

Entertaining God: Reconsidering the Central Role of Hospitality in the Christian Life in Regards to Ministering to Refugees

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As a Church, especially among biblical scholars and missiologists, there has been a lack of focus on an orientation of hospitality to respond to the refugee crisis. In light of the providential hospitality of God found in the biblical narrative, I argue for a missional theology of hospitality indispensable to the Christian life, and demand a new response from the Church in regards to the refugee crisis. Despite human limitations, we cannot ignore this urgent call to hospitality, lest we miss an essential part of the Gospel message.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

- Matthew 25: 35-40¹

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), there are 65.6 million forcibly displaced people in the world, 22.5 million of whom classify as refugees. As a Church, this is an issue we take to heart, especially in light of the passage above in Matthew 25, because we understand that as Christians, it is essential that we take care of the “least of these”. Biblical scholars and missional theologians have long understood this concept to be true, but have often overlooked the role of hospitality in serving those most in need as applicable to the refugee crisis today. Although Christine D. Pohl and some others have written on a theology of hospitality in regards to refugees and migration, the scholarship has been minimal in this area, considering the relevant nature of the issue for the Church today. But in taking a closer look at Matthew 25, we find that hospitality does in fact play a foundational role for responding to this. Jesus intimates that when we are serving others, most especially the “least of these” in whatever context, we are in fact serving Him. Therefore, we must go beyond just performing acts of service,

such as relief and food-aid to refugees, since we recognize that we are also building communion and relationship with God and with the body of Christ. This viewpoint completely changes the way that the Church follows in Jesus’s footsteps, demanding a radical life of hospitality that requires vulnerability on the part of the Church—in being willing to enter into relationship with others we are serving—often found in the context of sharing a meal together. In light of the providential hospitality of God found in the Biblical narrative, I argue that there is a theology of missional hospitality indispensable to the Christian life, and demand a new response from the Church in regards to the refugee crisis.

Part I: The Biblical Basis for Hospitality

Happening upon God’s Presence and Blessing
The Scriptures offer us a rather compelling narrative of unabashed hospitality, centered on the meal that knows no societal limits, as our model for the Christian life. The narrative starts from the

¹ All quotations taken from the Bible for the duration of this paper will be from the English Standard Version (ESV).

beginning, in Genesis 18:1-7, with the scene at Mamre, which presents a theme of welcoming the stranger through radical humility that is also to be found throughout the gospels. Abraham “ran from the tent door to meet them [three strangers],” invites them to his table eagerly, washes their feet, and sets before them the “curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared”. He is later blessed by them with the news of a longed-for child: part of the covenant promise of God. All this comes about by means of the generous, unhesitating hospitality of Abraham to strangers in the desert. His welcome presents a unique opportunity for God to enter into the everyday reality of his life. In her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine D. Pohl, a professor of Christian social ethics, expounds upon this scene in Genesis 18. She interprets the passage to be a gradual realization on the part of Abraham as to who he is really entertaining; she sees this process, as well as the reception of the message and blessing of God, to be “revealed only in the context of hospitable welcome to strangers,” (24). In other words, for the believer, God’s blessing and our awareness of His presence are acutely present in a unique way in the life of hospitality.

This same providing presence of God is found within the Exodus story of the Israelites, in which God is at work in saving His often rebellious people from the hand of Pharaoh. He invites them to a Passover meal in Exodus 11, by means of which He saves them from His own wrath against Egypt, with the foreshadowing of Christ: all must partake of the unblemished lamb to be saved. Later, fulfilling a covenant to which they have not been faithful in Exodus 16, God provides the grumbling Israelites with manna, quail, and water from the rock to sustain them. God’s hospitality is a sign of His faithfulness and blessing. The covenantal relationship God offers Abraham, the Israelites, and later us, is to be found around the table of a meal, reflecting the character of God as generous, later to be seen actively fulfilled in the very person of Jesus Christ.

