers to “put them up” in the old fashioned sense: we will make even our enemies our guests and thus our potential friends. Hospitality thus becomes an earthly analogy to the Gospel itself. Just as we were once strangers and enemies whom God has patiently taken into His household (Rom. 5:10), so must we be willing to offer hospitality to those who are alien and hostile to us.³⁴⁶

Intentionally illuminating the destructive nature of one of our most popular cultural icons, “tolerance,” ought to be the work of all faithful followers of Christ. Catholic philosopher

³⁴⁴ 1 John 4:18.

³⁴⁵ Chittister, *The Friendship of Women: The Hidden Tradition of the Bible*, 55.

³⁴⁶ Wood: 164.

Josef Pieper says “The true antithesis of love is not hate but despairing indifference.”³⁴⁷ It is easy for us to tolerate someone, as long as we can go home and live on without them; it is painful to accept them and make space for them to be as God created them to be. Hospitality does not settle for tolerance, for merely “getting along,”³⁴⁸ it calls us to “love the stranger.”³⁴⁹ “Monastic spirituality says that we are to honor one another. We are to listen to one another. We are to reach across boundaries and differences in this fragmented world and see in our differences distinctions of great merit that can mend a competitive, uncaring, and foolish world.”³⁵⁰ Conflict will inevitably arise even when we appreciate differences, but, as Pohl notes, robust disagreement is healthy for a community. It is “*how* we deal with people with whom we disagree on important matters that reveals our own deepest commitments.”³⁵¹

The church has accepted the cultural lie that “to be my friend you must agree with everything that I believe.” Parker Palmer laments the lack of public space which keeps us from this lie—space in which guests and hosts can meet in safety, in community; exchange ideas; learn and grow from one another; and become more—physically, relationally, emotionally, and spiritually. He unpacks how our culture has forgotten public space as the place where humanity safely interacts and has instead confused “public” with politics. In the *polis*, the “public” originally focused on resourcing the common good. Today, public, confused with politics, wedded to our American freedom

³⁴⁷ Josef Pieper, *An Anthology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 12.

³⁴⁸ Newman, 144.

³⁴⁹ Richard, 30.

³⁵⁰ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 296.

³⁵¹ Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, 84.

of choice and individual voice in government, has left us bereft of a common, public space for meeting, greeting, and living together—not despite our differences, but enlivened by them. Palmer shows us the public life involves strangers encountering each other “with no political agenda at all.”³⁵² Public space in ancient cultures and the Scriptures entailed the public gate, open squares, even the faith communities where strangers were welcomed and conversation exchanged, within the relative safety of the larger community.³⁵³ Needs were met, opinions exchanged, and futures decided based on both the common good and the individuals involved.³⁵⁴

An understanding of public as well as private space is essential for hospitality. Increasing urbanization means we see more people daily, but truly encounter fewer and fewer.³⁵⁵ “Homogenization and massification have left us with a loss of texture in the world.”³⁵⁶ We need community to live and thrive. The work of hospitality rebuilds community one relationship at a time. “Today, we live in a culture of brokenness and fragmentation. Images of individualism and autonomy are far more compelling to us than visions of unity, and the fabric of relatedness seems dangerously threadbare and frayed.”³⁵⁷

The private *has* grown out of proportion in our society, and the inner journey *has* been perverted into narcissism, partly *because* we fail to identify their public counterweight. We need to see that in a healthy society the private and the public

³⁵² Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 25.

³⁵³ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 94.

³⁵⁴ Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, 22.

³⁵⁵ Sutherland, x.

³⁵⁶ Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus*, 120.

³⁵⁷ Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*, 23.

are not mutually exclusive, not in competition with each other. They are, instead, two halves of a whole, two poles of paradox. They work together dialectically, helping to create and nurture one another.³⁵⁸

Hospitality is the intersection between the public and private life.³⁵⁹ We live in a world with others not by accident but by God's design. Imago Dei enables us both for creativity and community. As we co-create the Kingdom of God, hospitality offers us opportunities for creative community.³⁶⁰ When we engage creative community, we most fully live into the Creator's design for our being. Sweet notes, "instead of building consensus around shared values and visions, we ought to be building trust around shared relationships and journeys. There is a tragic irony in living in a world where the richer our visual landscape, the more impoverished our capacity to perceive it."³⁶¹ Today, the church desperately needs public spaces, to divorce government from faith, to embrace the beauty of Creation where guests are genuinely welcomed not merely tolerated, and to attend to co-creating the Kingdom of God as hosts welcoming guests rather than the distraction of meddling in human politics of no eternal significance or form.

The practice of hospitality, open to the presence and unique gifts of another, seen most expressly in their differences, fluctuates between the joy of beauty and the pain of laying down self-importance. By design, the Kingdom of God must be large enough to accommodate creation as God imagined it. Anything less is not the Kingdom of God.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 35.

³⁵⁹ Richard, 2.

³⁶⁰ For an excellent metaphor on differences and living together as jazz improvisation, see Thomas E. Reynolds, "Improvising Together: Christian Solidarity and Hospitality as Jazz Performance," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43, no. 1 (2008).

³⁶¹ Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, 207.

Letty Russell passionately embraced the joy of “riotous differences”³⁶² in Creation even while she was marginalized from her own faith community. She faithfully reminds us, “Just hospitality will not make us safe, but it will lead us to risk joining the work of mending the creation without requiring those who are different to become like us.”³⁶³ Speaking on the life work of Audre Lorde, Russell notes, “Although there are among us real differences ... these differences are not the problem, ‘... rather it is our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.’”³⁶⁴ The one who is “like us” makes us comfortable, affirms that we are right, and does not challenge us to painful growth. “Organized religion has not been known for its inclusiveness or for being very comfortable with diversity. Yet pluriformity, multiplicity, and diversity is the only world there is! It is rather amazing that we can miss, deny, or ignore what is in plain sight everywhere.”³⁶⁵ Welcoming differences threatens our illusion of control, our compulsion to particular specialness, and our lazy contentedness in remaining as we are where we are. “Understanding difference as a gift of God may help us search for ways that difference may become liberating or emancipatory in our lives.”³⁶⁶

When we willingly explore the frame of differences, we find that difference exists in communities, between individuals, and even between theological streams within the same faith tradition. God is content, even enraptured in the beauty of this. It is a shame

³⁶² Russell, Clarkson, and Ott, 71.

³⁶³ Ibid., 123.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 62.

³⁶⁵ Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 60.

³⁶⁶ Russell, Clarkson, and Ott, 72.

we are not. God has created differences not for the sake of our personal self, but as a gift to the whole of creation, gifts we are to share with one another enriching us all. With our passionate grip on individuality and self-determination we threaten anyone or anything which might compel us to conform. Yet, ironically, the whole time we are protecting ourselves within the Church and our culture, we are aggressively and meanly demanding conformity of others. While Christ intentionally collected the oddest, most painfully human group of people possible, we modern Christians demand that each person who “comes to faith” become like us in dress, speech, and lifestyle before he or she is welcomed into our “community.” Jesus would confront us with the lie this is—not the Gospel “faithfully lived” as we claim—but rather the fearful sheltering of our own self-protecting, self-affirming style of religion which, in essence, is nothing more than petty idolatry as we focus on ourselves with its fears and “needs” rather than on the Creator God.

It remains helpful to add the intentional practice of identifying, affirming, and welcoming differences to our hospitality given the innate brokenness in our particular time, culture, and theological history. “Unless we confront the misuse of difference, there is no integrity in our talk about a God who welcomes all people, or in our actions as participants in that welcome.”³⁶⁷ An honest reflection on God reveals “no indication of any divine interest in blandness, uniformity, exclusion, mindless repetition, or sameness.”³⁶⁸ Hospitality becomes an “expression of unity without uniformity” and a

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 71.

³⁶⁸ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 130.

place where community builds on created differences rather than denying them.³⁶⁹ The corollary to welcoming differences is that we must rely in faith on God. We must give up the morality and structures of conformity which prop up our religious practices but do not co-create the Kingdom of God. Faith then becomes painful, requiring us to tend to building strong muscles as we give up our place of judge and “defender of the faith” and accept a God large enough to “defend” God’s own self and to allow non-conformity as created intentionality rather than a threat to “the divine order.” This line of thinking invokes violent reaction from most “Bible-believing evangelicals” who have unknowingly conceded to a shadow of faith rather than faith itself. We cannot fault their inheritance, for all who live in this culture and can name this dark shadow have their own painful journey of revelation to tell. Neither can we sit idly by content to watch relational destruction in the name of Jesus. Rohr offers wise and timely conference on mentoring in the second half of life where presence rather than the sword or law is the tool for faith.³⁷⁰ Listening and stories enable life. Differences illuminate the beauty of the Creator. Neither faith, nor the Creator is fragile. The only fragility is religious practices unhinged from the substance of Life and the abundance of the Table.

Table Ministry: Food & God’s Lavish Abundance

One of the most conspicuous and ignored aspects of Christ’s sojourn in human form was his compulsive propensity for gathering individuals to eat together and for

³⁶⁹ Russell, Clarkson, and Ott, 65.

³⁷⁰ Richard Rohr explores the roles of the two halves of life in Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

turning mundane meals into recognized parties which he used to exemplify the Banquet Table in the coming Kingdom of God. Table Ministry as the central work of the Kingdom of God is not a happenstance theological construct; rather, it is the precise image Christ entrusted to us for understanding the form and work of the Kingdom encompassing both abundant provision for all of creation and warm inclusion of all who would come and dine. Table imagery gives space to understanding the confounding inversion of the Kingdom from the patterns of humanity:

Why does Jesus choose table imagery to symbolize not only his own kingdom authority but also that of his disciples? The best answer, I think, is one that Luke gives us indirectly throughout the narrative of his Gospel and Acts, namely, that Jesus and the spirit are most regularly present to reveal God's kingdom *at meals*. In Acts, many of these table settings are distinctly Christian events because all the diners proclaim or celebrate Jesus' messiahship (e.g. Acts 2: 42-47; 9:17-19; 16:14-16, 30-34). On other occasions, however, both in the ministry of Jesus and the stories of Acts, this isn't the case. Instead, we find "mixed meals," where some participants have committed themselves to Jesus (by discipleship and/or baptism), while others haven't. Given the unique wording of Jesus' Last Supper prophecy in Luke, it seems most likely that he considers both categories of meals to be the Messiah's table. A bold stance of this kind follows naturally from Luke's belief that Jesus is Lord of the cosmos (Luke 1:10-11; Acts 2:34-36; 17:30-31) and that wherever his people show up at meals, he is present as the true host, whether or not all diners acknowledge him.³⁷¹

Table imagery confronts us with the confines of our own limited human vision. It is easy to see those around us, those important to us. Christ calls us, however, to actively seek out those apart from us, those hidden from our everyday space, those too marginalized to hold space in the world. "We welcome others to the table, not because we want more people on the rolls, but because we know the deep joy and challenge of sharing life in God, and long for all of creation to share in it, too. Gospel hospitality shifts our attention away from what we have to offer and toward what God has to offer, an expansive table

³⁷¹ Koenig, *Soul Banquets: How Meals Become Mission in the Local Congregation*, 114.

where we all can feed on an abundance of mercy and grace.”³⁷² Table imagery grants our imagination the freedom to dream big with God. None of us own the Table; rather, we recognize and affirm it belongs to God³⁷³ where God’s desires, God’s vision, God’s welcome define its form and substance. Along with the rag-tag and motley assortment of humanity gathered around God’s Table, table imagery captures our imagination with the assumption that food resources are abundant enough to satiate all. How you eat the food is also important.³⁷⁴ “People who sit down together to eat a meal tend to be more closely committed to each other than those at a buffet party. There’s a greater level of intimacy. People are more engaged in each other’s lives.”³⁷⁵ The preparation of food is inseparably tied to hospitality.³⁷⁶ This preparation takes into primary consideration the needs of the guests even if they are not our own. The food symbolizes and becomes the health and well-being of each particular guest. “A shared meal is the activity most closely tied to the reality of God’s Kingdom, just as it is the most basic expression of hospitality.”³⁷⁷ Attending to the example of Christ, we recognize that God delights in sanctifying the ordinary,³⁷⁸ community love is exemplified in the community meal,³⁷⁹ guests must be

³⁷² Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 104.

³⁷³ Ibid., 103.

³⁷⁴ Hershberger, 101, 102.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 103.

³⁷⁶ Hobbs: 15.

³⁷⁷ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 30.

³⁷⁸ Koenig, *Soul Banquets: How Meals Become Mission in the Local Congregation*, 46.

³⁷⁹ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 170.

invited to join the table fellowship,³⁸⁰ and eating together is salvation in the Kingdom of God.³⁸¹

Food at the Banquet Table comes abundant and free. Its sheer abundance challenges the scarcity mentality that grips our minds and culture. We quote reminders that God cares for “the lilies of the field” and “the birds of the air,”³⁸² but we worry and fret over empty bank accounts and low larders. Christian hospitality embodies an economics that is marked by surplus, excess, and surprise where generosity rather than hoarding is eschatologically present in the Kingdom of God at hand.³⁸³ If our imagination fails to capture this vision as reality, then as Wittgenstein said, “a picture holds us captive” because the Church has failed to embody an alternative abundant economics³⁸⁴ in a world of perceived economic scarcity. As we have noted, an economics of scarcity actually creates scarcity when governments and individuals hoard resources.³⁸⁵ “Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them—and receive from others when we are in need.”³⁸⁶ This sort of common sharing and “communal living,” while the original design of the Creator, inflames reactionism in our culture, primarily among those who lived through the Cold War with McCarthyism and its paranoia of all things “communist.” If ever there was an authentic

³⁸⁰ Winter, 125-126.

³⁸¹ Pauw: 13.

³⁸² Matt. 6:26-28

³⁸³ Newman, 86, 101.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 103; Winter, 95.

³⁸⁵ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 107.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 108.

communist, it was Christ. He kept nothing for himself: food, shelter, not even life itself. All were freely given away for the sake of others.

An attentive reading of the Scriptures, an intentional entry into the stories, offers countless examples of divine abundance and encouragement to participate in abundance as both receivers and givers. It is almost as if God intends this to be an important topic in our lives. The economic framing of stories contrasts the scarcity mentality of individuals and governmental leaders with the abundant economy of God and divine representatives. Elisha provides for the “undeserving widow,” Jesus feeds the hungry multitudes, David opens banquet tables to all his subjects to celebrate God, and the Early Church graciously feeds and clothes strangers.³⁸⁷ None of these miracles were mere magic tricks; rather, they remain simple reminders to share what we have.³⁸⁸ Hospitality does not require many resources, just the willingness to share³⁸⁹ what we have whether “food, time, space or money.”³⁹⁰ “Gracious welcome ... includes material and physical help, inclusion into community, and a respect for them that values their identities, stories, and contributions. ... It requires an openness of heart, a willingness to make one’s life visible to others, and a generosity of time and resources.”³⁹¹ Our abundant and generous God resources all needs as we attend to welcoming and including strangers. Brueggemann notes that the absence of explanation in the Old Testament stories “is part of the narrative strategy so that the reader can see ... [God] is the master of new possibility, transforming situations

³⁸⁷ 2 Sam 6; 2 Kings 4; Matt. 14; Mark 6; Luke 9; John 6; Acts 4.

³⁸⁸ Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 89.

³⁸⁹ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 135.

³⁹⁰ Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 39.

³⁹¹ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 101, 13.

of negativity into options for new life.”³⁹² Palmer encourages entrance into prayer where scarcity is revealed as illusion³⁹³ and abundance is embraced as a communal act both on behalf of the whole creation and while simultaneously sustained by the whole creation.³⁹⁴ “Spiritual abundance is reflected in our intimacy with God and compassion toward others.”³⁹⁵ Miroslav Volf reflects,

What happens to the flow when it reaches us? Does it then stop, having bestowed the gift and fulfilled its purpose? If the flow were to stop, we would be only receivers, not givers. We would then be unlike what is most divine in God. God would be a pure giver, and we would be no givers at all; we would receive from God, but instead of giving, we would only acquire through legitimate exchange or take by force. But we were created to be and act like God. And so the flow of God’s gifts shouldn’t stop as soon as it reaches us. The outbound movement must continue. Indeed, in addition to making us flourish, giving to others is the very purpose for which God gave us the gifts. To pass them on, participating in God’s gift giving, is the fourth thing to which God’s gifts oblige us.³⁹⁶

Even today abundance remains the hallmark of the Kingdom of God. An over-flowing Banquet Table welcomes hosts who welcome guests as all are welcomed into the Triune Dance by the King and Creator God.

Table Ministry: Limits

A discussion on limits would initially appear to directly countermand the call to abundant living. Instead, paradoxically, it further multiplies abundance. When we recognize that humans are finite and abundance really comes from God, then we check

³⁹² Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*, 93-94.

³⁹³ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 114.

³⁹⁴ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 108.

³⁹⁵ Epperly: 91.

³⁹⁶ Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, 49.

our pesky human inclinations to plunge in and embrace our craving to become divine meeting all needs, everywhere, ourself. This rabid compulsion actually throws off the mantle of faith we began with and plunges us into a depth of human misery and need our finite form cannot meet. Parker Palmer explores the idea how our limits create a much better definition of our self than our gifts. As we recognize and live within our unique human form, we are increasingly free to live within the divine and the created order.³⁹⁷ God is not concerned that we meet human needs; rather, God invites us into the Dance, to the Table, that God might meet the needs of the stranger from God's abundance.

Understanding the boundaries of our human form allows us to continue to offer the only gift we truly have to give: ourselves. Giving gifts that are not ours disintegrates our form.³⁹⁸ "Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others."³⁹⁹ Pauw reminds us that we must not claim that our "no" is God's blessing to another person;⁴⁰⁰ rather, the mystery of Table Ministry is that God remains attentive to the hosts as well as the guests gathered. Pohl notes discernment is the central discipline when exploring and naming our limits. It is "central to living truthfully." Discerning communities and practitioners "do not ignore difficult issues"⁴⁰¹ but embrace their particular, polyphonic hospitality. As the ultimate host, God's wisdom knows who to call for particular tasks. This is not just functional and efficient; it binds the Kingdom community into many-layered strands of relationships. A

³⁹⁷ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 22, 41-42.

³⁹⁸ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 233; Pratt and Homan, 200.

³⁹⁹ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 30-31.

⁴⁰⁰ Pauw: 16.

⁴⁰¹ Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, 151.

guest is not just the guest of one host with a singular connection to the Divine Dance; rather, a guest is bound into the community through a multiplicity of relational ties. We are reminded that a cord of many strands is not easily broken.⁴⁰²

Table Ministry: God Invites Us to Participate

Table Ministry sounds challenging upon reflection, but owning it confronts us with full force. Table Ministry demands we either dive deeper into the Divine Dance or we retreat into the comforts of moralist religion. The Jesus who hosts Table Ministry is rarely compatible with our cultural standards and comforts—the very specific items we believe to be our divine right, our proof of divine blessings, the subtle but stubborn commonly embraced lies of prosperity theology as it is now generally accepted within faith communities. “When a religious expert asked him about inheriting eternal life, the Lord didn’t give a simple answer. Rather, he reminded him that life is essentially rooted in two loves, love for God and love for the neighbor. Everything else is secondary to these two loves.”⁴⁰³

Much of the agenda of Jesus was revealed in the context of a meal, how he ate, where he ate, and especially with whom he ate and what he sometimes did while present at a meal were often political statements intended as a critique of the elite or a challenge to the ruling class. Strict social and religious structures scrupulously separated those who belonged from those considered unclean, for a purity code determined who was acceptable to God. Jesus contradicted this conventional understanding with his subversive behavior. He understood that there is more to a meal than assuaging physical hunger. Seeds of systematic

⁴⁰² Eccles. 4:12.

⁴⁰³ Wilbur Ellsworth, "Classical Worship for Today: Hospitality Means Making Room," *Reformation & Revival* 13, no. Spr (2004): 146.

change are sown when there is a place at the table for persons and perspectives that custom or tradition would exclude.⁴⁰⁴

Casey reminds us that while Jesus often went off to pray by himself, we never find him eating alone.⁴⁰⁵ The host of the Table mentors us as hosts at the Table. At the Table we trust God's abundance past our fears of scarcity,⁴⁰⁶ we find sharing a meal is the deepest and most universal sign of unity,⁴⁰⁷ we discover that in a world of hoarding, extravagance breeds extravagance,⁴⁰⁸ and we find that together our sometimes scarce love for one another will not tear us apart.⁴⁰⁹

The Table beckons us to consider the Divine Dance. The Table both sustains who we are and calls us into growth. Neighbors, friends, strangers all gather to eat together. We are known; we come to know. Each of us yearns for someone to truly welcome our true self.⁴¹⁰ As practitioners of hospitality we want to see Jesus in each person we meet, but we often discover "the Jesus we find there is not the Jesus we expect."⁴¹¹ Chittister reminds us God is most of all to be found not in special ways, but in doing "common things with uncommon conscientiousness."⁴¹² Around the table, as with the Dance, "There is always a part of God that is new to us, a surprise for us, and a stranger to us.

⁴⁰⁴ Winter, 42.

⁴⁰⁵ Casey, 23.

⁴⁰⁶ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 102.

⁴⁰⁷ Casey, 16.

⁴⁰⁸ Lillian Daniel, "Silver Tea Service: One Congregation's Epiphany," *Christian Century* 126, no. 18 (2009): 33.

⁴⁰⁹ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 111.

⁴¹⁰ Kirk: 111.

⁴¹¹ Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 79.

⁴¹² Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 194.

We relate to a new side of God, then, as we relate to the strangers among us.⁴¹³ As hosts at the Table we must constantly struggle with our traditions to break them open in new and fresh ways attentive to the Spirit rather than content with our familiarity. “Guests are crucial to the making of any heart,”⁴¹⁴ and, as Rohr reminds us, “Parties are about participation ... If there is not room for one more at your party, you are a very poor host. And God is not a poor host.”⁴¹⁵ The Table will always remain the place of our gathering, the form of our divinely-appointed community. In the Kingdom, there are no tables for one.⁴¹⁶

The Table work of welcoming is not for the faint of heart. Not because it will cost us everything, but because it will reveal to us everything within our own soul even as it disrupts and establishes a new social order. The depravity of our humanity is not the barrier to our salvation; rather, it is the fertile ground of God’s imagination alive within us. The one who gives the most is the widow tendering her last mite.⁴¹⁷ The one who brings healing is the stranger, the half breed Samaritan, who touches the one, who if conscious, would not speak to him.⁴¹⁸ The one most welcome at our table is the one who has robbed us the most. Each one we welcome both reflects and exposes our brokenness, our sinfulness, our disappointed hopes, and our fears. At the same time, each one we welcome also heals our soul. In knowing, truly knowing, God’s welcome of another

⁴¹³ Hershberger, 45.

⁴¹⁴ Pratt and Homan, 5.

⁴¹⁵ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 110.

⁴¹⁶ Casey, 25.

⁴¹⁷ Mark 12:41-44.

⁴¹⁸ Luke 10:25-37.

through us, a piece of our own soul is known and healed. Restoration is the work of breathing life into the broken and dying. The more we welcome, the more we are known and the more we too are restored.⁴¹⁹ At the same time, Table Ministry remains subversive as it restores God's social order where all are invited to come and dine, all are welcome.

The shared meal was not only a social act of friendship but was also a religious act of fellowship with God. For Jesus, such an act is open to all. Jesus' table fellowship is disruptive of any form of exclusiveness. ... In the Kingdom of God there is no discrimination, no dualism such as rich and poor. Hospitality to the stranger epitomizes the scandal of exclusiveness.⁴²⁰

Table Ministry compels us to engage a number of questions: Do we leave space to include others unexpectedly? How do we view our resources? What do we consider to be our resources? What does it mean to enter into a story or that God would chose to enter into the story of humanity? What difference does it make when we consciously choose and then live out entering into the story of someone else? What then? Do we just listen? Change our perspective? What does it take to enter into the story of someone else? What does it cost us? Increasingly, it costs us our belief systems, our theology, our prejudices, our self-righteous sense of being right and superior. What does it expose as vulnerable? Are we too busy with our story to become a participant in the story of others? How have we forgotten that we are all participants in the story of God and God's people? Do we even have the ability to imagine that it might not be about me, but about us together in relationship? The Banquet Table in the Kingdom of God is made available to all. The compelling question of faith communities today has becomes who are we impeding from eating and participating with everyone else? Who are we excluding from the Table for

⁴¹⁹ Journals, January 14, 2014.

⁴²⁰ Richard, 32.

pettiness, politics, morality, or bigotry when God is the only judge, the only healer, the only determinant of participation and God has lavishly welcomed all into healing, restoration, abundance, and the Kingdom of God.

God weeps for the loss of any person, any life, regardless of faith. We are all made in the image of God. The sooner we wrestle and accept this truth as God's, the sooner we will be able to truly live out our faith and live into the present and ever-coming Kingdom of God. Other people are not our enemies, as followers of Christ, our own inability to see people as created and beloved is our enemy. This is the mystifying truth of "love your enemies" and "pray for those who persecute you."⁴²¹ When our hearts beat as God's, then we see each person as valuable and beloved, each person as someone God is actively at work in and around. Being different does not determine exclusion. Making a bad choice does not make a person expendable; rather, it makes them in need of deeper love and richer grace. The act of joining God in this work in our world is the work of Table Ministry. The life of Christ was sacrifice. Only sacrifice opens us to deeper wells of union with God and reflections of God in and through us. Learning to extend welcome and lay down cultural, political, and religious hatred and rhetoric, even against everything we have been taught as "right" is the hardest, most costly, and most rewarding work of all. The person we become and the people we come to love are beyond imagination and worth the journey.⁴²²

Our culture is dying to hear and experience God's message of grace, love, and hope, to be invited and welcomed not for some future, but here and now: The Kingdom

⁴²¹ Matt. 5:43-47.

⁴²² Journals, February.17, 2015.

of God powerful and present in, among, and through us today. The work of hospitality will not make any Christian look better or make him or her more powerful as the disciples hoped; rather, it will redistribute resources among all who come that they too may welcome and resource others. “The abundance God promised us is simple things like daily bread, neighborly conversation, and the day-after-day reality of life lived in relationship with the divine. The abundance God promises us is also not to be used for own private gain and profit. ... Our abundance is to be shared with a needy world.”⁴²³

Letty Russell writes,

In 1966 my late husband, Hans Hoekendijk, published a book entitled *The Church Inside Out*, in which he argued that God is at work in the world to mend the creation and that the church does not have a separate mission but is, instead invited to be a part of God’s mission and to witness to God’s love in the world. This perspective can help us to make sense of what ministry is all about: The ministry is not ours. Nor does it belong to the church. Rather the ministry of service to humankind is the ministry of God in Christ reconciling the world. The church is invited to participate in that ministry.⁴²⁴

The church does not exist for its own sustenance any more than the Israelites were called for inherent specialness. Rather, the church exists to be the Incarnation of Christ on earth, co-creating the Kingdom of God. Where the church is not attentive to Table Ministry, the church should not be known as the church. At that point, it is nothing more than a religion:

Where there is no reverence, no trust, there may be attraction, but there is no friendship. It is a social question of great import in the highly anonymous society in which we live, where neighbors do not know neighbors and telephones have answering machines to weed out calls.

The underlying tension in contemporary Western society is the struggle between the public and the personal. We are a private people who happen to live in groups. We are individuals who develop communities based more on the rights

⁴²³ Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, 190.

⁴²⁴ Russell, Clarkson, and Ott, 15.

of each separate member than on our obligations to the groups themselves. We prize autonomy as we honor little else, and yet nothing has become more apparent in the advance toward personal independence than the inextricable connection between human relationships and mental health. . . . Friends open new worlds for us and invite us in, laughing and singing. Friends carry our burdens in their own hearts and give us the wisdom of distance to deal with them. Friends, the people we really trust, point a way.⁴²⁵

The Table provides us a place to share food and laughter which brings health⁴²⁶ and a place where community can be found.⁴²⁷ Miraculously, the Kingdom will look like Jesus feeding the five thousand where there was enough for all who came, enough for all to be filled, extra for newcomers, but no one stuffed their pockets to prove later their bread was more magical and thus greater than anyone else's bread.

What if Jesus wanted us to look back more on his life than his death? What if the imagery he wanted, by repetition and experience, to sear into our souls and practices was how he chose to live? What if life is not about dying or even being guilty of Christ's dying? What if life is about precisely that: Life itself? Eating. Drinking. Sharing stories and meals together. Visiting each other's homes. Working together. Gathering together to celebrate family and friends and strangers. What if life was about life and not death—would that change our focus? Death constricts our focus to our self. Each and every one of us knows we will die. But Life beckons our focus to others. None of us wants to live alone. We desire friends. We long for family. When our vision is not reduced to surviving the travail known as life which will only end in death anyway no matter how we live, when our vision is lifted to gaze on others, we see more. We see people. We see longings. We recognize dreams and passions and failures. We instinctively know when others share

⁴²⁵ Chittister, *The Friendship of Women: The Hidden Tradition of the Bible*, 2-3.

⁴²⁶ Howard Macy, accessed December 11, 2012, <http://howardmacy.com/2012/12/folksjokes/>.

⁴²⁷ Nouwen, 65.

our same loss; we have the capacity to enter into the story of someone else. We create and become community simply because we see and know other people around us, with us, for us even as we are for them. I eat and drink with you because you matter. And you matter. And you matter. And you matter. And so the words and heart of the Creator flow over all those created in the image of God.

Hospitality, like any spiritual practice, requires an intentional re-orientation toward a particular kind of living. Daily, hourly, by the minute we are bombarded with choices. Hospitality, lived out as a practice of faith, requires that we make our choices not by personal whim or particular preference, but by obedience to the One who invites us into the work of co-creation. Hospitality around the Banquet Table enables ordinary people, living ordinary lives, the opportunity to make extraordinary choices for extraordinary results. For one who has taken a vow of stability, it means a promotion at work or a better educational opportunity for a child will be turned down to remain rooted in a particular neighborhood. For one who has opened his or her home to a stranger or homeless family, it means integrating two possibly very divergent views of parenting or social expectations.⁴²⁸ For the one who has promised to remain attentive to strangers it means stopping the familiar with little notice to make space and time for the stranger. Unburdened by the need to impress God or be judged a failure, living in obedience to the One who created and most graciously calls forth the best in us, drawn ever deeper into the Triune Dance, we are known and long to know others, to share with them the overabundance of God's generosity. The practices of hospitality enables us to live obediently, to let go of the need to control the outcomes of ministry, and to graciously

⁴²⁸ Dickau, 22.

invite others from the darkness of liminal spaces into the warmth of the Banquet Table where differences are celebrated as divinely crafted gifts, tolerance is exposed as a sham, limits multiply abundance, and guests and hosts revel in new found relationships. Called to anticipate and prepare for the return of the King we are also privileged to live in delight in the Kingdom of God as we take up the Table Ministry of Christ.

Chapter 5

The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God remains one of the most elusive concepts in Scripture. As it is presented, it belongs neither here nor there, neither on a fallen earth nor in a glittering eternal heaven. The Kingdom of God imagined and described by Jesus embodies utter welcoming, from the rich to the poor, the socially acceptable to the marginalized. In contrast to the immaculate image of heaven with its glittering streets of gold, endless heavenly choir, and sublime presence of God; the Kingdom of God is earthly, smelly, boisterous, a rag-tag, motley assortment of humanity's finest specimens. These are not the proper, respectful, quiet, robed citizens of the eternal kingdom of bliss. Sometimes we allow our theology to slide around just a little bit to accommodate what we cannot grasp. No one really wants to compare Jesus' idea of joyful human companionship and the perfect party with the heavenly construct we own. Maybe it's just a phase. Jesus in a kind of tweener mentality: these guys will be fun, while I am both God and human I can create this hybrid description. Somehow, there is an unconscious, unspoken assumption that when Jesus returns to the Father he will be reoriented to a fuller, more proper understanding of eternity. His idea helped for a season to make eternity more palatable to messy humanity, but once we start to reel them in, we will finish growing them up into proper, socially-respectable Christians worthy and capable of quietly strolling the streets of gold. We just cannot help ourselves. We function so naturally, so rightly, so securely out of our confidence and compulsion that we can know, we must know. Give us a

paradox, a mystery of God, we will figure it out. We reach out. We grasp the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. We grab what is not ours to take. We refuse to live content in mystery. We deny its capacity to enlarge our being as it draws us deeper into divine fellowship. Heaven is not a more respectable, more mature image of eternity. The rowdy, continuously open Banquet Table is not a preliminary, temporary means of passage. The image of the Kingdom of God given to us by Christ, exemplified in his life, enables us to begin to grasp the unbounded joy, lavish abundance, and divine passion for creation that remains in the heart of the Creator God. The Kingdom of God, through the on-going, co-creative incarnate work of the Body of Christ both takes form on the earth now and gains fuller expression in the age to come:

While in our midst, the Kingdom of God involves a transcendent dimension. It is God's work, and so it manifests, reveals God. Again while already present, it is also eschatological. While eschatological, the Kingdom of God is not simply otherworldly, for it brings about a social transformation. The image of the Kingdom of God has power to change and transform lives. ... Hope for salvation is summed up by Jesus in the expression "the Kingdom of God," or better, "the reign of God." The reign of God is the active lordship of God within ourselves and outside of ourselves.

What the Reign of God brings about is the reintegration of the poor and the marginal into society. The Kingdom of God contradicts any form of discrimination. ... The vision emphasizes radical inclusiveness: all are invited to the Kingdom of God.⁴²⁹

The Kingdom of God, embraced, holds the power to shatter dearly held theological constructs regarding inclusion and timing of final exclusion. The Table Ministry of Christ anchors the Kingdom of God among creation and draws it further into the Triune Dance through the restorative work of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of God dwells both in present and coming form, open and welcoming to all who will accept the invitation, anticipatory of strangers, illuminating liminal places as it expands, and

⁴²⁹ Richard, 40-41.

filled to ever-increasing capacity with the rich spectrum of lovingly-crafted, lavishly-blessed, painfully-redeemed, and warmly-welcomed people of the Creator God.

As practitioners of hospitality embrace Table Ministry and co-create the Kingdom of God, we are drawn into exploring the mysteries of liminal space, the idea of the stranger, the ancient practices or disciplines of the faith, the invitation to join in co-creating, the lure of success, the common understandings of power, and the potential heresy of pluralism. As we have noted, a serious practice of hospitality; informed within the scriptural, historical, and theological streams of our faith; cannot stand isolated or alone. Rather, its practices exist to welcome us to God's Table, to embrace a paradoxical relationship with the Creator to both be restored and to co-create restoration, and to draw us into the beauty and mystery of the Triune Dance where the Imago Dei enlivens once again to live in community and to create. "The kingdom of God is a place that makes it possible for the poor, the outcasts, the strangers to have life and dignity. The kingdom of God is a realm of hospitality."⁴³⁰ The Kingdom of God is a wild, special, raucous, and wholly unconventional place of longing, acceptance, heartbreak, healing, invitation, welcome, abundance, creativity, growth, community, and individuality. The Kingdom of God offends us with its unending welcome, its lack of decorum, its disregard for religious sensibilities, and its divine form unyielding to human constraints. The Kingdom of God is our salvation. It is our stamp of approval to flourish and grow uniquely ourselves. It is our constant companion into inter-relationships. It is our home. "In the eyes of Jesus the Kingdom often turns out to be both cause and consequence of hospitality. ... Hospitality

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 43.

to strangers has a generative power.”⁴³¹ The Kingdom of God is all we have ever really longed for, all the human desires we never quite believed God will accept: simple pleasures, laughter, inappropriate friends, unconformity, spontaneity, inclusion, rich and lavish, free, a place of belonging and becoming, non-judgmental, affirming of quirks and unique gifts, a place to chill out, and a place to find a perfect niche to contribute. In short, the Kingdom of God is all we have ever desired the earth and humanity to be, just with a lot more food.

The Kingdom of God: A Stranger to Welcome

By definition, neither hospitality nor the Kingdom of God exists without the presence of a stranger to welcome, to embrace, and to draw into the Life of God. The stranger is any human previously unknown or separated from us. The stranger is known by his or her Creator, but the stranger is not known to us, and the work of hospitality and the essence of the Kingdom of God is that we might be known together. Strangers elicit almost immediate fear. What is other, unknown, out of our control inherently unsettles us. Through the faithful practices of hospitality, practitioners affirm that what ignites fear in us is not the person itself; rather, it is the idea of the person as an unknown.⁴³² Once the person is known, previous fear is dispelled in the common human condition: we eat, we sleep, we dream, we fail, we love our children, we fear death. When Christians offer an open and hospitable space “strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Ibid., 6; Sutherland, 34.

fellow human beings.”⁴³³ Those who never open themselves to a stranger remain bound in the imagined differences between people.⁴³⁴ Hospitality to the stranger requires a level of vulnerability. While our modern mind imagines this frequently betrayed, in reality it rarely is and, when it is, the betrayal generally has to do with a lack of conformity rather than an inability to meet as common people. Practitioners remain sensitive to the fact that both the host and the guest expose vulnerability as they meet.⁴³⁵ The divine wonder of Creation and hospitality within the Kingdom of God is “where the opportunity for hospitality exists—so does the opportunity to make a neighbor of a stranger.”⁴³⁶

The disciplines of the faith which draw us deeper into God, more available to know both ourselves and God, are also the disciplines that facilitate reception of the stranger. “The readiness that marks gospel hospitality comes from a lifetime of listening to God and opening our hearts. Readiness is a way of life in God’s life, so that when the stranger appears, readiness has already taken root.”⁴³⁷ Deeply rooted in the practices of the faith, hospitality becomes less and less fearful as we allow God to move to the forefront where the Spirit primarily welcomes and we partner in the exchange. Even as we are drawn out into the world at the edges of the Kingdom to welcome strangers, we are drawn deeper into the Triune Dance where we come to know God as stranger and friend in alterations as the relationship deepens. We are also drawn into the mystery of Christ as stranger to this world, then known, then found in each stranger we meet, and

⁴³³ Nouwen, 65.

⁴³⁴ Russell, Clarkson, and Ott, 99.