Eating Together with the Unlikely

The life of Jesus is noticeably marked by the presence of hospitable meals. In the Gospel of Luke alone, there are ten scenes in which we find Jesus

at table with others, most notably present around the journey to Jerusalem (Kelley 123). At the Last Supper, we find a narrative eerily familiar, echoing much of what we find in the encounter of Abraham and the three strangers. There is again the humble washing of feet, the eating of the Lamb, who is now Host; Guest; and Food, and a moment of transparent divine revelation to strangers who are now friends. Here, we see the covenant with God even more deeply fulfilled. As Pohl explains, the “Eucharist most fundamentally connects hospitality with God because it anticipates and reveals the ‘heavenly table of the Lord,’” (Pohl, *Making Room* 30). We find the complete context of living the Christian life in this scene precisely because, “Eating together, ritualized in the Lord’s Supper, continually reenacts the center of the gospel... 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,” (Pohl 30). Jesus’s example becomes a means of showing us how to bring about the Kingdom here on earth: demonstrating what communion with the God who humbled himself to share meals with us looks like.

However, even before the Last Supper, we often find Jesus at table with unlikely guests and hosts, often to the dismay of the Scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus’ time. His chosen disciples were already among the marginalized and the lowly; He called fishermen and tax collectors to follow Him while the uppity Jewish hypocrites wagged their tongues and fingers against Him. In Mark 2: 15-17, Jesus chooses to eat with the tax collectors and sinners because, as He pointed out to the condescending Pharisees, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” He beckons to the table those who are spiritually the least of these, so as to bring them into communion with himself. He offers the invitation to both the Pharisees and the tax collectors, but the Pharisees do not see their need for Jesus. The meal that takes place gives a glimpse of humility on both sides: for Jesus to eat with the rejected of society and for the rejected to see their need for Jesus. Before he suffered the humiliation of Calvary, Jesus chose to sacrifice and humble Himself for those with whom he associated, seeing all as equals at the table of God, even those otherwise marginalized in society.

Eventually, for all whom He beckons to the table, “being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross,” (Phil. 2:8).

An Orientation of Humility

This act of humility begins even before the meal starts, as we find in the illuminating narrative John offers of the Last Supper in his Gospel. In examining John 13, Mary L. Coloe, of Australian Catholic University, finds the welcome of God to be in the act of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet before the culmination of hospitality in breaking bread together. She takes note of the fact that his action of “laying aside” and “taking up” his garments “recalls the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd”, who does the same with his life later in the passion narrative (407). Jesus’s hospitality, she concludes, goes far beyond any act of servitude as it may seem, and bring us into the relationship of love in the Household of God (415). She clarifies:

To the outside observer, love may appear to be a lowly service, as it can also seem to be a duty; but the experience of love transcends and transforms service and duty. This is why the attitude of love among disciples is so critical, for love is the essential dynamism of any household. At one level, Jesus’ relationship with his disciples remains that of teacher and master, but as the ‘hour’ approaches, there is a deeper level of loving intimacy that he now reveals, knowing that it will not be understood until later. (415)

The hospitality of Jesus transforms lives and transforms relationships, gathering the flock into intimate communion with himself in perfect love. Later on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, we find Jesus under the humble cloak of a stranger, allowing others to share His own story to Him, however ignorant their version may be, in order to fully tell them their own story in return, culminated in breaking bread with them and them later on asking each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” This walk in turn shows the character of these disciples to whom Jesus eventually reveals himself in blessing, because of their hospitality

towards their unknown companion (Sorenson 17). To then try to be a Christian, without this radical and transforming imitation of hospitality, is to miss the Gospel message.

Part II: Hospitality as Vital to the Christian Mission

The example of Jesus, also displayed in the prior life of Abraham, is not one to be ignored, and neither is their example of hospitality. When we are called to the Christian life, it is a life of mission, whether it be in a more subtle sense of the word or in very direct and world-traveling sense of the word. Regardless, it is a missional life that is to be marked by a hospitality, without which, we could not call ourselves Christian—nor would they know us by our love. If this tenant of hospitality is to be central to the gospel, then we must know what it means to hospitable in the Christian life. There is the stereotypical definition that often comes to mind, often accompanied by images of open doors and welcoming in guests into cozy warmth during the holidays. But this hospitality that the Gospel offers is one that is radical to the point of being uncomfortable. As Quaker scholar, Parker Palmer, puts it in his book *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America’s Public Life*, hospitality is:

... inviting the stranger into our private space, whether that be the space of our own home or the space of our personal awareness and concern. And when we do so, some important transformations occur. Our private space is suddenly enlarged; no longer tight, cramped, restricted, but open and expansive and free. And our space may also be illumined... Hospitality to the stranger gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes. (132)

We look to Jesus’ perfect example during his own life, knowing that we cannot ever obtain it as part of a very broken humanity—but striving nonetheless. We must keep in mind that the notion of hospitality is what we are aiming for, despite the fact that in practical application we often find obstacles in

our own selfishness and fear. As Dr. Cathy Ross, a lecturer in Mission at Regent's Park College, Oxford, UK, intimates, there is a degree of sacrifice in true hospitality, a sacrifice of ourselves often for someone we may not find among our close circles of family and friends ("Attending Global Christianity: I" 5).

We see this level of sacrifice especially around the table at a meal, because as Pohl insightfully claims, "Because eating is something every person must do, meal-time has a profoundly egalitarian dimension," (*Making Room* 74). It is one thing to offer someone something to eat—it is a very different thing to actually sit down and eat with someone. Once you sit down and eat with someone, you acknowledge the dignity of that person, seeing them as offering something of value to you just as much as you might to them. This is contrary to what we are usually apt to do, and so we must continually remind ourselves that what we strive for are "hospitality relationships [that] should always be moving toward friendship and partnership models," as "long-term guest status becomes disempowering," (Pohl, "Biblical Issues" 13). We see that difference in the way Jesus lived his life. Pohl notes this difference, saying, "We are familiar with roles as helpers but are less certain about being equals eating together. Many of us struggle with being simply present with people in need; our helping roles give definition to the relationship but they also keep it decidedly hierarchical," (*Making Room* 74). Actually eating a meal with someone is such an unparalleled example of what we as Christians are called to do, which is to take the watered down version of hospitality offered by the world, and adding a posture of humility and sacrifice, especially in our encounter with those in need, however they may be in need. In this way, "hospitality is not a means to an end; it is a way of life infused by the gospel," (Pohl, "Biblical Issues" 11).

So then the first step as Christians is to be attentive to who is in need, and to recognize whom the neighbor is we are called to reach out in love to at that moment. As Ross emphasizes, we must listen to a crying world that is broken, as bearers of God's image, because we are the vessels of the hospitality of God and we reflect His constant attentiveness to His creation, ("Attending Global Christianity: II" 12). She sees this as being a vital point of reference for

healing the global Church of which we are all a part ("Attending Global Christianity: II" 13).

Part III: Hospitality as the Christian Response to the Refugee Crisis Today

The global Church today is facing the greatest refugee crisis ever known, one which calls urgently and especially on our role of hospitality to shed God's light on a dark time. Here we see the command of Jesus in Matthew 25: 35-40 is most applicable. As Pohl indicates, "Christians should be in the forefront of responding to the needs of refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants because we have been called by the gospel to the most needy and vulnerable—whether they be found in refugee or migrant camps, inner cities, or overwhelmed border communities," ("Biblical Issues" 4). Pohl warns though of the danger of seeing hospitality as a short-term strategy in this crisis, or of being a "results-orientated culture", in which "we are hesitant about making commitments to people who 'don't have much to offer,'" ("Biblical Issues" 11). The hospitality we need to offer is much more than just a variety of stratagem in order to put band-aids on the gaping wounds of our world; it needs to be healing ointment offered in the context of sharing meals and stories in a distinct way of life.

Marguerite La Caze, an associate professor at the University of Queensland, sees limitations in the use of universal hospitality, in light of Kant's *Cosmopolitan*, in application to the refugee crisis. She sees the concept of hospitality as a useful framework for facing the refugee crisis and respect for human rights, but sees it as impractical in the sense that "hospitality appears to be an inappropriate concept to apply to immigrants because they are not intending to visit but planning to stay," (320). I see this as being somewhat contrary to the Christian notion of hospitality, as she disregards the aspect of long-term relationship that we seek in the context of hospitality and looks only at the utilitarian short-term aspects of practicality. She seems to find hospitality to be only a singular action, when in light of Jesus' example, as Pohl emphasizes, it is an entire orientation of life ("Biblical Issues" 11).