⁴³⁵ Pratt and Homan, 50.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., xix.

⁴³⁷ Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 18.

then known also in us. “The many injunctions to practice hospitality to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, in thanksgiving for Israel’s deliverance from bondage and for God’s gifts, remind us that we have been strangers who are welcomed by God and are to welcome others in return (Exod. 23:9).”⁴³⁸ Yahweh’s covenant with Israel included particular care to those considered strangers and marginalized: the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, and the poor⁴³⁹ and as Israel’s response to them articulated its response to God⁴⁴⁰ so, too, our response to the stranger today exposes our response to Christ. Hospitality is risky, but ultimately, “it is God doing the welcoming. ... If we risk nothing, it is unlikely we are participating in God’s welcome.”⁴⁴¹ Hospitality is subversive, by nature restructuring exclusive patterns into inclusive welcoming into the Kingdom of God. “Hospitality to the stranger demands sacrifice: to surrender our biases; to make the interests, joys, and sorrows of others our own. As such, hospitality to the stranger is subversive by nature, threatening to the existing powers.”⁴⁴²

The Benedictine tradition invites us into a rich depth of knowing and valuing the stranger both as God’s unique gift to us, and as God’s invitation that we might know ourselves and Christ better in the stranger. “Humility, Benedict teaches, treads tenderly upon the life around it. When we know our place in the universe, we can afford to value the place of others. We need them, in fact, to make up what is wanting in us.”⁴⁴³ It is not

⁴³⁸ Russell, Clarkson, and Ott, 19.

⁴³⁹ Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*, 121-122.

⁴⁴⁰ Richard, 26-27, 28.

⁴⁴¹ Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 20.

⁴⁴² Richard, 21.

⁴⁴³ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 95.

so much what we do for the stranger, but how we do it.⁴⁴⁴ Meeting emotional and relational needs along with physical ones defines much of Christian hospitality. “Those who are different are the strangers among us. There are many ways of being different: one can be different by virtue of values, culture, race, language or education, religious or political orientation.”⁴⁴⁵ God is no stranger to the stranger, and as God remains a respecter of the stranger’s otherness, we too are called to expand ourselves to include the stranger. Welcoming the stranger is not the opportunity to invite conformity;⁴⁴⁶ rather, it remains the opportunity to co-create a Kingdom, larger, more interesting, more full-bodied, and more reflective of the Creator than what previously existed. Hospitality is not engaged with reckless abandon;⁴⁴⁷ rather, it is attentive to the windows for relationship God invites us to embrace. Our challenge is to create and maintain space for the stranger God brings us.⁴⁴⁸ Frequently this also means we “have to modify our idea of what Jesus looks like in order to recognize Christ in another.”⁴⁴⁹ “Do we have any room for this stranger? We will begin to make room to love the stranger when we have learned to make room to love Jesus. When we learn to make room to love Jesus we will discover we now have room for the needy friends he brings with him.”⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁴⁵ Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 76.

⁴⁴⁶ Richard, 66.

⁴⁴⁷ Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 22.

⁴⁴⁸ Ellsworth: 146.

⁴⁴⁹ Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 26.

⁴⁵⁰ Ellsworth: 149.

The Kingdom of God: Liminal Spaces Beckon & Frighten

Liminality is becoming an increasingly familiar topic within ministry and includes two common parts for naming reality. The first part is the anthropological definition, the second we commonly call “margins.” Jesus taught that the Banquet invitation required walking the streets and intentionally seeking out the destitute and the forgotten,⁴⁵¹ those living in painful transition or on the margins of society. We, too, are beckoned to join Christ in abandoned places. Originally, as studied in anthropology, liminality encompasses the places and times of deep transition or “interstructural situation.”⁴⁵² Liminality implies the process of becoming⁴⁵³ or the opportunity to become. Turner reminds us, “As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture.”⁴⁵⁴ Liminal space and those in it defy our structures and our established understandings as their process of becoming cannot be captured by our static language or understanding. We both fear their emergence from this place and eagerly anticipate it. Avoiding liminal spaces is a rabid compulsion of our culture. While Christ us invites us into liminality as a primary home, we consistently recoil into the secure, the comfortable, and the known. Described and eluded to by Richard Rohr, the two passages into the second half of life are possible because both uncontrollable crisis and monastic living are liminal spaces. Pohl reminds us that the most gracious hosts are

⁴⁵¹ Matt. 22:1-14.

⁴⁵² Turner, 234.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 235.

those who intentionally live on the margins of society.⁴⁵⁵ They can see and do not fear the unknown as those who are sheltered from what is different.

As the people of God, we are called to intentionally live in the margins, attentive to opportunities for growth and relationship. Yahweh frequently reminded the ancient Israelites of their time in captivity. Even today, the Passover remains the core of Jewish identity as strangers, the people of God, in the world. Brueggemann explores the notion of covenant. In it he finds that the oppressed does not need to work or earn deliverance; rather, the act of crying out demands a response as “the mutuality of covenant team requires that both parties should be mightily engaged in the demanding, hopeful act of rescue.”⁴⁵⁶ Today, while we claim God’s sovereignty excludes any participation in redemption, we live as though we have some responsibility to earn it or at least pay it back. Whether Israel’s captivity, caused by her sin; our redemption, caused by our collective sin; or the creation’s fallen state, caused by its sin, the mystery and wonder is that God’s sovereignty, God’s willingness and establishment of covenant; God’s work is to reorder, recreate, reestablish our beings together in community.

The liminal spaces may spark fear or morbid dread, but the liminal spaces are the realms of our salvation and growth, the places where we are seen, we are invited, we are enabled to reenter community and from which we can cry out for our rescue or the rescue of another person. Sweet reminds us in our concentric circle culture that “A journey to the center is a journey away from Jesus, who is found on the margins and in the edges and around the periphery. The cornerstone is *not* the center. To find and follow Jesus, we

⁴⁵⁵ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 124.

⁴⁵⁶ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 554.

must decentralize our thinking and the center everything.”⁴⁵⁷ The paradox of liminality is that as we move to the edges, we are drawn deeper into the center of all being. In practice, intentional movement into liminal space looks around the Table and asks, “Who is missing? Who are the ones whose voice is not heard?”⁴⁵⁸ “Those marginalized by social and economic injustice not only have a [covenantal] claim on God’s mercy but an equally potent claim on the eucharist community’s attention.”⁴⁵⁹ Recognition of the margins compels practitioners of hospitality to make clear choices: do I remain comfortable and secure or do I venture into the unknown to risk relationship? Do I hold tight to what is “mine” or do I steward and share the resources God has entrusted to my care? Liminality and liminal spaces provide opportunities for co-creation, they enlarge community. Moving into the margins allows both interior and special growth. In paradox, what we fear the most is where we can most easily recognize the God we long to see.

The Kingdom of God: Practices or Disciplines for Intentional Growth

The ancient practices or disciplines of the faith encompass faithful attentiveness to God, our self, others, strangers, and the interrelationships between these. The church remains rich in history and practitioners to instruct and walk with us as we embrace the practices to plunge deeper into the Triune Dance and to stretch out toward the unknown. The practices encompass both disciplines for faith and some more particular to the distinctive work of hospitality. These practices also serve to focus our spiritual,

⁴⁵⁷ Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus*, 43.

⁴⁵⁸ Russell, Clarkson, and Ott, 14.

⁴⁵⁹ Richard, 50.

emotional, and relational growth in specific directions. “Giving attention to practices ... allows us to draw important insights from very ordinary experiences and situations.”⁴⁶⁰ In our culture we prefer to believe that we are free, the idea of faithful, attentive discipline is sour to many; however, Newman reminds us the “question is not whether or not we will live by discipline but rather which disciplines we will give ourselves over to.”⁴⁶¹ This is a helpful reminder to a culture which easily overlooks that even our daily exercise regimen, our weekly TV schedule, or our daily requirement to read work email will all provide structure and discipline if we do choose to define and establish practices intentionally. “Growth is not an accident. Growth is a process. We have to want to grow. We have to will to move away the stones that entomb us in ourselves. We have to work at uprooting the weeds that are smothering good growth in ourselves.”⁴⁶² “Hospitality requires training, only this training involves learning how to be steadfast in the faith while knowing how to resist that which obstructs the hospitality of God.”⁴⁶³ We must not forget that all humans are constantly learning: learning to trust, learning to fear, learning to venture forth, learning to hold back, learning to embrace others, learning to hunker and bunker. Our culture and our faith tradition have filled us with a lifetime of learning, some reflective of God, much rooted in fear and individualistic self-reliance and determination. With his constant love of irony and embracing of paradox, Rohr reminds us, “Spirituality [in the practices] tends to be more about unlearning the learning.”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶⁰ Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, 7.

⁴⁶¹ Newman, 166.

⁴⁶² Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 188-189.

⁴⁶³ Newman, 74.

⁴⁶⁴ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, xviii.

Growth within the work of hospitality does not come about by accident; rather, it seeks practices which heighten attentiveness and mentors who encourage and instruct. “Because hospitality is a way of life, it must be cultivated over a lifetime. We do not become good at hospitality in an instant; we learn it in small increments of daily faithfulness.”⁴⁶⁵ Certain practices are beneficial both for individuals and the communities from which they minister. Prayer, Scripture, silence, and attentiveness to others provide particular and helpful focus for individuals within hospitality. “Practices enact definitions of self, other, and God in Christ, thereby developing an approach to identifying and naming the implicit theological sensibilities embedded in a collective body’s acts of faithfulness.”⁴⁶⁶ Communities of faith which take up Table Ministry together, desiring to grow further into welcoming spaces for strangers, also engage practices of corporate, focused prayer; immersion in the stories and experiences of Scripture and history; intentional attentiveness to the needs of their local community; an awareness of marketplace politics and economics; an engagement with local systems of oppression and injustice; and extra tables and places set at intentional community meals. Communities of hospitality also intentionally engage and wrestle with individual and corporate fears, mentalities of economic scarcity, and appropriate and helpful responses to conflict. Pohl reminds us,

The longing for friendship at table, the capacity to feel compassion for those in need, the grace to follow Jesus’ way of welcome to the outcast—these and many other gifts, mysteriously supplied and sacrificially cultivated, have led hundreds of small communities around the world to organize their lives around the practice of hospitality, singling it out from among the many practices that belong to

⁴⁶⁵ Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 37.

⁴⁶⁶ Gilbert I. Bond, “Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger: The Practice of Encountering the Other in Two Christian Communities” in Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, 137.

Christian living as their central calling. The pursuit of justice is important, to be sure; but for such communities that pursuit is decisively shaped by specific friendships forged within the practice of hospitality.⁴⁶⁷

Christine Pohl extensively explores communities of faith that embrace hospitality as their primary expression of Christ in the world. She notes that these communities need other practices of faith to balance out their hospitality.⁴⁶⁸ Palmer reminds us that opportunities and conversations about what I cannot do stretch me to find what I can do.⁴⁶⁹ Hospitality itself as a broad discipline of faith opens one's life to God's life and revelation,⁴⁷⁰ develops different habits for knowing the self and embracing the stranger,⁴⁷¹ names the powers which separate us from living as hospitable people of God,⁴⁷² and recognizes the variety of ways God has called local faith communities to minister throughout history.⁴⁷³ Practices are not peripheral to our faith, but rather integral to its core.⁴⁷⁴ The practices of hospitality create intentional space for flourishing:

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create an emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁶⁷ Christine Pohl, "A Community's Practice of Hospitality: The Interdependence of Practices and of Communities" in *ibid.*, 128-129.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 124, 132.

⁴⁶⁹ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 44.

⁴⁷⁰ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 15.

⁴⁷¹ Newman, 62; Sutherland, 79.

⁴⁷² Newman, 78.

⁴⁷³ Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, 4.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁷⁵ Nouwen, 51.

As with all aspects of our spiritual life within the Kingdom of God and the Triune Dance, intentional practices of hospitality, both individually and corporately, draw us ever deeper into the Dance as they pull ever further into liminal spaces. “Formation is about learning to live the alternative reality of the kingdom of God within the present world order faithfully.”⁴⁷⁶ Practices recognize the stranger in our self, God, and others. Practices prepare us for divinely appointed encounters. Practices firmly root the Kingdom of God on the earth today even while they prepare for the Kingdom as it comes.

The Kingdom of God: The Fallacy of “Success” & “Failure”

As the practices of faith draw us deeper into the mysteries of God and truthful forms take shape, assumed cultural “truths” frequently emerge as fallacies. This process is often painful with extensive interior grieving and reconstruction. Intimately tied to the work of hospitality, but not immediately perceived, is the modern compulsion to label, categorize, and judge all events, tasks, activities, and even people as either a “success” or a “failure.” The church growth movement and the widely embraced generic assumptions of prosperity theology strongly undergird these categories and legitimize them within local faith communities and denominational hierarchies. One of the results of grasping for the Tree of Knowledge is that we come to believe the lie that knowledge endows the capacity to judge. Never mind Jesus’ clear reminder that we are not to judge, that God alone is judge.⁴⁷⁷ We obsessively categorize all we see, touch, or hear: good, bad, right, wrong. We force a dualistic frame onto a non-dualist creation. Labels of success and

⁴⁷⁶ Hunter, 237.

⁴⁷⁷ Matt. 7:1.

failure then marginalize recipients to their “proper place.” Sinners deserve exclusion, unproductive pastors earn pink slips, efficiency triumphs over relationships, and humans egos prop themselves on the backs of those they take captive or banish. This system of labels creates the fastest unraveling of hospitality, inclusion, divine wonder, and God’s intentional space for all.

Steve Donahue, an insightful non-Christian, reflects on an unanticipated desert adventure with friends and strangers in his book, *Shifting Sands*. For him, a planned, anticipated trip through the North African desert disintegrates into a frightening, wild, and unanticipated liminal space from which he chose to emerge changed. He reflects on the American fixation of mountaintops as imagery for success and marked triumph⁴⁷⁸ despite the fact that the overwhelming portion of life encompasses “unpredictability and uncertainty” the “two hallmarks of desert travel.”⁴⁷⁹ He contemplates our compulsion to keep moving when the sand reveals that remaining stuck is useful time for thought, planning, presence, and revelation.⁴⁸⁰ He discovers the desert paradoxes: the only way to escape a desert is to drive deeper into it and rest allows us to accomplish more work.⁴⁸¹ Parker Palmer reflects on similar themes in our language and their effect. For instance, agrarian societies speak, think, and produce imagery using the metaphor of growth. This implies tending, care, and an anticipated expanse of time without hurried judgment. In contrast, our American culture imagines and describes all things in terms of

⁴⁷⁸ Steve Donahue, *Shifting Sands: A Guidebook for Crossing the Deserts of Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004), 3, 66.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 7-9.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 62-64.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 36-37.

manufacturing.⁴⁸² We do not grow or tend people, we produce them—as if they come off an assembly line. This unconsciously predisposes us toward anticipating conformity and rejecting non-conformity as defective. In the end, after his adventure, his encounters with a fearful stranger who turns out to be a salt-sharing friend, his changes of companions along the way, and his reemergence into the first world, Donahue challenges us with simple reminders and image-shattering revelations in language which resonates with Palmer.

God created an agrarian world. It was a Garden! Jesus lived among an agrarian people. Most of the world still relies on the land for daily food and lives or dies by its bounty. Embracing the manufacturing imagery of our modern American culture we have unintentionally, but destructively settled for categories over relationships, conformity over uniqueness, and justification over attentiveness. Embracing judgment which is not ours to hold, we marginalize the very people Christ weeps over and then must invite others to join in the work of restoring them. John Wesley believed that it was better for a sinner to remain such than for him to come to faith but then not be disciplined since it would be harder for him to believe the promises of God after believers failed to embody them to him. Our obsession with categories of success and failure fall in the same line of thought. Joan Chittister reflectively reminds us,

Most of all, our real friends are the ones who take us into their lives with the ease of family and the warmth of love. ... They offer what women say they look for most in a relationship: encouragement, support, and a sense that they themselves are worthwhile human beings. Real friends are simply there for us, no matter the pressure, no matter the pain. They are home for us when no other home is open.

It's not that friends justify our failures; it is simply that they do not even notice them. Failure has nothing to do with what they see in us. Failure has nothing to do with what we do or do not disclose to them. To a real friend,

⁴⁸² Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 96-97.

whatever sins we bear are simply the lessons we've learned along the way to becoming the best in us. There is no absolution needed. Where acceptance is the idiom of the heart, everything translates into understanding.⁴⁸³

If we cannot embrace and live out obedience to the created order of God, then we should not minister in God's name. We do far more harm than good. We need friends, we need to be friends, or we create more broken people in the margins than the world does.

Success and failure are human constructs. They exist only because we constructed them to categorize and judge one another. Their use in the world should break our heart as it does God's. A church embracing success and failure with practitioner claims of divine blessing and instruction deserves divine wrath. God invites us to co-create the Kingdom of God, to welcome all people to the Banquet Table. Christ came to earth not to banish, but to gather. "Ready hearts trust not so much that we will succeed in some particular outcome, but that God will do a new thing. Such readiness takes courage, gratitude, and radical openness."⁴⁸⁴ The Creator allows freedom of choice, which entails a perfect ability to accept or reject God. But never, ever should the people of God, in God's name, define success or failure. God is the biggest failure ever in the history of humanity if we dare apply our pompous powers of judgment. God's creation "failed." Jesus was killed by the people he tried to love. He "failed" in a particularly humiliating manner. Not everyone responds positively to the invitation of the Spirit. The Spirit continues to "fail." Relationships are a revelation of the divine community. They are an eternal construct. They simply exist without the success or failure framework humans attempt to impose on them. Newman reminds us that "to ground our hope in the now and

⁴⁸³ Chittister, *The Friendship of Women: The Hidden Tradition of the Bible*, 52-53.

⁴⁸⁴ Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 19.

not yet of God's kingdom. Such hope frees us to live in and witness truthfully to God's love in Christ, with courage and humility, without having to 'win' or control the outcome. ...when we live into the conviction that our lives are gifts from God and our hope is in the now and not yet of God's reign, we have no 'choice' but to practice hospitality."⁴⁸⁵ "In a results-oriented culture, we struggle with the patience necessary for fidelity. We imagine that it is better to move on to more satisfying or fruitful projects than to stay with those that do not seem to be yielding much fruit."⁴⁸⁶ As hospitality embraces the invitation of God to co-create the Kingdom of God, we must either shed our obsession with success and failure categories; acknowledge our part in its destructive legacy; and embrace a divine, redemptive, and inclusive vision of relationships or we can never truly see, truly embrace, or truly join the restorative work of God.

The Kingdom of God: Power?

Human categories of success and failure expose another human construct: power. Power is understandably assumed to be part of God's nature and a naturally created part of the divine order. Thoughtful, attentive people have shared wisdom on the appropriate and life-giving use of power and the inappropriate and destructive use of power.⁴⁸⁷ Within the framework of hospitality, as we are drawn in the restorative co-creative work of the Kingdom of God and as we gather both as guests and hosts around the Banquet

⁴⁸⁵ Newman, 121.

⁴⁸⁶ Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, 97. Pohl also recommends Eugene Peterson's wise counsel in Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 5.

⁴⁸⁷ See Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*; Morse.

Table, we discover power never takes form as a divine substance. All of hospitality's practitioners include instructions on the wise use of power.⁴⁸⁸ Drawn into the Divine, however, we find that power and sovereignty have somehow become entangled. Historically, the church debated and called for particular forms of actions in relationship to God with the understanding that God is sovereign. Today we speak less of God's sovereignty because sovereignty remains a fairly obscure notion to our democratic minds and certainly does not appeal to our love of personal free choice. God is sovereign. Within this we can understand that God both exists outside the created order and "rules over" the created order. Where we introduce confusion is when we believe God does this because of God's "power." God is sovereign in the same way God is love. God simply is. Therefore God does not need any "power" to enforce sovereignty over humanity any more than God needs something in order to love humanity. God can create. God can enter covenant. God can restore humanity simply because God is sovereign. Entering this mystery we find power a human construct. To explain the mystery of sovereignty, which lies beyond our grasp because our created form does not share it, we constructed the notion of power. The ability to impose our will (or not) over another person we call power. This discussion on human will as it relates to our created capacity to choose over, around, with, for, or because of another person would be better served within the framework of a discussion on choice and the results which choices bring because we do

⁴⁸⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1996); Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*; Richard; Mary J. Streufert, "An Affinity for Difference: A Theology of Power," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37, no. 1 (2010); Jean Vanier, *Encountering 'the Other'* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005).

not inherently confuse sovereignty with free will or the capacity to choose. “Man has choice, but not sovereignty.”⁴⁸⁹ God’s sovereignty created free will, not power.

If we dare accept the radical notion that power does not reside within the Divine or the created order as a construct of divine appointment, then the work of hospitality and the Kingdom, even the very understood nature of God, requires reframing. Moving the conversation from power to sovereignty, limiting power to inclusion only under a human design, we must leave it in this fallen world. It cannot be used to describe, anticipate, or nuance the form of God, the form of humanity, the creation, or the form of the intended interrelationships between them. Therefore, it cannot be used in relation to restoration, the Triune Dance, the Banquet Table, or the Kingdom of God. When we talk about Jesus, we cannot grasp what he did if we limit ourselves to the idea that he “laid aside power.” We inherit language that attempts to explain this transaction, but we are invited to join the Divine in the Kingdom past this particular human explanation of a divine mystery. Christ did not lay aside a capacity of power. Rather, like Brueggemann’s reflection of Yahweh’s capacity both to create and destroy, as inherent within sovereignty,⁴⁹⁰ Jesus’ sovereignty allowed him both to live and to die without any form towards human “power.” The “power” that flowed from Jesus was his sovereignty to will and to act on behalf of the Creation.⁴⁹¹ When Jesus gave his disciples “power,” he enabled them relationally to become conduits for God’s sovereignty.⁴⁹² Later, we come to know the

⁴⁸⁹ Heschel, 190.

⁴⁹⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 567.

⁴⁹¹ Mark 5:30, 9:1, 12:24; Luke 6:19, 8:46.

⁴⁹² Luke 9:1.

One who within us wields this sovereignty for restoration as the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹³ We must simply trust that as we draw deeper into the work of God within the Kingdom, mystery abounds and language and constructs become malleable to bridge the infinite love and sovereignty and the finite form.⁴⁹⁴

When Scriptures reflect on death losing its power in Christ's sacrifice, we would do better to wrestle with the idea that power was not defeated; rather, it was exposed as a sham, a human construct. What humans grasped as the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was not simply "knowing," it was the illusion that they had the "power" to know, that their form was sovereign. The Tree of Knowledge lies outside our grasp. It is not ours to take into our human created form not because knowledge is inherently bad, but it is not ours because faith in knowledge distracts us from the Sovereign One. It deludes us into thinking our knowledge has some ability to control, to exercise "power" over other created beings made in the image of God, to make us sovereign. If we do not have power, then we have no ability to truly control anything. We can harbor the illusion of control. We can impose our will over another person in the same manner Cain killed Abel.⁴⁹⁵ But it is an illusion. Free will or the ability to choose remains a part of each human in the same manner as creativity and the need for community. We can destroy another person enough that they no longer have significant personal form to exercise their free will, but we can never truly exercise sovereign control over them. Our human form is not sovereign. We do not have power. Our human form simply cannot handle the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Coursing through our veins, "knowledge," the "fruit of knowledge"

⁴⁹³ Luke 24:49; Acts 2.

⁴⁹⁴ Interestingly, Richard affirms this thinking even while continuing to discuss power. Richard.

⁴⁹⁵ Gen. 4.

brings death, suffering, and misery because, whatever it is, only that which is Sovereign can handle it with integrity, creativity, and incorporate it into creation in life-giving ways. We must learn to be content trusting God in what we do not fully grasp. We must be content being human. We must grasp the hand of the Creator. This is faith—grasping, holding, and being held by the Divine—attentively and intentionally disregarding the lure of the Tree to offer us knowledge instead of relationship. If we insist on knowing, on “understanding” everything, than we lay aside faith which capacitates relationship with the Divine and we settle for mere “knowledge” which has no capacity for relationship, only death—that is, life without relationship with God. As a result, grasping for the Tree of Knowledge, we dissolve the Kingdom of God rather than co-create it. For the Kingdom of God is relationship between the Creator and the Creation. It is not something we individually “know,” it is our interdependent selves existing together in divine, created, restored relationship.

The Kingdom of God exposes power as a human construct and unhinges it. The Kingdom of God is not made up of power, neither does it take on form by power. Power categorizes and separates beings in relationships. The Kingdom of God takes form, in God’s sovereignty, to become the place of restored relationships. Within the Kingdom of God multiple and interwoven strands of interpersonal relationships create restoration as Christ hosts, Christ calls us to host, Christ calls our guests to host more guests, Christ is hosted by us as we invite guests, and, even more mystifying, Christ is the food on which we all dine. Relationships in the Kingdom of God are fluid, defined not by separation, but simply because the Triune Dance itself is relationship, is community. We expose the fallacy of power when we acknowledge and reframe our understanding that God is

relationship. The Imago Dei in us is the capacity, the longing, the need to live together—separate, yet together. Power can never gather; power always divides even when “wisely” used. As such, power is not inherent to relationships which are the substance of gathering and being and dwelling together. To more fully enter the Divine Dance, to more fully embrace the liminal edges around the Kingdom of God, power must be laid aside, acknowledged as a human construct, that we might clearly see and desire to discover the sovereignty of God as eternal and welcoming to our participation in the Divine Life.

The Kingdom of God: Pluralism & God’s Invitation to All

Somehow, it seems appropriate while exploring the Kingdom of God, its form, its substance, its welcome participation of all who gather, and its unorthodox notion of not just a divine longing for, but a divine blessing of participation by broken humanity, to explore the notion of pluralism. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines pluralism as “a situation in which people of different social classes, religions, races, etc., are together in a society but continue to have their different traditions and interests” and “the belief that people of different social classes, religions, races, etc., should live together in a society.”⁴⁹⁶ Common evangelical theology holds that pluralism is the antithesis to Christianity; that pluralism allows for many when God allows for only one. Attentiveness to the practices of hospitality undercovers shallow theological constructs as it seeks to live faithfully co-creating the Kingdom of God. Many of the common tenants of practical evangelicalism root themselves in American cultural norms or natural human fears rather

⁴⁹⁶ Merriam-Webster Online, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pluralism>.

than authentic attentiveness to the theological streams in which practicing evangelicals claim to flow. When exploring the nature of pluralism and its relevance to hospitality and the co-creation of the Kingdom of God, we immediately notice the similarities in the posture of openness toward others and willingness to engage. Pluralism attends to and gives permission for differences to come and gather on equal footing. Likewise, the Kingdom of God welcomes all who choose to accept the invitation no matter their current condition. “The same Christ works in each; but in each, Christ works differently because each is different.”⁴⁹⁷ Hunter notes what makes pluralism interesting today is that it is not embedded within an overwhelming understood and accepted dominant culture.⁴⁹⁸

Pluralism as acceptance of personhood with an openness toward difference reflects the Trinity:

Communion and love is not uniformity but union in difference both among human beings in general and between each particular person and God. Union in the Spirit preserves and perfects humanity precisely in its finite individuality and otherness. The positive aspect of the finite world precisely in its radical “otherness” before the infinite God is grounded in the inner trinitarian otherness that unites the Godhead with Christ in the Spirit. ... The infinite worth of the finite human creature is thus established and preserved. It is not destroyed horizontally ... [or] vertically ... Communion and respect for otherness are the authentic marks of a Spirit-filled community, where each person makes room in love for the freedom proper to others.⁴⁹⁹

Pluralism coupled with tolerance is not accepting of differences; rather, it allows differences to live around each other. However, when people merely tolerating each other bump into each other; anger, confusion over intention, and fear readily emerge. Pluralism with tolerance creates a fragile society. Pluralism with acceptance challenges shallow

⁴⁹⁷ Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, 116.

⁴⁹⁸ Hunter, 201. The author accepts that this can be a matter of personal interpretation.

⁴⁹⁹ Richard, 70-71.

evangelical practices to look to the warm welcome of the Kingdom of God to understand the heart of God and the relationship of people with God. Pluralism with intentional attentiveness toward the created differences in people reveals the glory of the Creator and the wonder of Creation, inviting people not to live around one another but with and for one another.

God created humanity in such a way that the unique characteristics of particular individuals embody and reflect various gifts, passions, longings, and forms of presence of the Creator. A love of music, art, dance, sports, people, or animals are all characteristics we commonly recognize as reflections of God. Pluralism, coupled with the Kingdom of God, entails the notion that all these characteristics possess value and worth as they gather within their human forms around the Banquet Table:

In its metaphorical usage, hospitality does not refer simply to literal instances of interaction with people from societies and cultures other than our own. It suggests attention to “otherness” in its many expressions: wonder and all in the presence of the holy, receptivity to unconscious impulses arising from our being, openness to the unfamiliar and unexpected in our most intimate relationships. Identity and plurality, unity and diversity, the familiar and the strange, seeing through one’s own eyes and seeing through the eyes of another, being at home in the world and being a pilgrim in a strange land negotiating a common world and honoring plurality—these are the motifs that characterize our new space, the household of the Lord.⁵⁰⁰

The stories of Christ describe parties where some believed Jesus was the Messiah, some did not, and some would find out at the table.⁵⁰¹ Jesus likens the Banquet Table of the Kingdom of God to these exact forms of parties. Inherently, then, we must recognize that these were “pluralistic” gatherings. Some were attentive followers of Yahweh, some were fearful of Yahweh, and some were captured by the belief systems of the ruling Roman

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁰¹ Matt. 22:1-14; Luke 5:27-32, 14:7-24; John 2:1-12.

culture. A great deal of the theological and interpersonal tension which existed in these gatherings was not just because religious leaders feared Jesus, it was also because they did not agree or get along theologically or relationally with each other as various groups were more or less influenced by the Greeks, the Romans, and various Jewish traditions. If the meal tables of Jesus and the Banquet Table of the Kingdom of God allow diners to come with their varying faith systems as well as unique, created characteristics, then we must engage and define a pluralism that holds tension both within the calling of the Creator to humanity to reengage relationship and the capacity for the Kingdom of God to find form even embodied in those who do not understand the meal of which they partake. Christ is guest, host, and the meal itself. Guests come and dine, and, somehow, in doing so, they partake in the lived life and death of Christ on earth, which also becomes spiritual substance. The mysteries of this transformation beckon acceptance far more than specific definition. While guests can choose to leave the Banquet Table after dining, many, if not most, will stay sustained and healed by the presence of Christ and God's food.

The threatening nature of "pluralism" as a religious concept is better understood within the narratives, examples, and covenantal boundaries of the Old Testament. Brueggemann explores the polyphonic nature of Yahweh's relationship with creation, noting an imperative to remember that God exists outside and beyond humanity as well as intimately engaged with humanity. Our finite form cannot grasp all of the infinite nor should we try. Rather, as those in the streams of spirituality encourage us, we should revel in the wonder and mystery of a God who is larger than we can imagine but desperately in love with us. The Old Testament does not set the stage for Christ; rather,

the narratives, laws, and interactions of Yahweh and humanity give us a taste of what God's restorative love loose in the world would look like. The polyphonic nature of God is not limited to what people within specific times and cultures can understand, explain, or imagine. Rather, it is wild and daring as it intensely loves within certain times and certain places and invites us to join its non-conforming nature to imagine, accept, and even long for a God who not only invites us into restorative work, but also invites us to reimagine and to reinterpret the narratives and stories of God in the world in ways that speak to specific cultures, specific times, and specific people:

1. One must recognize that the Old Testament is powerfully polyphonic in its testimony, both in its substantive claims and in its characteristically elusive modes of articulation. Nothing about the theological claims of the Old Testament is obvious or one-dimensional. They remain remarkably open.

2. The polyphonic openness of the Old Testament, in substance and in modes of articulation, insists on interpretation. It is in the nature of the text to require, in each new circumstance of reading, an interpretive act that draws the text close to the circumstance and horizon of the interpretive community. The elusive quality of the text, moreover, invites interpretation that is free, expansive, and enormously imaginative. Thus I insist that expansive, imaginative interpretation is not an illicit abuse of the text, it is rather activity permitted and insisted on by the text.

... Old Testament theology, at the beginning of the twenty-first-century, is not just an activity preoccupied with an ancient text, though it is indeed that. It is preoccupied with an ancient text in a particular circumstance. I have indicated that it was legitimate in the first century (and has been so ever since) for Christian interpretation to draw the Old Testament text to its circumstance, namely to its life with Jesus. It was legitimate, I affirm as a confessing Christian, because the text permits such evocative construal of its polyvalent quality. *Mutatis Mutandis*, for us as Christians at the outset of the twenty-first-century, it is legitimate and necessary to draw the Old Testament text closely to our circumstance, which is what every interpretive community inescapably doubts, wittingly or unwittingly.⁵⁰²

Understanding "pluralism" as the polyphonic possibility of God in creation invites us to give up the fear which requires us to "defend God." Polyphonic openness gives us

⁵⁰² Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 731, 734.

permission to see others not as a threat, but as a soon-to-be-known friend. It focuses our eyes on our common humanity rather than our differences. Polyphonic openness to God's imaginative work of restoration invites, embraces, and requires a "rethinking of the particular challenges to authentic Christian witness that derive from this historical moment."⁵⁰³ Within the larger faith tradition, the "multiplicity of Christian beliefs and practices ... encourages [us] to be articulate about the significance of distinctive voices within the larger tradition."⁵⁰⁴ Hospitality "eagerly engages the other"⁵⁰⁵ drawing people together "without obliterating their God-given differences."⁵⁰⁶ A polyphonic pluralism, attuned to the nuances of the Kingdom and seeking anew Christ in each new time and space, makes space for language which describes, affirms, and celebrates the "riotous differences"⁵⁰⁷ gathered around the Banquet Table remembering "the uniqueness of each person is necessary so that there will be a fuller abundance, a genuine giving to another and receiving of what we do not already have."⁵⁰⁸

The Kingdom of God: For the World

While theologians and practitioners of hospitality agree the Kingdom of God will come in full expression, they disagree on the exact time or form. As a result, most

⁵⁰³ Hunter, 199.

⁵⁰⁴ Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, 5.

⁵⁰⁵ Wood: 165.

⁵⁰⁶ Newman, 116.

⁵⁰⁷ Russell, Clarkson, and Ott, 53-54, 71.

⁵⁰⁸ Newman, 116.

believers hear, learn, or imagine little about its relevance to their life. It is other, out there, remarkably irrelevant to common life and practice. Many theologians believe that the Kingdom of God will come heralding the new age. They anchor this in the necessary death and resurrection of Christ and the sovereignty of God for the “fullness of time” in which a new heaven and a new earth will appear. As such, the Church must simply wait for God to act in sovereignty and power. A notable exception here is Origen who in the third century wrote about Jesus as the *auto philia*. That Jesus himself was the Kingdom of God. “The Son of God is king of heaven. And just as he is wisdom itself and righteousness itself and truth itself, so too is he also the kingdom itself (*autobasileia*). But it is not the kingdom over the things below or over a part of the things above, but over all the things above which have been called heaven.”⁵⁰⁹ Origen’s words, coupled with a theology of the Church as the incarnate Body of Christ on earth, hold great potential. Practitioners of hospitality and a handful of theologians regard the Kingdom of God as an already coming reality whose form is moving to fullness. They anchor this belief in Christ’s invitation to join the on-going work of God in the world; in the presence of the Church on earth as the Body of Christ; and in the witness of what they have seen and experienced themselves as they welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless:

Christians are therefore called to live ‘as if’ the kingdom of God, a reign marked by excess and superfluidity, is now present, because it is now present, though not in its fullness. ... The living Christ is already fully present, giving us the gift of new creation. At the same time, however, Christ’s presence is often concealed, covered over by our sins, our blindness and tragedy. The renewal of creation ... is

⁵⁰⁹ Origen and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen, Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 362.

not yet complete. Hence we journey as disciples between two times, a journey in which we are graciously held by Christ even as we seek to hold onto him.⁵¹⁰

Practitioners remind us that we are all adopted within the household of God and

“hospitality is how the house of God functions.”⁵¹¹ Like the poor, widows, orphans, the sick, and the abandoned, we all need a home. Christ came both to bring and to become that home as he gathers us up into himself:

Home is central to the human experience because it has to do not simply with a place but with a state of being. Issues of identity, belonging, and origin have to do with home. ... The coming of the Kingdom is the beginning of a new age in which Jew and Gentile, neighbor and stranger, are to be joined together without distinction in the people of God. ... Christ creates in himself one new home, one new household, his own body. ... He is the builder of this new home; the new humanity is a home-in-process. ... There is an unequivocal earthiness to this Kingdom, a reality with social dimensions in human history. Pauline faith and the faith of the whole New Testament consist in believing that the definitive kingdom of justice and life has arrived.⁵¹²

Adopted into the household of God, we are heirs to the Kingdom of God. In God’s lavish abundance, we receive not to keep, but to join in sharing with all of creation.

Within the streams of spirituality, those attuned to the rhythms of the deep places of God feel little need to contemplate the details of theological structures. Rather, they pull our attention back to the Creator, to God’s longings, God’s relationship with us, and God’s relationship with all of Creation. Surrounded and content with the mysteries of God, spirituality writers and practitioners call us again and again to the rhythms of grace, abundance, passion, and attentiveness. Out of these we naturally see God in the stranger and know our participation in the Divine. “As Jesus ministers, so he wants us to

⁵¹⁰ Newman, 105.

⁵¹¹ Richard, 68-69.

⁵¹² Ibid., 8, 42.

minister.⁵¹³ We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God. Therefore, true ministry must be mutual.”⁵¹⁴ The practices of hospitality, an open posture toward strangers, and a courageous entry into the Divine Dance bring forth God in us, us in God, God found in the stranger, the stranger recognizing God in us, and the whole process bound together as invitation, revelation, restoration, and incarnation. Conjoined with God, we dance, we dine, and we welcome all as we gather in our homes, share food with a neighbor, talk with a stranger at the park, or keep vigil at a deathbed. “This True Self cannot find or know God without bringing everybody else along for the ride. It is one great big finding and one great big being found, all at the same time.”⁵¹⁵

If we choose to enter the deeper streams, content to enjoy and explore the mysteries of God, then we free ourselves from wooden constructs and allow ourselves to enter the divine imagination. Only within the divine does death bring life, does intentional poverty bring wealth, and does fallen humanity receive an invitation to grasp the hand of God and partner in the coming of the Kingdom of God. “As followers of Jesus we live with the tension between a kingdom already come and yet somehow not fully achieved. We live according to a new order unfolding before us. It changes our vision and challenges us to make connections between things that are seemingly

⁵¹³ Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom*, 59-60.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 61-62.