This orientation of life is then something we can

apply in forming our relationships with refugees, if not so much on the political or international level, at least on a more personal level. But Pohl acknowledges that there are indeed boundaries to the notion of biblical hospitality. She concedes, “In a paradoxical way, hospitality is simultaneously mundane and sturdy, mysterious and fragile. As a practice it involves soup and bread, blankets and beds. But it always involves more than these, and certain tensions internal to hospitality make it fragile—vulnerable to distortion and misuse,” (*Making Room* 127). She goes on to describe many of the limitations we, as human beings, have in providing true hospitality to those who need it. There is the matter of resources, of energy being used, and of the community saying yes to more than it can actually handle, for fear of turning somebody away. In her words, we tend as Christian communities to associate “a certain moral horror” with the concept of not being able to provide, to do enough (*Making Room* 128-35). The problem therein is that we rely on ourselves as a means of solving a problem much bigger than we are; we are left exhausted and cynical trying to accomplish it all. This in turn becomes service without love, which is never true Christian hospitality, and does not benefit the host or the guest. We need to acknowledge we are human, and that we can do something, but that we are not called to do everything. Pohl warns us, “Although boundaries are difficult to impose and sometimes contested by hosts and guests, ignoring limits can be a form of arrogance, a refusal to recognize finiteness,” (*Making Room* 134). These boundaries protect and maintain a sense of dignity for ourselves and those we are serving, not trying to spread ourselves too thin—but truly being present with the people God places in front of us. It is not an excuse to do nothing, but instead a recognition that we are human, that we trust in God: who is bigger than the refugee crisis, and that we will continue to show Christ to those whom we serve in the spirit of true hospitality.

As of September 2014, there were “more than 400 informal tented encampments ...registered around Lebanon to accommodate Syrian refugees,” (Thorleifsson 23). In that same year, a case study, included in the *International Review of the Red Cross*, was done with help from the Lebanese Society for

Educational and Social Development (LSESD), on the food-aid provided by local Lebanese evangelical churches for Syrian refugees. In the church network, a concept that was recognized was the focus on building relationships with refugees and recognizing their dignity, often despite ideological or religious differences (Kraft 410-412). They found that the churches had formed family-like communities with the refugees, in spite of knowing that this kind of relationship-based system could be abused, because they continued to offer unconditional love (Kraft 410). They offered themselves in the same vulnerability that is found in sharing a meal together, imitating the provocative hospitality of Jesus. As Ross Langmead, a professor of Missiology at Whitely College, notes in ministering to refugees, “When a congregation is offering hospitality well it is extending God’s hospitality in the way Jesus did and therefore is a holy place, a place of healing, of belonging, and of shared meals. As such it is a sign of the gracious realm of God,” (43). There is something sacred in the vulnerability of imitating Jesus in welcoming the “least of these” to the table.

To truly be a Christian ministering to the refugees in our world today, one must express a personal hospitality that goes beyond just offering aid, that invites us into an equal and sharing communion with each other, and that the Biblical narrative exemplifies to the utmost degree. It is a hospitality that may seem foolish to the world, simply because for the world: it is. But as we know from the illustration of Jesus’ life, Jesus was never one to follow what the world said. And so the Church offers an example of true dignity, because as Pohl claims, “When we offer hospitality, when we eat and drink together, and when we share in conversation with persons significantly different than ourselves, we make powerful statements to the world about who is interesting, valuable, and important to us,” (“Biblical Issues” 10). When we serve, we must offer an invitation to fellowship: not just a meal, but a meal shared. We offer holy ground where both parties bring something to the table—where guest becomes host, and host becomes guest—where both come to recognize the person of Christ in each other. This is a type of hospitality the world has not really seen, but nonetheless a hospitality we are called to as the

Church. It is a hospitality that permeates all of our life, and welcomes God into our hearts, allowing Him to truly provide through us. As Pohl implicates, “Embodying the hospitality of the gospel requires a radical, costly reorientation of our lives, where we share not only our gifts, resources, and message, but also our very selves. Welcoming the stranger is then not something we do for a few hours a week in a fixed program, but how we live and how we orientate our families, churches, and mission organizations,” (“Biblical Issues” 11).

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