⁵¹⁵ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 185.

unrelated.”⁵¹⁶ The idea that we co-create the Kingdom of God does not imply that any of our planning or scheming for efficiency bear results themselves; rather, the Kingdom of God comes forth only in intimate partnership, attentive to the Spirit’s direction and content, joining rather than leading, owning, or directing. God wants to be with us. God thinks it is fun to throw a party with us, for us, and to invite us to bring guests.

A party needs guests, a King needs a people, a sick person needs a doctor, a hungry person needs food, a rich person needs a stranger to share his wealth with, all these embody the presence of the Kingdom as we join with the restorative work of the Kingdom of God. No longer are we strangers to one another. We are friends:

Jesus’ basic message about the kingdom of God is a message of love. “Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). As we have seen such love is a hospitable love, love not only of the friend but *philoxenia*, love of the “other”-friend, stranger, even enemy. In such hospitable love one is born into the very life of God and having this life brings knowledge of God. It does this because God is love. Such love is unconditional.⁵¹⁷

The Kingdom becomes able to take form because we are in God, God is in us, and our lives weave together. The love of God richly flows and fills all with abundance. Gracious hands and hearts remain open and reach out. We no longer are merely known by God; rather, we are caught up into the life of God. We long for the future, where a heaven “without pain” will be the miraculous cure for our tortured existence. All the while, we fail to come to terms with the truth that the Kingdom of God is not just something that is to come, but it is already coming. It already is even as it still forms. We are called to come into it, the live in it, to welcome others into it now. This defies our notion of

⁵¹⁶ Szews: 20.

⁵¹⁷ Richard, 58-59.

heaven, of perfection. It forces us to grapple with the idea that God might accept and love us in our imperfection. A holy God surely could not do that. A holy God must reject us as fallen.⁵¹⁸ Rohr suggests that maybe the Gospel is too big for us,⁵¹⁹ that it is too good to be true.⁵²⁰ Whether an inclusive, loving Gospel offends our prejudices or fears or not, the wonder remains: “God seems to have created things that continue to create”⁵²¹ and “God seems to want us to be in on the deal! The Great Work is ours too.”⁵²²

The Kingdom of God & the Tree of Knowledge

Knowledge is not a bad thing. It is not inherently wrong or evil. It is merely distracting. It holds place for only the one in whose heart and mind it is held. It is a limitation of our created form. We can live together, but we cannot live within one another as the Triune. Knowledge is a part of the creation. This work asks for a public recognition of “knowledge.” But we were not made for knowledge. We were made for life with God, each other, and Creation. For relationship. For community. For creativity. For the beauty and wonder of the world we share when we come together. Not for the bits and pieces we can each collect like marbles in a little bag. The Tree of Knowledge distracts us with its fruit. By constantly, obsessively looking at it, we cannot truly see each other. We keep forgetting the hand of God extended. We hurt others with our distraction, our obsession.

⁵¹⁸ Journals, June 30, 2011.

⁵¹⁹ Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 76.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁵²¹ Ibid., 93.

⁵²² Ibid., 110.

In the same way we sit in a crowded room each one with a tablet or phone, we do not speak, do not hear, we do not see those around us. Knowledge is not bad. We just were made for relationship, creativity, and community. The knowledge and skills for these we would have learned together. We were not made to acquire or hold knowledge separately.

Christ has come. Christ has done the restorative work of the Kingdom. The Creator has invited the creation not to be discarded as invaluable. Only inflated humanity would imagine a disposable earth. Creation groans holding the Kingdom. It is larger, longer than the Divine desired. A joyful sharing of redemption should be a blessing, a mark of favor, not a painful agony. The Creator has chosen. The Creator is sovereign to choose. The mark of the Garden was beauty, abundance, and life together. To force a gift is not an authentic beginning or form to the Garden restored. The King has invited humanity to co-create a kingdom not foreign to our form, but one which compliments and enlivens our relational and creative humanity.

The Kingdom of God: A Place for Us

The church growth movement has compelled the Protestant church to seek after the perfect growth formula with the same ferocity that others have sought the fountain of youth. But there is no perfect formula just as there is no fountain of youth. Much to the dismay of our instant gratification obsession, the ancient church reminds us, in case we have forgotten our Scriptures, that there is no substitute for faithfulness. Eugene Peterson

calls it “a long obedience in the same direction.”⁵²³ Growth and change are the purview of the Holy Spirit. Obedience, faithfulness, and presence are the domain of humans who are called into co-creation with God, the invitation to incarnate daily, hourly, and faithfully, the Kingdom of God where we gather, where we sleep, where we eat, and where we shop.⁵²⁴ The term “church” should not be used outside labeling times and places where the Kingdom of God is bursting forth upon this earth. Otherwise, we will be tempted to believe that God’s receptive work is predictable, manageable, or the results of our own efforts.⁵²⁵ “The Kingdom of God cannot be contained by existing structures and institutions.”⁵²⁶ Vanier notes,

There is a hidden strength in being vulnerable, open, and non-violent, in being a people of the resurrection, knowing that we are loved and that God is guiding us, in all our fragility and littleness. We are not a people who think we are better. We are not an elite. We are people who are poor, but we have been drawn together by God and put our trust in God. That is what a kingdom community is about: a community that knows it has been called by God in all its poverty and weakness, and that God is love.⁵²⁷

Who wants to be the first to follow? We all want to lead, but the Kingdom, like the Creation is not about leading.⁵²⁸ We are invited into participation, made for community. We are not sovereign. Power does not exist. Control destroys other life. Our form is made to dwell, to delight, to engage, and to create. A hand is offered to us, love courses through its veins. The rhythms of the Creator’s heart draws us in. Who will be the first to follow?

⁵²³ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

⁵²⁴ Journals, April 27, 2015.

⁵²⁵ Journals, April 28, 2015.

⁵²⁶ Richard, 65.

⁵²⁷ Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, 51.

⁵²⁸ See Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus*.

The first to grab God's hand. The first to grab the hand of a stranger. Joy and laughter explode from our being. It is true. The work of restoration is accomplished. All we have been anguishing over, all our folly, a hand waits for our grasp so that we too may know death has lost its sting.⁵²⁹

Like creation and our relationship with God, the Kingdom of God has form and boundaries. Until its fullness, our human form can still pull ahead, wander off, or lag behind. Miroslav Volf notes these painful encounters exist for our benefit. They focus our attention on that within which still needs tending and healing.⁵³⁰ Many things can distract us. Our humanity, our imperfections, but these should not for *all is well and all will be well*. God's sovereignty has formed a Kingdom for community and creativity but we do not determine its shape, its pattern of growth, or even its time frame as it comes to form. Can we trust that God is big enough to love us with our similarities and our distinctions? Can we ever trust a God wild enough to continue to move out the boundaries of the Kingdom so that there is space for all who will sit and dine? A God who does not need to ask our permission? A God who messes with our reality? A God who is big enough to take care of God's own self? A God who doesn't actually need us, but who desperately and irrationally loves us?

For centuries, the Kingdom of God has been marginalized and discarded as an image rather than a true form. Too human to be truly divine. We have judged, labeled, categorized, and justified its dismissal. Then we sit and moan, pain and misery, suffering, heartbreak and war. Why does God not rescue us? Why does Jesus not return? We remain

⁵²⁹ 1 Cor. 15:55.

⁵³⁰ Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, 67.

content to tell others about God, about love, about the promise of eternity, but rarely do we rise, intentionally live as Christ, and experience of the Kingdom take form around us.

Sweet refers to Marianne Sawicki noting,

Another reason we miss the handoff is because we are confused about the language of “kingdom.” The metaphor of kingdom has become for us that we’re talking about a social and political agenda rather than a way of participating in God’s activity in the world.⁵³¹ Wherever Jesus is found, the kingdom of God is a present reality. Jesus could not have been clearer when he asked the Pharisees about the coming kingdom of God: “The kingdom of God is not coming up with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.”⁵³²

Another way of asking “Would we recognize the living Christ if we saw him?” is this: “Would we recognize the kingdom of God on earth if we saw it?” Can we recognize only the absence and not its presence? We, too, can learn how to recognize Jesus and enter the kingdom. In fact, our task is to help others recognize the one who is already among them.⁵³³

We forget that the Creation was declared “good.”⁵³⁴ We justify our willingness to think only about eternity rather than live into it by blaming God’s sovereignty and our depravity rather than admitting we are still more allured by the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge than we are of imagining God would actually make eternity fun. A place for all. A place to play. A place to tend. A place to be our unique selves. The Kingdom of God is not for God. It is for us. Fashioned for our form. Attentive to our created being. If we imagined a place for humans, would it not be a gathering of people with food and space for more? What more can we want? What are we waiting for? At the edges of the Kingdom, where the light of the table wanes, liminal space holds many waiting to be

⁵³¹ Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 28.

⁵³² Luke 17:20-21 NRSV.

⁵³³ Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, 87.

⁵³⁴ Gen. 1.

invited. But, mysteriously, around the Table is also a Kingdom with streets of gold.

Places to talk with others. Homes for rest. Introverts dine at the Table, but then enjoy the peace of a quiet walk. Extroverts appreciate the splendor, but then return to the Table to share stories and gather with others. All tribes and peoples will come. The food, lavish and free, nourishes our form with the lifeblood of God. Creation rejoices and dwells together.

The Kingdom of God does not await God. The Kingdom of God awaits us. The Kingdom of God comes to your home, your neighborhood, your community, draws form on this earth as strangers are welcomed in, as food is shared, as the sick are brought inside to heal. The Kingdom of God expands form as intentional relationships bind the Children of God with not just friends, neighbors, and business associates, but also with enemies, bullies, politicians, community leaders, grocers, children, baristas, and farmers. The Kingdom of God finds form as Christ is seen in each person, recognized, named, and given honor. The Kingdom of God finds form as gifts are celebrated and exchanged. The Kingdom of God finds form as relationships are celebrated for being rather than for accomplishing anything. The Kingdom of God finds form as we remain open and vulnerable and learn to anticipate a fellow human being rather than a frightful enemy. The Kingdom of God takes form as we are attentive to our soul and plunge deeper into the Dance and being with the Triune rather than settling for understanding God. The Kingdom of God takes form as we celebrate the gifts we received and as we delight in being able to share gifts with others. The Kingdom of God takes form when we anticipate and celebrate abundance. The Kingdom of God takes form as we embrace mystery. The

Kingdom of God takes form as we hold the hand of the Creator and the hand of a stranger and we dine together.

Is it any wonder that the festivals of God centered around the gathering of people and food? Is there any place in Creation that God has not left distinctive marks to reveal and expose our created form and its needs? Is it not heart-breaking that such a Kingdom holds least appeal for the Church? That we, believers of God, would rather know about God, than live, eat, work, and laugh with God? That we would rather anticipate a Kingdom marked not be living together around a Banquet Table, but one marked by individual separate homes for each of us alone? That we would rather fear someone, berate someone, shove our morality in someone's face than be lovingly tended and healed from our pain, our isolation, our fragility? The world does not believe our message because it is outrageous, we all love a farce; the world knows the intimate and on-going disappointment with words and actions that have no life, no form. We do not need to say what we believe. We need to live what we believe. We do not need more instruction until we begin to practice what we have already been taught. As much as the world around us, we need a reason to believe again. A God big enough to hope in. An adventure wild enough to enjoy. We need to become ordinary people living ordinary lives making intentionally extraordinary choices for extraordinary results. We need to live as the Incarnate Body of Christ on earth, attentive to the King, moving out from the Banquet Table into the liminal places; inviting the stranger to come and dine; and celebrating in the wonder and mystery of the Kingdom of God as the Creator restores Creation, invites us into the Triune Dance, and welcomes us into our new home.

Chapter 6

The Incarnation

The Incarnation: A Story

In a world fractured by greed, politics, racism, wars, petty disputes, and religious bigotry, Christ has entered the fray not to blow a whistle, gather the warring factions, and impose silence and order, but instead to walk among the players, patting backs, noticing the crumpled, and one-by-one inviting each to a beautiful table in the middle of the room. The hands of a carpenter lovingly crafted each joint, each seam, planed each of the massive beams. Very few in the room even noticed him as he constructed the table. He picked out a handful of men to help him hold the pieces as the corners are fitted. Few people even noticed him working in the center of all the chaos—mostly those who were hurt and shunned. One woman even brought him a cup of water, another some lotion for his cracked hands. In a world of strife, God has entered the fray, in human form, that God might invite us back into the Table Fellowship we walked away from in the Garden. God has not come to impose a Divine “New World Order” as if that would be any more peaceful than a fascist dictator. Jesus has come, apprenticed as a carpenter, selected raw materials rare to his environment, and crafted a beautiful table. Not so it can be admired. No. A table fit for a party. A King’s party. A table large enough for everyone in the room. A table wide enough to hold pitchers of wine and juice; platters of cheeses, fresh and dried fruits, and warm bread; and enough tankards, plates, and silverware for a crowd. The cross-beams under the Table as well as the chairs also bear the weight of a person, enraptured in story or song, to stand, dance, or jump without collapsing the whole feast.

No twinkling lights, soft music, or loudspeaker announcements try to capture attention. Rather, a simple carpenter, hands rough with labor, peace on his countenance, his ear attentive to faint moaning, moves among the throngs offering a hand, pointing to the feast, wrapping an arm around a broken limb, and sitting and listening to a story. The children in the room, uninterested and bored of debate, jump and dance around his feet. They watch his every move, mimic his ministrations, and he applauds their efforts and moves their hands to teach more gentle touch. They know where everyone is. They tell the King who is hiding, who is fighting, and who is still hurting from yesterday. Sometimes they drag him to a new person, at other times he whispers and sends them to scamper off attending themselves and inviting to the feast. Soon the table is filled with broken bodies, whispered wonder, and the delightful young giggles of bright-eyed wonder. The sheer abundance of food convinces even the shyest to eat. Little bodies wiggle and slide off chairs, quickly more people arrive. Healing hands touch broken bones, bloody faces, and wipe away dirt and spittle. Each time, the King asks or a person faintly requests help. Strong hands move platters so all can reach. Soon the fruit and wine bring warmth and energy. Tenuous smiles emerge, arms strengthen to pass food, and people stand and ask if they too can invite their friends. The King moves among the people, pointing out more to invite, crafting more chairs, listening to the jokes of children, and laughing at human silliness. Those with the King are enraptured by his care, the warmth of the Table, and drawn deeper into the work seeing each other. The noisy clusters of people continue to yell, push, shove, and beat each other. Children and newly-strengthened ministers of healing move among the groups offering bandages and pointing to the food on the Table. Some are embraced tearfully, others are forcefully shoved away.

As they pick themselves up off the floor, they quietly and bravely offer the same blessing the King prayed over them. Around the room arguments and entreaties of cooperation fill the air, few notice the attentive work, but some ask to join. All are invited to eat at the Table first, to nourish themselves for the task, some hurriedly brush it off and declare themselves fit enough to meet the needs on their own. Sometimes they try to mimic the ministrations, sometimes they just hurriedly toss bandages and run until their exhaustion pulls them onto the floor or the unappreciative responses invoke quitting. Soon, it becomes obvious that only those who dine on the food and respond to the particular requests of the King find healing and strength to continue the work. While the atmosphere in the room has not changed, a place of laughter, peace, and joy illuminates the center. Warmth radiates. Giggles abound. Courage is found. Healing appears. Platters and pitchers are consumed but never emptied. Babies abandoned in corners are brought in. Bottles of milk appear. The King encourages the babies be laid in the laps and arms of the elderly, the quiet, and the broken-hearted. Soon, the tending of small needs sparks life in barren faces. Wrinkled fingers wipe milk drips and point out aggressive eaters and sleepy, pink faces. The babies quiet as tummies fill. Soon ancient arms swaddle and cuddle, rocking and singing lullabies. Sweet songs in many languages fill the air. Grandpas long forgotten by kin reach out and tweak the ears of passing gigglers, little fingers poke back and screeches of delight accompany chubby tummies wiggling, looking for tickles. Smiles crack ancient lips, crooked teeth appear. Offers of treats and stories cause little bodies to find laps and eyes grow large as fantastic tales fill the air. Grandmas wisely shake their heads while grandpas giggle as conspirators and offer more cookies. The King crafts ever more chairs, bringing them around the table. The young

stand and boldly tell stories as long arms swing to demonstrate actions. People come and go, ever bringing in more hurting and hungry people. The din in the air still suffocates outside the light of the Table. Endless arguments and explanations and excuses drain the air of oxygen, but the Table continues to expand and the King continues to show that whether an invitation is accepted or not, in this place, around his Table, love, joy, and health abound. He seems neither discouraged nor worried at the pace of human response; neither does he ignore the effects of arguments and fights in the room. Young and old, frail, infirm, hungry, nearly naked, all are welcomed. Slowly, even the room begins to change. As the tables and chairs expand, they do not scrape the floor; instead, tiles break and grass appears. Soon little flowers grow and even small springs and brooks appear. How is this? Life generates from the King and his Table so that even the room heals? The air changes. A fresh breeze is felt around the Table. The scent of food mixes with flowers; lungs expand. Fresh air fills stale lungs. Sinuses clear. Sniffles disappear. Pinpricks of light appear on the Table as cracks in the ceiling form. As sunlight broadens small saplings reach upward. Bees seek nectar, squirrels chatter, and birds sing among tiny buds. How does this life appear? Children point in awe, old men reach into their pockets for ancient books long forgotten. Life does have a Creator! The King laughs and the people cheer. As the broken continue to join the Table soft grass soothes broken toes, shade shelters swollen eyes and sleepy bodies, streams with little fish invite giggles, small fingers, and soon small glasses of fresh, pure water greet newcomers. The King hands out small tin cups and skin bags. Children are shown how to fill the bags and they leave the emerging garden to offer cold, pure water to those whose mouths are parched from talking, to those whose eyes are swollen shut, and to those whose bodies are too

frail to move. The water startles in its healing power. Is it the water? Is it the hands which offer the cup? Is the King, too, in this water? In the wine? Does his body source all? A few gathered remember when blood and water flowed, when a broken body was carried away, when their fear caused them to hide. The King absolves their guilt. “It is the story that matters,” he says. “It is us together, not apart. What you did happened apart. It is nothing here. What we do together matters—how this Table, this food, this laughter, this healing, this Garden grows. Come, we are friends. Let us find more friends!”

The Incarnation: Story as Life

Story holds incredible power. Stories bind and soften hearts. Broken hearts. Hard hearts. Weary hearts. Tender hearts. Stories mark who we are together. Who we are becoming. What we want to remember. “Part of the challenge of hospitality involves helping people to notice it and tell stories about their experiences as guests, hosts, and strangers.”⁵³⁵ Stories chronicle our growth, our change, our expansion. Stories welcome others as laughter, giggles, rolled eyes, and appreciation of human quirks and silliness affirms created form. “In stories, we encounter all of the messiness, beauty, and complexity of practices and life itself.”⁵³⁶ The Creator has not made people who must live apart. The Creator has not made people who need to compete for anything. The Creator has fashioned a being so like, yet unlike Itself that they can be friends. The Creator, unbounded by space or time, simply is and invites the created form to join. Sadly, glittering bits distract the humans. But neither death, nor life, neither principalities,

⁵³⁵ Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, 172.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 10.

nor power, can separate us from the love of God.⁵³⁷ And so Christ enters the human fray. The very being of God incarnates in human form upon the earth. To live. To die. To invite entrance to the Kingdom. The broken death of a created world cannot hold the form of its creator. Death dissolves. The King begins to recreate. The restoration of Life. We are invited to step into the mystery of Incarnation. To see all around the wonder of a Creator becoming the created just to restore Creation. Why is this? Why not discard and start new? A waste of life is the curse of the fallen world. In the Kingdom no breathe of life is wrong, no created form is worthy of discarding. “Becoming more attentive to hospitality and storytelling allows us to recount the blessings of welcoming strangers and to learn from some of the challenges.”⁵³⁸ As the King lovingly crafts a Banquet Table, as ministers of grace embrace Table Ministry, as the Kingdom of God expands into the human fray, the Incarnation connects God and humanity. We see. We touch. We know our God. Our concrete forms, recognize and recognized, regrow relational and creative places in which to see and marvel at less material forms: God as human? The Triune in a dance? The forms of God and human grasped and grasping the hands of others? The incarnation, the source and wonder of God and humanity, in restoration. Worlds merging until we recognize that they are not meant to be separate worlds. What is this? The Incarnation of God in human form grows as human forms take on the Christ in them. Can it be that God and the Creation can live thus? Separate, yet entwined? Distinct, yet within one another? No explanation can unravel this. Divine mystery does not exist to be understood. It is the wonder and glory of God. We are invited to throw back our heads

⁵³⁷ Rom. 8:38.

⁵³⁸ Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, 172.

and laugh, to shake our heads in wonder, and to tell outrageous tales of love, and grace, and mercy, and hope. To embrace and join in bringing forth Life in a barren world. The Incarnation binds the Creator and the Creation in the wonder of all that is, all that was, and all there ever will be—God and humanity together.

The Incarnation: the Gift of Differences

The Incarnation invites us to explore its form. Once inside the mystery, we begin to see the contours of Divine and human form, separate and distinct, yet hauntingly familiar to one another; we begin to grasp the capacity for community which hallmarks the Imago Dei and draws us together; the paradoxes of Life invite further exploration and wonder; the eucharist intrigues even as it reveals; and the Dance of the Divine offers clues to our separate yet reflective forms. No language or thought can fully grasp the mystery, but we are invited to delight in the wonder. Our hands and hearts are better suited for the communal work of coming to know one another than the toxic allure of the Tree of Knowledge. God whispers on the wind, God is the wind, and God is within us drawing us to delight in his presence and voice in the Wind:

A new spirituality is being born in you. Not body denying or body indulging but truly incarnational. You have to trust that this spirituality can find shape within you, and that it can find articulation through you. You will discover that many other spiritualities you have admired and tried to practice no longer completely fit your unique call. You will begin sensing when other people's experiences and ideas no longer match your own. You have to start trusting your unique vocation and allow it to grow deeper and stronger in you so it can blossom in your community. ... Friendship becomes more and more possible when you accept yourself as deeply loved. Then you can be with others in a non-possessive way. Real friends find their inner correspondence where both know the love of God. There spirit speaks to spirit and heart to heart. True friendships are lasting because true love is eternal. A friendship in which heart speaks to heart is a gift from God, and no gift that comes from God is temporary or occasional. All that comes from

God participates in God's eternal life. ... Everything Jesus is saying to you can be summarized in the words, "Know that you are welcome." Jesus offers you his own most intimate life with the Father. He wants you to know all he knows and to do all he does. ... So you have to think, speak, and act according to the truth that you are very, very, very welcome.⁵³⁹

Within the Incarnation, we find, "God is both utterly beyond me and yet totally within me at the same time [and that] is the exquisite balance."⁵⁴⁰ The Incarnation opens recognition to that which could not be seen in separation. Rohr explores the Incarnation noting all of Creation comes forth as individuals then goes back into God, "into the Ground of all Being."⁵⁴¹ The Incarnation brings together, reveals, and, in hope, mercy, and grace, offers restoration.

Within the Incarnation, the Creator reveals the contours of created human form and the faint edges of the Divine. We see that we are distinct even in our familiarity. We are given permission to accept both our gifts and our limitations. The Creator invites us to not only acknowledge the differences and their value, but also to live content within the shared form of our lives together trusting that the Creator has made all to be good within its place as it dwells together in creation. Rohr reminds us that as we accept and settle into our uniqueness in the second half of life, "Ironically, we are more than ever before in a position to change people—but we do not need to."⁵⁴² This free embracing of the stranger and his or her differences as valuable gifts reflects God's welcome to us:

Human beings need a place in which they and their contributions are valued, and a hospitable community finds ways to value the gifts people bring. Few

⁵³⁹ Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey through Anguish to Freedom*, 32-33, 80, 101-102.

⁵⁴⁰ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 5.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁴² Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 123.

experiences are more lonely or isolating than finding oneself unwanted, unneeded, and unable to contribute. People come to life, however, when they and their offerings are valued. This means that communities and the folks within them must be willing to receive. Only as we recognize our own vulnerabilities and incompleteness are we open to what others can contribute.⁵⁴³

The Incarnation challenges our fallen form and the remains of it as it moves into restoration, to live, to act, to speak, to create, and to form community attentive, content, and respective of God's divinity and our humanity. Each holds its place. When allowed to be, community and creation flourish. When confused or grasped in jealousy, community dies and creation withers. God is God. We are not. We are beloved. We are finely crafted. We are known. We have capacity to explore, to learn, and to grow. But we are not God. The rhythms of creation beat strong when we anchor ourselves in our created identity as God's beloved. Nothing more. Nothing less.

The Incarnation: Dualism & the Wonder of Paradox

The Incarnation blesses us with its invitation to explore and to revel in paradox. Knowledge bears a compulsion to frame all things in the boundaries of its own shape—separation—what is simply abstract, non-relational knowledge cannot be intimately shared together. Dualism reflects this separation and becomes the nightmare for “understanding” all within knowledge's domain. “This is that because it is not something else.” “No, these cannot be together because they are different in this way.” And so on and so on and so on. The Creator sighs. This is why the Tree was not for the people. The Creator has made us to be, to discover, to wonder, to learn, to grow, to experience life

⁵⁴³ Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, 170.

together, not apart. Dualism is shallow. It warps and distorts any mystery or paradox it tries to explain:

Dualistic thinking is the well-practiced pattern of knowing most things by comparison. And for some reason, once you compare or label things (that is, judge), you almost always conclude that one is good and the other is less good or even bad.... Dualistic thinking works only for a while to get us started, but if we are honest, it stops being helpful in most real-life situations. ... Nondualistic thinking presumes that you have first mastered dualistic clarity, but also found it insufficient for the really big issues like love, suffering, death, God, and any notion of infinity.”⁵⁴⁴

The Creator sent the Spirit that we might daily, hourly, be reminded that dualism is not the order of Life, even God exists in Triune. The humans, they cling to their passions, but those who dive deeper into the Divine tell stories, share secrets long forgotten, point our eyes to see the glory of form and life filled with wonder unbounded by dualism. It need not be, compulsively, one or the other. “Thomas Merton understood that the way we respond to contradiction is pivotal to our spiritual lives. The moments we meet and reckon with contradiction are turning points where we either enter or evade the mystery of God.”⁵⁴⁵ The Divine, the creation is far more rapturous than mere comparison, contrast, or categorization:

We are not well-prepared to understand our lives in terms of paradox. Instead, we have been taught to see and think in dualities: individual versus group, self versus others, contemplative versus active, success versus failure. But the deeper truths of our lives seem to need paradox for full expression. There is truth in both poles, and we live most creatively when we live between them in tension. ... And yet the way of the cross is also a path towards, symbolized by that central place where the arms of the cross converge.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁴ Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 146, 147, 150.

⁵⁴⁵ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 5.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 31, 63.

The work and practices of hospitality embrace many paradoxes. “The spiritual life—whose territory is the nonrational—proceeds with a trembling confidence that God’s truth is too large for the simplicity of either-or. It can be apprehended only by the complexity of both-and.”⁵⁴⁷ “Our Western dualistic minds do not process paradoxes very well. Without a contemplative mind, we do not know how to hold creative tensions. . . . Mature people are not either-or thinkers, but they bathe in the ocean of both-and.”⁵⁴⁸ Humanity is separate yet cannot live alone?⁵⁴⁹ God is “utterly beyond me and yet totally within me?”⁵⁵⁰ We fear the differences between people yet we abhor the idea of anyone being like us? The finding of life requires losing it?⁵⁵¹ In a world where thousands die daily from hunger there is food for all? We spit on the face of God, but God never tires of inviting us to share God’s life? By emptying ourselves we find ourselves filled with the life song of others?⁵⁵² True relationships both gather and protect aloneness?⁵⁵³ Silence is the sound of God’s heart?⁵⁵⁴ Loving actions, unprescribed, tear down walls and boundaries? New life is born of the pains of the old?⁵⁵⁵ The wilderness is the place of life?⁵⁵⁶ Which

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁴⁸ Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 36, 10.

⁵⁴⁹ Gen. 1.

⁵⁵⁰ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 5.

⁵⁵¹ Matt. 10:39. Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 31.

⁵⁵² Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 72; Oden, *God’s Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 77.

⁵⁵³ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 92.

⁵⁵⁴ Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who’s Already There*, 110.

⁵⁵⁵ Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 19.

⁵⁵⁶ Richard, 24.

of these opposites can be explained by dualism? None. They are the truths, the wisdom of common, creative life together but they cannot be known without the openness toward a life larger than dualistic understandings. “For Christians, the cross speaks of the greatest paradox of all: that to live, we have to die. To walk the way of the cross, to allow one’s life to be torn by contradiction and swallowed up in paradox, is to live in the hope of resurrection, in the sign of Jonah. For Christians, the crossing point is a place of transformation.”⁵⁵⁷

Ministering out of the Triune Dance, hospitality invites us to engage the life of God and humanity together within the mysteries of the paradoxes such existence encompasses. Practitioners must join those who swim in deep waters trusting that the God who is all, in all, and through all remains unbounded and thus expansively open to creating life and restoration in inconceivable fashions. “The Christian vision demands the formation of a specific kind of self, a hospitable self. The hospitable self is marked by the paradox of the Christian vision: ‘Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it’ (Matt 10:39).”⁵⁵⁸

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guests to find his own.⁵⁵⁹

Exploration in paradox invites us to laugh with the intoxication of absurdity. Description of even one mystery of creation, even the smallest practice of hospitality, reveals multiple

⁵⁵⁷ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 31.

⁵⁵⁸ Richard, 74.

⁵⁵⁹ Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 72.

and different layers and paradoxes to each practitioner who explores its form. One sees certain refractions of light, another person sees other refractions. All illuminate mystery.

All are true descriptions of the mystery:

This touches on a real paradox: as humans, we crave belonging, we need the connectedness to others that bring security, but this connectedness can prevent the natural movement and evolution that we need in our lives. It can also get in the way of creativity and stifle the natural loneliness that pushes us to discover something new, that pushes us closer to God. This loneliness is the loneliness of the individual who steps out from the group, who takes a chance on what can be discovered and done outside the norm.

So here is the paradox: as humans we are caught between competing drives, the drive to belong, to fit in and be a part of something bigger than ourselves, and the drive to let our deepest selves rise up, to walk alone, to refuse the accepted and the comfortable, and this can mean, at least for a time, acceptance of anguish. It is in the group that we discover what we have in common. It is as individuals that we discover a personal relationship with God. We must find a way to balance our two opposing impulses.⁵⁶⁰

We are encouraged on this journey, “At the same time, the mystery of our faith opens a door for embracing paradox and even logical contradictions. ... To the person who walks in the Spirit, paradox, mystery, and uncertainty propel him forward instead of bogging him down.”⁵⁶¹

The world of paradox is not for the faint of heart or young in faith although it remains the innocent gift to little children not yet schooled in dualism. Rohr notes, “This new coherence, a unified field inclusive of the paradoxes, is precisely what gradually characterizes a second-half-of-life person. It feels like a return to simplicity after having learned from all the complexity.”⁵⁶² Learning the work and value of hospitality within the small individual tasks of everyday life and common relationships—eating, listening,

⁵⁶⁰ Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 18-19.

⁵⁶¹ Sweet and Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*, 87.

⁵⁶² Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 114.

tending wounds, and offering shelter—teaches us “The joy of Christianity, the kingdom imperative, breaks through conventional thought to reconcile opposites. Such living knows that the really important matters are the ordinary and the likable.”⁵⁶³ As practitioners retain an open posture toward the stranger, respect the human form, remember people fear commonality, and desire affirmation of their divine unique differences; the key to community is the paradox of gathering while protecting unique aloneness.⁵⁶⁴ As we remember that like the Israelites, we too are sojourners, we minister to bring forth a Kingdom both taking shape and coming. “Hospitality then appears to rest on a paradox: Christians are called to welcome the stranger even though they have no home, even though they are a diaspora people with no fixed place to call their own.”⁵⁶⁵ Our home then is Christ. We lay our head in the place of the saints, on Christ.⁵⁶⁶ In doing so, we see beyond Christ, attentive to the Spirit and the gaze of Christ, and we are invited to look upon the Triune Dance. The Dance itself opens our hearts and minds to the mystery of creation and community. Vosloo notes that in regard to

identity, pluralism and otherness. It seems to be the case that a trinitarian focus holds the promise of a more adequate rethinking of the relation between the one and the many, sameness and difference, identity and otherness. ... David Cunningham writes: “The doctrine of the Trinity calls into question our assumption that the categories of oneness and difference are incommensurable, incompatible, or even necessarily in tension with one another.”⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶³ Szews: 19.

⁵⁶⁴ Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, 101-102, 92.

⁵⁶⁵ Newman, 113-114.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁶⁷ Vosloo, "Identity, Otherness and the Triune God: Theological Groundwork for a Christian Ethic of Hospitality," 76.

The work of hospitality might occur within the perceived dualistic framework of two: God and humanity, but to limit its form to dualistic thinking drains its capacity for creative ministry. God and humanity interact not within a duality, but within the plurality of the Divine form, human form, and their interrelationships with both self, other, and community, which reveal the endless paradoxes found between each. This world of paradox and mystery with endless opportunities for learning together enlivens human form, for this is what we were made for. “The soul and spirit tend to love and revel in paradoxes; [for] they operate by resonance and reflection.”⁵⁶⁸

The Incarnation & the Eucharist

Certainly hospitality opens our hearts and minds to one of the largest paradoxes of Divine/Human community in restoration: the Eucharist. Debated, dissected, and interpreted into more articulated understandings than any other part of God and humanity in relationship, the Eucharist remains at the center of Christian faith and practice. Of consequence here is not the various interpretations of the Eucharist, but the implications of Eucharistic thinking, practice, and gathering within the work of hospitality which enable us “to live more fully in the time of God’s saving events in history that stretch back to the formation of Israel and forward to the consummation of the kingdom of God.”⁵⁶⁹ The mystery of the Banquet Table reminds us that Christ participates both as host and guest, and also the meal itself. The Incarnation reminds us that the Paschal mystery reveals not only humanity welcomed into the divine and the Divine seen in the

⁵⁶⁸ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 154.

⁵⁶⁹ Newman, 57.

stranger, but also that together the people of God become the incarnate Body of Christ ever present in the world. The Eucharist, firmly anchored both in the Passover remembering of covenant and life as strangers and in the restorative work of sacrifice, invites us past mere form into mystery. To remember more than wine and blood, bread and body. To gather attentive not only to the towel and the humiliation of being served, but to the invitation to join the ministry of common service.⁵⁷⁰ To gaze at the whole of Christ's life of shared meals, laughter, long walks and talks, abundant food, and the warm embrace of suffering and brokenness, not just the final hours of agony and abandonment.⁵⁷¹ The Eucharist invites us to gather and to remember all: the Creation, the slavery, the Covenant, the Diaspora, the meals, the miracles, the service, the laughter, the healing, the embrace, the teaching, the sacrifice, and the body and life, which taken into our own, restores God and humanity. Christ invites us not to remember suffering that our lives might be marked only with encounters with suffering. Christ invites us to remember towels and meals where we bathed dirty feet and shared food⁵⁷² knowing Christ in the stranger. Christ invites us to remember friends are necessary to gathering and that gathering and remembering are the stories we share.⁵⁷³ Christ invites us to embrace the common and to no longer fear desolation and abandonment. However practiced, however honored, Christ is the Eucharist, for we remember ourselves as the Body of Christ when we gather to minister to one another.⁵⁷⁴ The Israelites celebrated Passover as Jews do

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 190-191.

⁵⁷¹ Winter, 43, 68.

⁵⁷² Richard, 51.

⁵⁷³ Winter, 40.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 123, 143.

today to remember God and Covenant. The Early Church gathered around tables in morning, midday, or evening, laid with common food to recount stories, to touch each other in healing, and to celebrate their shared life in divinely restored community not to eat Christ, but to continue to eat with Christ.⁵⁷⁵ The Church has gathered and continues to gather, in many languages, in many forms, to remain anchored in the hope of God and humanity reconciled to dwell together. The longer we tend the Banquet Table, the deeper we foray into liminal places, and the more invitations we offer with and on behalf of the King as ordinary people engaged in ordinary activities for extraordinary results; the more our many Eucharistic gatherings reflect and become the Banquet Table here on earth⁵⁷⁶ surrounded by the forming shape of the Kingdom of God and resplendent with the light and laughter of the King.

The Incarnation & the Divine Dance

The Divine Dance both invites human participation in knowing and being known. It offers itself as a reflection and revelation on the mysterious shape of community which is formed and respective both of individuality and the relationships shared within it. The Triune Dance names the interrelationships of the Father God, Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Each exist both in their own form and the form of their community together. Christian theology is rich with explanations and explorations of this existential paradox of form. Within the practices of hospitality and its focus on welcoming and inviting into

⁵⁷⁵ Koenig, *Soul Banquets: How Meals Become Mission in the Local Congregation*, 93; Winter, 36.

⁵⁷⁶ Cláudio Carvalhaes, "Borders, Globalization and Eucharistic Hospitality," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49, no. 1 (2010): 54; Kirk: 104-105; Winter, 118.

restored life, Eastern images of the Trinity as a Dance better describe the mystery than the structured words of Western theology. Each is good, but images often offer creative and relational shape that linguistic form, with its inherent purpose of definition, cannot. Increasingly, tired of wooden, modern forms for the masses, attentive theologians and practitioners are looking to ancient writings and icons to explore hospitality, community, the Trinity, and humanity:

In trinitarian studies reference is often made to God as essentially relational. This is expressed in both the Eastern and the Western trajectories in trinitarian faith, albeit in different ways. It was agreed by the end of the fourth century that the nature of God should be thought of as a communion of persons. The verb *choreo* was sometimes used to express the idea that each person participates in others. Later this was expressed in a noun, *perichoresis*. This term was first used in a trinitarian context by Pseudo-Cyril in the sixth century and later in the eighth century by John of Damascus. The notion of *perichoresis* takes up the words of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: "... believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:11). As Paul Fiddes notes, the term *perichoresis* had the advantage of emphasizing reciprocity and exchange in the mutual indwelling and penetration of the persons, thus expressing the "the permeation of each person by the other, their co-inherence without confusion."⁵⁷⁷

Focused on God rather than humanity, the Eastern Church has not been distracted into petty divisions over differences—as we noted, where we focus matters. The Eastern Church speaks of the Divine-Human relationship not in how we can return to God, but in how God invites us in. While seemingly subtle, this shift of perspective is profound. Our focus remains attentive to God and the order of relationship: God to humanity.

The image of the Divine Dance gives space both to the form of each participant and their movement with, around, and among each other. It also allows space for light, color, sound, and movement to characterize and to give form to relational pieces. In this,

⁵⁷⁷ Vosloo, "Identity, Otherness and the Triune God: Theological Groundwork for a Christian Ethic of Hospitality," 85. Paul Fiddes explores divine and human participation in his book. Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

it affirms not just the beings, but their relationships as all integral to the Dance. The Divine Dance also bears space to invite humanity into its form not to become God or another divine being, but to be drawn up into the Divine Life,⁵⁷⁸ to become all that the Garden Creation originally created both in our distinct form and in our exquisite interrelationships with the Creator and with each other. In the second century, Irenaeus wrote, affirming this, noting, “for the union and communion God and man; —both bringing down God unto man by the Spirit, and again bringing in man unto God by His Incarnation.”⁵⁷⁹ The Dance holds space and is the community and creativity alive in our *Imago Dei*. Rohr calls this “earthly embodiment and divinization ... *incarnational mysticism*.”⁵⁸⁰ The giving and receiving of relationships within the Divine Dance is best described as gifts—for self and relationship are freely given, freely received, a mark of abundance, and a form able to be drawn into the other expanding their being:

God’s gifts do not lessen the human beings. Human beings exist because of God’s gifts—not merely in the sense that they would cease to exist if God did not give, like a starving child if they did not receive nourishment, but in the more significant sense that their very existence is result of God’s giving.

God’s gifts don’t diminish those who receive them. They don’t come with the message, “You are small and insignificant, and I am big and important.” God’s gifts establish. They come with the message, “You are loved, and therefore you exist.” With that message, gratitude becomes easy because it is not primarily gratitude for getting what we lacked and could have acquired ourselves if we were not so insignificant, but gratitude for the wonder of just being there as fruits of God’s creativity and objects of God’s blessing.⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁸ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 120; Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, 75.

⁵⁷⁹ St. Irenaeus, *Five Books of S. Irenaeus*, trans., John Keble, A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1872), 450.

⁵⁸⁰ Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 78.

⁵⁸¹ Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, 47.

By nature, the exchange of gifts occurs between beings with the express purpose of enlarging both the form of each and the relationship between them. Hospitality is the intentional work of God and humanity to restore the places in which gifts are freely and lovingly celebrated and exchanged as reflective of the divine beauty formed into Creation.

Jean Vanier's lifetime of living with, learning from, and coming to love those who are broken by physical and mental illnesses provides him with sacred perspectives on humanity. No matter our outward shape, we all gather fractured, beaten, and scarred. Within and because of the Divine Dance, "We're beginning to see that we can only live if we're together. ...[for] we have to die to all the powers of egoism in ourselves in order to be reborn for this new and deeper unity where our uniqueness and personal gifts and creativity are not crushed but enlivened and enhanced."⁵⁸² "In a relationship of communion, you are you and I am I; I have my identity and you have yours. I must be myself and you must be yourself. We are called to grow together, each one becoming more fully himself or herself. Communion, in fact, gives the freedom to grow. It is not possessiveness. It entails a deep listening to others, helping them to become more fully themselves."⁵⁸³ Attentive to our individual forms within community, we find "The purpose of the outbound flow of God's gifts is for us to receive living water from God's eternal source, and to thereby come to mirror among ourselves the loving gift exchange of the Godhead"⁵⁸⁴ for only in belonging "can we break out of the shell of individualism

⁵⁸² Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, 33-35.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁸⁴ Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, 70-71.

and self-centeredness that both protects and isolates us.”⁵⁸⁵ The self is both God’s gift to us and our gift to each other. Likewise, we receive Christ’s life as gift, and our life blesses God.

The imagery of dancing together offers a promise of freedom and an opportunity for the unique forms of our created being to participate in the Table Ministry of the Kingdom of God. As we are invited in, Christ does not heal us into perfect bodies with personalities that all look identical; rather, Christ binds and heals our wounds, Christ affirms and blesses the unique gifts we bring pointing out their reflection of the Creator, and Christ lovingly points us in directions toward individuals to whom our gifts are a particular blessing:

And what does this “Visitor” show us? He shows us how great is our potential. There are two Latin phrases which speak of this great potential. We are told that we are made *ad imaginem Dei* – that is, “toward the image of God”; in other words, we are like an unfinished icon which, as our “creation” moves toward completion, progressively takes on a closer resemblance to the God Who created us in the first place. We are intended to live so fully the life of the Trinity that we are transformed into visible and credible icons of the transcendent God. In fact, our likeness to God should grow to be so perfect, our unity with God so intimate, that we can say with St. Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me.” This brings us to the astounding Eastern Christian doctrine of “divinization” – *theosis* in Greek – which shows us how great is the “Christmas present” which God gives to us: “God Has become man so that man might become God”... and woman too!⁵⁸⁶

The image of the Divine Dance affirms the plurality of life lived together where space and relationships exist for giving and receiving; it does not abolish form but enlarges it as

⁵⁸⁵ Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 35.

⁵⁸⁶ Jim Karepin, "The Guest," accessed December 2, 2012, <http://www.stbasils.com/ECS/FrJim/dpGuest17xi05.pdf>.

a gift to the community.⁵⁸⁷ The Dance and the Table together remind us that life is comprised of more than one sphere of relationships. Rohr notes,

Once we made Jesus *only* divine, we ended up being *only* human, and the whole process of human transformation ground to a halt. That is the way the dualistic mind works, I am very sad to say. ... When we tried to understand Jesus outside of the dynamism of the Trinity, we did not do him or ourselves any favor. Jesus never knew himself or operated as an independent “I” but only as a “Thou” in relationship to his Father and the Holy Spirit, which he says in a hundred different ways. The “Father” and the “Holy Spirit” are a relationship to Jesus. *God* is a verb more than a noun. God is love, which means relationship itself (1 John 4:7-8).⁵⁸⁸

Recentring the Christ of our salvation within the Trinity creates space for a perichoretic hospitality which “serves as a challenge against the isolation from the other and otherness, as well as the loss of particularity through our openness.”⁵⁸⁹ It reminds us the only gift we have is our self, with the created form gifted to us by the Creator.⁵⁹⁰ Perichoretic hospitality extended from the Banquet Table illuminates that within the Kingdom of God “The true self does not really ‘go to heaven’ as much as live there already.”⁵⁹¹

The Incarnation as Invitation

The Incarnation brought God and humanity into an intimate physical encounter within the rhythms of daily living in community for the first time since Creation. The

⁵⁸⁷ Vosloo, "Identity, Otherness and the Triune God: Theological Groundwork for a Christian Ethic of Hospitality," 88.

⁵⁸⁸ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 97-98.

⁵⁸⁹ Vosloo, "Identity, Otherness and the Triune God: Theological Groundwork for a Christian Ethic of Hospitality," 89.

⁵⁹⁰ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 30.

⁵⁹¹ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 54.

Creator, who once walked and talked in the cool of the evening, who for generations invited the Israelites back in to covenantal community, now stepped onto the earth to fully invite humanity into the hospitable, restorative work of re-creation. Now present on earth was God, incarnate in Jesus to attend to human need, to restore the broken creation, and to articulate in word and deed this restored community of God and humanity eating and living together in the Kingdom of God. Encountering Jesus, the people recalled examples of hospitality such as Rahab, Boaz, King David, Abigail, Elisha, and Elijah. The deeds, life, and described character of these people of God were well known concepts and stories, but as with most traditions, hospitality had lost most its luster by the arrival of Christ. The Israel that Jesus stepped into held a common but deeply ritualistic faith evident in a variety of forms as well as a broad spectrum of personal sincerity based on both written and oral laws, narratives, and interpretations. As with all theological concepts, Jesus turned what the Jews believed they knew about hospitality, the nature of God, and God's relationship to the world on its head as he incarnated not just God on earth, but also the physical presence of Yahweh's covenant. In Christ we see not merely the fulfillment of the law, but the embodiment of the restorative work of God begun in covenant for the express purpose of restoring all humanity:

Thus, I propose, Yahweh is generated and constituted, so far as the claims of Israel are concerned, in actual practices that mediate. The Bible is the product generated by a community, and the source that generates and nurtures the community as it practices Yahweh-in-relation. Thus the question of mediation is not a question of right theology (as in orthodoxy), a great and pervasive theological temptation, but it is a question of characteristic social practice generates, constitutes, and mediates Yahweh in the midst of life. ... Thus my thesis is that Yahweh is given to Israel in practice (a practice made credible by the original events that stand at the beginning of the process of these mediations). This judgment leads to derivative observations. First, this is an important reminder that Old Testament theology is not simply an intellectual exercise. Wherever this testimony has been taken seriously, in ancient time or in any time

since then, it has been taken seriously in practice. Second, this judgment is an affirmation to ecclesial communities, Jewish and Christian, that the day-to-day disciplines and practices of the community are indeed theological activities, for such activities are the modes and arenas in which the utterances and gestures of Yahweh can be nurtured. These activities are received as reliable disclosures of the partner in relationship. These practices, in ancient times and since, are not overly splashy or innovative or noteworthy. They are slow, steady, and mundane as life itself. It is this history of day-to-dayness, conducted with some intentionality and courage, in which Yahweh is seen to be related to Israel, in ways of demanding, promissory sovereignty and forgiving, restorative fidelity.⁵⁹²

Jesus was the most scandalous practitioner of hospitality the world had ever known as he taught and concretely lived out God's restorative work of hospitality in simple, common, everyday gestures of welcome and sincerity. He not only talked and interacted with women, outcasts, lepers, white collar thieves, and those of low economic status, he also ate with them and refused to ceremonially cleanse himself afterwards. Furthermore, he promoted the notion that God was more interested in those that society overlooked than God was interested in self-promoting by knowing and dining with the best, the brightest, and the richest. Jesus called hosts on the carpet for not granting common courtesies as a way of publicly humiliating him even while he praised the entrance and actions of women who were not to be at the party at all:

Jesus identifies the redemptive work of God in him with that of the stranger, the weak, and the destitute, suggesting that by welcoming such persons one welcomes him, and thus God. This identification affirms humanity to the core by embracing it at its most vulnerable points. It disrupts the human tendency to secure itself by strength, power, domination, wealth, status, and even religious association.⁵⁹³

Finally, Christ used parables to teach the notion that the Kingdom of God was not just coming; but that it was already coming, already present, and was open to all; not just the socially respectable. In fact, the King of the Kingdom desperately wanted the ugly and

⁵⁹² Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 574, 575-576.

⁵⁹³ Reynolds, "Welcoming without Reserve? A Case in Christian Hospitality," 199.

lame to come, to eat, to laugh, and to be whole. The Early Church continued to live out this scandalous welcoming to all. Women, slaves, Gentiles, and abandoned babies all came to be welcomed at the Banquet Table.⁵⁹⁴

The Incarnation endows the Kingdom of God with form and substance. Not only did Christ come to walk among us, Christ continues to be present among us as we individually and collectively incarnate Christ in the world.⁵⁹⁵ “If Christ is in you, the Christian life is not about striving to be something you are not. It is about becoming what you already are.”⁵⁹⁶ The Incarnation embraces and embodies the Table Ministry of hospitality:

Through the incarnation, God has welcomed the stranger, human nature, invited it home, and restored it. As with any act of welcome, the host and guest do not remain unchanged, but are transformed by hospitality. God genuinely experiences human finitude, and human being genuinely experiences divine healing. The teaching of the Incarnation that God took all of human being into the divine life for a dwelling place means every part of human life dwells in God.⁵⁹⁷

Christ came not only to model the Kingdom, but to announce that in Kingdom of God “the shalom of God was at hand.”⁵⁹⁸ Christ revealed that the Kingdom was not an otherworldly place, a form foreign to human need, or even patterned after human kingdoms. The Incarnation revealed God in human form that God might restore humanity into a place crafted for its unique needs and able to capacitate the love of its Creator and the exchanges of gifts in relationships. While theology and humanity have sought

⁵⁹⁴ Journals, November 27, 2011.

⁵⁹⁵ Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus*, 182; Sweet and Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*, 143.

⁵⁹⁶ Sweet and Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*, 58.

⁵⁹⁷ Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World*, 109.

⁵⁹⁸ Hunter, 229.

grandness and luster, the Kingdom of God grows out of the ordinary, the common, by extraordinary choices and attentive living. The Incarnation reveals “there is no such thing as ‘ordinary.’ Nothing is ordinary. All things are out of the ordinary. Everything that exists is extraordinary and hold secrets of the universe within ... for the doctrine of the incarnation requires a high doctrine of the everyday, the ordinary.”⁵⁹⁹ As Christ entered our ordinary world, in an ordinary way, and engaged in ordinary activities of eating, sleeping, and talking he modeled that we too must humbly enter each other’s worlds⁶⁰⁰ for extraordinary results. Jesus did not focus on retaining his status as God in order to impress humanity into relationship; rather, Christ allowed himself to be emptied in order to bring us together and to show us that welcoming the stranger is essential in the Kingdom not for self-glory, but rather as an exquisite and particular act of love between two beings and reflective of the Triune.⁶⁰¹ As we minister hospitality within our own culture, the Incarnation of Christ is a painful reminder that life is not about us, it is about restoring relationship with the stranger and about coming into a place where we celebrate the unique ways we are created and we actively seek out others to invite to the Banquet Table not to agree with us, but simply to come as they are. Christ emptied himself in order to create space for a mutual knowing. We too must empty ourselves to make space for the stranger—not just our time, but also our opinions, our rights, and our particular sacred obsessions. “Jesus did say that we should ‘give the good news to all creation’ (Mark 16:16). I can only assume that meant to enter into their worlds, learn the

⁵⁹⁹ Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, 103.

⁶⁰⁰ Richard, 13.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 64; Jean Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 40; Vanier, *Encountering 'the Other'*, 41.

vocabulary, and humbly understand their assumptions, and not sit around and wait while they understand and totally agree with ours.”⁶⁰² Without a doubt this remains the greatest challenge in our culture. To take up the work of hospitality, we must live content within human form. We must recognize differences as gifts whose exchange builds up the community. We must acknowledge that our opinions are merely that, they never fully understand, describe, or even agree with divine and eternal truths. The Incarnation reminds us that relationship rather than knowledge or morality is the center of our being and that invitations are open and free to rejection not to inspire us to force or legislate our “kingdom.” Incarnate as a simple, everyday carpenter, God entered our world to draw us back in the Divine. The carpenter, in sovereignty and love, chose to craft a Banquet Table. He invited and continues to invite us to join him there. He invites us to join in the work of inviting and gathering not the good-looking, rich, or socially respectable who can advance us. Rather, he invites us to seek out those who do not know or cannot come themselves. He reminds us that suffering, marginalization, and poverty create hollow social and emotional space in which the voice of God is more easily heard and recognized. He invites us to dine as guest and host. He gives us eyes to see the transformation of our common, smelly, loud, and fearful world into the lush, abundant, and peaceful Garden. At the edges of the Kingdom we venture forth with life-giving water and gentle hands, hearts, and voices to minister healing. The work of hospitality celebrates the present and coming reality of the Kingdom of God joyfully expanding into our world today full of the riches and abundance of Creation restored and restoring, loving and healing, attentive to strangers and recognizable by the sounds of giggling

⁶⁰² Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 128.

children, the contented sighs of old women and babies, the whispers of conspiring men and their outrageous tales, and the raucous laughter of the King.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Hospitality: Dancing with the Divine & Feasting at the Banquet Table in the Kingdom of God

For centuries, the Protestant church has pushed aside mystery and embraced the fallacy of human knowing enticed by the same lure of knowledge that led Adam and Eve to taste of the forbidden fruit. We want to know; we need to know and fully grasp everything. We forget the mysteries of God are infinite. We grasp for a birthright that is not ours by creative design. We are human. We are not divine. The Orthodox Church invites us to remember that the Triune Dance welcomes us into its lustrous community, but we want to know and be in and of and for ourselves only, singularly, individually. Our generic, American Protestant legacy ignores the wisdom of community and shudders at the thought of inter-dependent responsibility. We believe we can do this. We believe our life, our salvation, our eternity, our story, is about me, individually. Heirs of Kant, we believe we can stand outside and apart from the created world. So long has our western, colonizing culture been wedded to the philosophical underpinnings that also endowed the Protestant movement with its love for Locke and faith in epistemology, we lost sight of the form of our created being. We are companion to God, we are welcome participants in the life, love, and creativity of the Creator God, but we are not, nor shall we ever be, God. Hospitality calls us to revere what is sacred in every person ever born.⁶⁰³ Hospitality is the work of God's creative imagination. Denying community, denying hospitality,

⁶⁰³ Pratt and Homan, 180.

denying the call into the Triune Dance, denying the Imago Dei within us, we trade it away for the lie, the fallacy that salvation is about individuality, about me alone. That God died just for and because of me. We lose not only ourselves and the Dance, but we lose our life and hope. Our human, created limits free us to choose life; our denial of them enslaves us to endlessly seeking after that which we can never truly attain.⁶⁰⁴ In grasping for the divine understanding which will never be ours, we miss the invitation to the divine relational dance for which we were lovingly crafted. God invites us, within the fallen world, to join in the work of co-creation and restoration. To become the Body of Christ, to incarnate God's love in the world, to dine at the Banquet Table, to invite strangers to join us, to become the part of the Kingdom of God already coming to earth.

“For God so loved the world,” not for God so loved me, “he [God] gave his [God's] only begotten Son.”⁶⁰⁵ For the world, for the community, for the call to join the Dance, for the liminal spaces where God's love still yearns to break forth in dark and dying hearts. For the wounded, the outcasts, the impoverished, the lowly, the humble, the forgotten, the hypocrites, the human ones. “For God so loved the world,” our birthright is not a solo invitation into heaven; rather, God invites us into the Triune Dance where we become the Kingdom of God breaking forth on this earth, here and now, where we become “the hands and feet of Jesus,” where we incarnate, live and breathe, as the Body of Christ. Without hospitality, none of this is possible. Without God's loving welcome of us and our loving welcome to others, there is no Dance, there is no Banquet Table, there is no Body of Christ, and there is no Kingdom of God. The Creator's sovereign love

⁶⁰⁴ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, 22, 42.

⁶⁰⁵ John 3:16.

breathes life into our being, excites our imagination with creative potential, and invites us into the grandest adventure ever. If we want to join in God's ministry, if we want to be a part of the Kingdom of God here on earth, if we want to live as humans in relationship with the divine, then hospitality rightly and naturally must move back to the center of our theology, our practices, and our understanding of relationships.

Hospitality encompasses the simplest of tasks: the sharing of a meal, the warm embrace of a listening conversation, the gentle passing of a warm blanket and pillow, the space for each of us to be present to the other in real time and space in the name of God. When seriously pursued and engaged, hospitality shatters us. It exposes our self-centeredness, our compulsion to hoard, our fear of strangers, our concrete belief that God tangibly gifts to those who are faithful and withholds from those who are not, and exposes our freedom of choice as sheer fallacy and isolating self-deception. "When we truly make room for others, we cannot keep up false appearances for long; hospitality is an invitation to mutual truthfulness."⁶⁰⁶ While hospitality invites us to engage another in the name and with the grace of God, it simultaneously reveals the wounded and poor human we remain despite any wealth we possess. "Although we can see the common humanity of our family, neighbors, and nation on the basis of blood and race, it is ultimately the stranger that shows us who we actually are."⁶⁰⁷ Hospitality, rightly engaged, brings us deeper into the Triune dance and we grasp the stranger and invite him or her into the outer ring of the dance. The deeper into the Dance we plunge, the more we must know and accept our own self or reject it and move back out into the safety of the

⁶⁰⁶ Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*, 166.

⁶⁰⁷ Sutherland, 28.

outer edge. Only by maintaining a receiving posture from God within a relationship of hospitality can we offer hospitality to another.

Hospitality is the work of the people of God in the world. God is not asking us to become something we are not; rather, to live fully into who the Creator crafted us to be and become. “Hospitality faithfully practiced, challenges our assumptions about what it means to be normal. ... We are not required to fit into a predetermined mold... we are free to be faithful, to live joyfully.”⁶⁰⁸ To accept and appreciate the differences within us. To see they add to the beauty of the Creation. Hospitality challenges our assumptions of discipleship as primarily knowledge with the hope of transformation into Christlikeness. As Rohr notes, “The Western church lost the ground and transformative center.”⁶⁰⁹ Hospitality is not something to be learned; rather, it is the choice to accept the call to receive the world and God in the manner in which God offers them—both Creation and Restoration—open and inviting to all who respond, abundant and free, lavish and recklessly inclusive. Hospitality recognizes that God made Creation “good,”⁶¹⁰ that neither lust for knowledge and sovereignty nor sin can deter the Creator from restoring humanity into intimate relationship. Hospitality then is a moral stance not against sin, but for Creation, for the world in the same manner that the “Holy Spirit is always entirely *for us*.”⁶¹¹ “The entire point of hospitality is that Christians are a people in the world and for the world.”⁶¹² It is readiness for God which requires “courage, gratitude, and radical

⁶⁰⁸ Newman, 177.

⁶⁰⁹ Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 123.

⁶¹⁰ Gen. 1.

⁶¹¹ Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 92.

⁶¹² Sutherland, xvi-xvii.

openness.”⁶¹³ Benedict reminds us that “if we close ourselves to the stranger, we close ourselves from the Sacred” so we choose to embrace a life of acceptance to “build a new kind of kingdom among us” in which “our entire existence [becomes] a welcoming table.”⁶¹⁴ Hospitality reminds us that the work of discipleship is simply ordinary people living their ordinary lives but choosing to make extraordinary choices which focus on the warm and generous welcoming of others so that the extraordinary work of restoration will continue to break forth into the world.

Today we are keenly aware of tragedy, desolation, and utter devastation in the world. News and social media assault our senses with needs and opinions until we grow physically, emotionally, and relationally numb. “The contemporary church hungers for models of a more authentic Christian life in which glimpses of the Kingdom can be seen and the promise of the Kingdom is embodied. More than words and ideas, the World needs living pictures of what a life of hospitality could look like.”⁶¹⁵ God is not inviting us into all the work of the Kingdom. God invites each one of us, individually and as faith communities, into the particular tasks suited for our gifts and limitations. The needs of the world might beckon hospitality as a possible ministry from our bag of options,⁶¹⁶ but as we move deeper into its practices and theology, we find hospitality is not merely a ministry option; rather, it is a way of life where we live in rhythm with God’s way of life in the world. Hospitality anchors within the “spiritual economy, the *oikos* or household of

⁶¹³ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 15.

⁶¹⁴ Pratt and Homan, 23, 31, 149.

⁶¹⁵ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 10.

⁶¹⁶ Pohl, “Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition,” 81.

God”⁶¹⁷ where abundance rather than hoarding welcomes the stranger. We agree with the Scriptures and the ancient church that distribution rather than actual scarcity is the issue.⁶¹⁸ We remember that ordinary acts of kindness—a shared meal, a listening ear, a warm bed overnight, a soft hand—minister the grace needed in each moment and bind our hearts together in such a way we find ourselves invited and feasting at the Table of God. Hospitality does not require many resources, just the willingness to share what we have because in the Kingdom there is always enough.⁶¹⁹ Even the smallest of gifts make a difference in the most difficult of situations.⁶²⁰ “Offering hospitality requires that we allow a place for uncertainty, contingency, and human tragedy”⁶²¹ remembering that listening, learning, valuing, honoring, and attending to needs is our work just as it is God’s.⁶²² This is not a single act, but a lifestyle. “To become good givers, we also need to apprentice ourselves to givers.”⁶²³ Hospitality invites us to relax into God, into the Table, into the Kingdom remembering we are the ones “God has chosen to work through. But God is the one doing the real work, not me.”⁶²⁴ We need not fear failure, stress over succeeding, or worry over abundance. God actively invites all to come and dine, but God has chosen to invite us to join in the fun. Love does not measure response. We do not have to restock the Banquet Table. We are simply invited, in a world of overwhelming

⁶¹⁷ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 16.

⁶¹⁸ Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 195.

⁶¹⁹ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 116.

⁶²⁰ Pratt and Homan, 245.

⁶²¹ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 171.

⁶²² Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity*, 14.

⁶²³ Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, 120.

⁶²⁴ Hershberger, 252.

need, to orient our life in the same direction as God: toward the world, into the world, for the unimaginable restoration of the world into the Kingdom of God.

When we choose to live in such a way that we remember the Church is not ours, it is God's; when we accept and welcome divinely gifted differences; when we embrace mystery rather than needing to fully define or understand it; then we can free ourselves to become the people of God and find that we live both in the world and in the coming Kingdom of God. We find we do not need be heroic, we need only be ourselves.⁶²⁵ We can accept that growth and change is messy and painful and that our story and presence comforts another.⁶²⁶ We realize a life surrounded by people just like us is delusional and dangerous and lulls us away from the laughter of the Table.⁶²⁷ We remember that God asks us to attend to the people right in front of us—the community, the neighborhood, the city—enacting shalom where we live.⁶²⁸ That size matters not, but that intimacy enables greater knowing, greater care:

Our current culture, fascinated with conspicuous consumption and “supersize me” opportunities, would lead us to ignore the significance of such a small gathering. Yet Christ never said our gathering together as his body had to be large. By contrast, Jesus lifted up the deep significance of the few and apparently insignificant. . . . The faithful practice of hospitality must begin (and also end) with what our society will tend to regard as of little consequence. Waiting for the earthshaking event or the cultural or even ecclesial revolution can paralyze us. We are rather, as the gospel reminds us, called to be faithful in the small things. Hospitality is a practice and discipline that asks us to do what in the world's eyes might seem inconsequential but from the perspective of the gospel is a manifestation of God's kingdom.⁶²⁹

⁶²⁵ Newman, 190.

⁶²⁶ Pratt and Homan, 288.

⁶²⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁶²⁸ Hunter, 253.

⁶²⁹ Newman, 174.

If we become serious about hospitality, not as something to do, but as the mystery of God into which we are invited, we find we will never be the same again.⁶³⁰ We will cease being just the Church and become the welcoming community of the Kingdom known by its laughter, its embrace, its abundance, its attentive care, and its participation in the life of God in the world.

Hospitality entices us with its potential, but the invitation from God challenges us with its form. Like the Israelites of Jesus' time we would prefer a conquering king to sweep others away and position us as the privileged and chosen few—our vision of a divinely crafted heaven. Yet in the same manner Christ entered the world to walk among the people and live, we too are invited to walk among people and live—Christ's vision of the Kingdom of God. We are invited not simply to remain ourselves, but to become, individually and corporately, the people God created us to be, to accept and embrace God's choice to enter into this world and bring restoration rather than suck us out into a perfect world and discard creation and the people that remain. We value stability and security in an unpredictable world, but hospitality says we must grasp the hand of God and the hand of a stranger as faith that God will provide and even lavishly, abundantly bless not only us but those around us. Benedict reminds us that we must "let down the barriers of our souls so that the God of the unexpected can come in."⁶³¹ Christian hospitality is "not a 'lifestyle' but a way of life in which we allow our desires, tastes, and choices to be formed by the drama of God's grace-filled kingdom in our midst."⁶³²

Responding to God rather than wishing for a return of the Early Church will naturally

⁶³⁰ Pratt and Homan, 74.

⁶³¹ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, 229.

⁶³² Newman, 30.

recover the unique intersection of home and church, reconnecting the two institutions in partnership for the sake of the world.⁶³³ God invites, we need only reorient our vision and make decisions attending to God's invitation. Pohl encourages us, "As the Christian community engages the complex but rich resources of its own tradition of hospitality, it will be better equipped to respond to the needs and the gifts of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants."⁶³⁴ We will also attend to the hungry, the homeless, the lonely, the sick, the marginalized, and the weak in our neighborhoods, cities, and homes. Understanding, rather than fearing or blindly embracing our culture, will enable us to face the unique and evolving character of our times with integrity and faithfulness⁶³⁵ capable of a polyphonic, fresh engaging and reimagining of the nature of the God in the world here and now. We can delight in the affirmation and acceptance of our differences, but we also need the practices and disciplines of the faith that we might intentionally grow. "When this universalizing of the neighbor to include anyone in need is combined with the previously mentioned commitments to recognizing the image of God in every person and to acknowledging shared humanness, a significant foundation for recognition, respect and care emerges."⁶³⁶ We can affirm that to flourish people need a network of relationships in the world,⁶³⁷ but to enter these we must be content in our Imago Dei, that we are created for community rather than individuality. Hospitality reminds us that the journey and the

⁶³³ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 58.

⁶³⁴ Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 101.

⁶³⁵ Hunter, 198.

⁶³⁶ Pohl, "Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition," 87.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

destination cannot be separated.⁶³⁸ It is not about getting people for heaven someday and then rushing on abandoning them to God's care; rather, it is warmly welcoming the one Christ nudges us toward and walking with them through life, coming to know the shape of the Kingdom as we dine together at the Banquet Table. Winter challenges us,

The times we live in call for a radical reorientation, not only of how we view our world, but how we behave within it. We cannot keep doing what we have always done ... We have a responsibility to pour into the matrix a transforming perspective. We are called to proclaim that the healing, wholesome, compassionate sensitivities of the Spirit are present everywhere and accessible to all. The primary lesson of Pentecost is that chaos is the Spirit's realm and, as such, is ripe with potential.⁶³⁹

We want to be heroes. Our culture pushes toward individuality rather than inter-relational living. The hero looks to his or her self,⁶⁴⁰ but Creation and the Kingdom of God by God's design, attentive to the Imago Dei, are about who we are together. God invites us into the Dance that we might be known and named not by our culture, but by the One who made us.

“To know and to be known,” this phrase sounds healthy, compelling, even inviting. To truly know and be known? We do not want this. We fear exposure. We know the pain of rejection. We want our best to be known and our worst to be forgotten or divinely, magically fixed. God, however, is not magical and certainly not on call to our whims and fancies. God makes us known by inviting us to name all that dwells inside. To know ourselves in our strengths and our weaknesses. To know ourselves as created, known, accepted, and loved. To know ourselves as wounded, scarred, healed, in healing, failing, forgiving, and still loved. God, the author of Life, invites us to join the Triune

⁶³⁸ Newman, 174.

⁶³⁹ Winter, 157.

⁶⁴⁰ Newman, 188.

Dance where the work of hospitality exposes God's love for us and flows through us as God's love and ours for another. Everyone is known. Everyone is changed. The author of life, while complete without us, is richer and in love with us. The role of guest and host rightly exchange as each are changed by the other. Deep calls to deep, needs are met, we are known and found worthy of loving by the One who cannot stop loving, who is love incarnate.

Hospitality, despite cultural shifts, theological fads, poverty, hunger, and gross excess, remains the work of God in us and the call of God upon us. Hospitality names the over-flowing and abundant generosity of God as the tangible, redemptive love of God in the world. Hospitality recognizes the death of Christ as the work of God necessary for redemption, but reorients our eyes back to Creation and the original desire of God to live in abundant and free relationship. Hospitality gathers the lost and outcast not to herd them into heaven sometime in the future, but to lovingly and relationally invite and usher them into the warmth of the Banquet Table already over-flowing in the Kingdom of God which is breaking forth upon the earth today. Hospitality, with gentle spirit and simple tending to human needs, pulls us back from the brink of our theological obsession with rules, sin, sin management, and our compulsive need to dine at the buffet of freedom which does not satisfy because it lacks relationship and so exists in antithesis to our *Imago Dei*. Hospitality acknowledges that free will can reject a free gift, but that the gift giver will keep offering from the well-spring of love which resonates between the heart of God and the human heart alive in God. Hospitality rightly names the co-creative work of God as the Kingdom of God already coming upon the earth. Hospitality exposes the tenets of colonialism, racism, sexism, and ageism for the self-possessive, insatiable

lustive, space-consuming, sinful hunger of a heart inclined toward its self rather than out-pouring the love of God.⁶⁴¹ Hospitality acknowledges stewardship of creation as necessity within the work of redemptive co-creation, recognizing that all is generously given by God for the blessing of all. Hospitality firmly grasps the abundant generosity of God, lavishly available through God's relationship with humans to all people in blatant disregard of the historical and perennial human misinterpretation of blessings as proof of God's pleasure or ill-will. Neither prosperity theology nor its twin, church growth, can stand with feet of clay while they deny the abundance of God's love for all and the creativity of a God neither rushed by our impatience nor limited to our time frame. God wills and acts as God wills and acts. Some faith communities like some tribes remain small, others come in other shapes, sizes, and colors, but all, all reflect the abundance of God. Finally, hospitality embraces growth and failure, for failure is not defined by God with the same condemnation humans offer it to one another. Can one truly fail to love? Can an act of hospitality truly fail? Can our ministry truly be a failure? Only if we take a short view of history and become the definers of success. If, however, we remain human and allow God to remain God, then success is a fallacy or God is the biggest failure ever. God constantly loves without return, God continuously pours life into humans too self-absorbed to offer it back, God died rather than conquer by force. Failure is a measurement by which humans falsely make themselves feel better by comparing themselves to another. God is not enthralled by our neuroticism. Hospitality knows no failure, it simply knows the abundant and lavish generosity of God enjoyed within the realm of community relationships wherein the Creator God delights in co-creating with

⁶⁴¹ Rohr comments on these as "goat stories" in Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 62.

humanity. To become and live fully human, invited in the Divine Dance, gifted abundantly, hospitality must return to the center of our faithful practices as the Body of Christ where we graciously invite those in the liminal spaces to dine at the Banquet Table in the Kingdom of God as it breaks forth upon the earth.

Creation Restored

A dark and weary planet swings through the universe. A loving and generous Creator looks upon it in love. What has been made is good, but the ones who live there have forgotten their Creator. The Creator holds the planet tenderly and nods to the King. A carpenter by trade, the King crafts a beautiful Banquet Table and places it upon the earth. The loving gaze of the Creator, King, and Spirit bring warmth and abundance to the Table. The King steps onto the planet and places each platter and pitcher carefully in preparation for the guests. It is time for the Creator and the Creation to dine and live together once again. The King leaves the warmth of the Banquet Table to go searching in the dark for those who are crippled and slowly clawing their way toward the light. In the silence, in the dark, he reaches down and touches. He heals. He invites one and then another to join him at the Table, to dine on its lavish abundance. Soon the people warm, their bodies and souls nourished. They begin to whisper about others who remain in the darkness. The King comes and goes bringing in more. He invites others to join him in the work at hand.

The King silently beckons to one at the Table to follow him into the dark. He whispers how to see the signs and follow the trail of blood or scratch marks in the dirt. When they come upon the injured, the King reaches out the hand of his student and the

student touches, the student co-creates healing. The student wraps her arms around the new life. The student issues the spoken declaration and turns toward the Table. She realizes that the light and laughter from the Table in the distance, has now broken forth onto the ground on which they stand. This light reveals others lying nearby who kept silence fearful of those who approached, but now cautiously wondering if there are enough miracles for all. The King pauses, wraps his arm around the first one healed and motions the student towards the others. He walks back to the Table, entrusting the healing work of co-creation to the student. The student moves out of the light in the way her Master had done. She touches one, then another, then another. She quickly realizes she must pass on what she has learned. She shows others how to reach out with the new light in them. How to wrap their still strengthening arms around others, to trust their new legs to carry them. Some are sent back to the Table leaning on a new-found friend, others are drawn in to help. But the field is full and the Master has entrusted her with the work. Before she can return to the Table, she, and those ministering with her, find that the Table has expanded again, by sheer necessity, to make space for all who have been healed. The Banquet Table now fills the ground which was once marked by darkness and despair. The Table's laughter and light are seen and heard even further afar from this new space. The King catches her eye, for his presence fills the Table no matter where along its length anyone sits. He nods. The message on his face is clear, "Good job! How did you like that? So many you have found and touched: creation, healing, restoration." The King throws back his head and laughs as a newcomer proudly displays a newly healed scar and inquires whether the one who touched him has been able to return and rest. He wants to say thank you and help. Before the student has finished her first drink, she notices the

King tilt his head, motion to the young man, and silently they move off into the darkness. And she knows. She knows. The work of the Kingdom is constant and sure. The work is for newcomers and experienced alike. She knows that while she has moved from silent servant in the field to server of food and drink at the Table, the King beckons and draws forth as he chooses.

The Kingdom's growth and expansion is wild and untamable. The sounds of stories, laughter, and hope fill the air. The Table is covered by a sheer canopy through which the stars are seen, but there are no walls, in every direction darkness lay beyond the edges of light. The King moves back and forth by his own intuition. Not all who are touched in a field will come to the Table. Not all who are at the Table will follow the King into the darkness. But those who ignore the invitation of the King eventually wander from the Table because without obedience, the laughter grows tinny, the food loses its taste and color, and the presence of those sitting nearby feels fractious. But for those whose hearts grow deeper attuned to the King, for those who learn the joy of service rather than praise, for those whose choices and actions mark their obedience, their hearts grow with laughter, song, drink, and hope. The King joins hands with the Creator and the Spirit. Together they reach out to grasp the hands of those dining. The earth now glows with the light and laughter of the Table and the Kingdom expanding out from it. The King and those he invites continue to bring more guests. The sounds of laughter and dancing fill the air. The Creator smiles. The Banquet Table. The Kingdom of God. Creation Restored.

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