

From Logos to Christos: Essays in Christology in Honour of Joanne McWilliam

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"The Practice of Hospitality" by Deirdre Good

Joanne McWilliam exemplified hospitality and charity wherever she was: in the welcome she and Peter Slater gave to others and in her openness to discussion and ideas at all times and places. This essay is a small way of honoring her memory.

Hospitality to strangers is a Christian virtue. By virtue, we mean something we esteem highly, a quality we try to practice. We didn't however invent it. In most countries of the world, strangers are shown hospitality.

Hospitality is a biblical mandate. Lev 19:33-4 instructs ancient Israelites, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." And in the New Testament, the Epistle to the Hebrews 13:2 exhorts, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have inadvertently entertained angels." Perhaps the author has the entertainment of angelic strangers by Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18:1-3) or Lot (Gen 19:1-14) or even Tobit (Tobit 12:1-20) in mind. The allusion in Hebrews is vague but the practice "love of strangers" commended in a wider context of "letting brotherly love remain." The presumption is that those addressed should continue in a practice already evident among the letter's recipients. In a context of the itinerant ministry of disciples, hospitality is of course an important means of spreading the gospel. But hospitality is not simply kindness to strangers. It has always been a virtue practiced without regard to location. Indeed Paul counsels "Pursuing hospitality to the stranger" in Romans 12:13 using an active verb. The odd NRSV translation, "extend hospitality to strangers" simply demonstrates how hard it is to dislocate hospitality. By this I mean not only that hospitality is not practiced from a specific location, but also that this aspect of hospitality is not widely understood. Because this inconvenient feature of hospitality has been a neglected element of biblical texts, their interpretation and application, it is the focus of this essay.

Abraham in Biblical and Post-biblical Tradition

If we suppose that Abraham is the paradigm of hospitality to strangers that the author of Hebrews has in mind, Genesis 18 might be a good place to begin. It preserves lengthy details of Abraham's encounter with three strangers.

"The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."

And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him."

The practice and location of hospitality in this passage is clear: it is food offered to passing guests under the oaks of Mamre at some distance from Abraham's tent. Hence all the to-ing and fro-ing: a seated Abraham sees three traveling figures whom he runs to meet. Anxious to offer hospitality, he persuades them to rest under the tree and runs back to the tent to ask Sarah for cakes. Next he runs to the herd for a calf to be prepared by the servant for food. Then he takes cakes prepared by Sarah; the calf, milk and curds prepared by himself and the servant and brings them to the visitors under the tree. They are all not so far from the tent that Sarah cannot hear the promise spoken by one of the three guests that she will have a son. This is the element of reciprocity shown by the guest or recipient of hospitality and a feature of the practice.

Christian icons of Abraham's hospitality often show the location of the table at which the three strangers ate as under a tree, with Abraham and Sarah looking on from either side. The tree as the location for hospitality is for the convenience of the strangers. Post-biblical tradition, however, alters Abraham's location. Instead of running to greet strangers and bringing hospitality to them, Abraham moves his dwelling.

According to the (first century BCE) Testament of Abraham, Abraham, the paradigm of hospitality, pitches a tent at the crossroads so as to welcome more strangers arriving from four different roads. Abraham thus welcomed rich and poor, kings and rulers, crippled and helpless, friends and strangers, neighbors and passers-by. "All on equal terms thus did the pious, holy, righteous and hospitable Abraham welcome them." The Testament of Abraham, like the midrash on Genesis, Genesis Rabbah 48,9 understands Abraham's behavior to be typical not exceptional in that he wanted to serve travelers constantly. Similarly, the first century writer Philo of Alexandria, describing Genesis 18, says Abraham ran out of his house and begged the strangers who were passing by his home to stay with him because he was so eager to extend hospitality to them. Aboth deR. Nathan 7 says that "Abraham...used to go out and look all around and when he found strangers he would invite them into his house." In fact, he built a mansion on the road where he would leave food and drink so that anyone who came by would eat and drink and bless God.

In all these passages, hospitality is not primarily associated with the treatment of friends, neighbors, or members of one's own family. When Abraham catches sight of the messengers in the distance, he has no way of knowing who they are. The blessed have earned praise for welcoming the stranger. Indeed, in the Christian Bible, the word often used for hospitality is *philoxenia*, from the Greek for one who loves strangers. Part of the

goodness in hospitality is in receiving a person outside the community from whom one has no immediate expectation of reciprocity. The person you help may never be in a position to help you—he or she may even bring you harm. Nevertheless, hosts are obliged to extend themselves.

Rahab and Women's Hospitality in Biblical and Post-Biblical Tradition

But Abraham is not the only example of hospitable behavior in post-biblical tradition, although he may be the most well known. In I Clement, an early writing of the Church Fathers, Abraham is a paradigm of faith and hospitality along with Lot and Rahab the harlot. According to I Clement, "the hospitable Rahab," hid the spies sent by Joshua to Jericho in order to spy out the country. For this action all under her roof were saved. The sign the spies gave her, namely, hanging out a scarlet thread from her house to identify and save "all that are yours under your roof," makes it clear that, for the writer of I Clement "all who believe and hope on God shall have redemption through the blood of the Lord."

In this interpretative shift from biblical to post-biblical, from hospitality offered outside the house to hospitality offered in the home, we see a reflection of a movement from nomadic to urban. But within the biblical text itself, a shift has already taken place in regard to gender: the place from which a male head of household offers hospitality is different from that of women. While Abraham can be seen to run back and forth between strangers and flocks in public pursuit of provisions for hospitality, Sarah and servants are at home. Women extending hospitality in the Hebrew Bible exist in a somewhat protected physical space that we would identify as a household. For all intents and purposes they function as head of that (less public) household.

Elijah, for example, received hospitality from a foreign widow of Zarephath at her own expense in her house for considerable time according to I Kings 17-18 while the country was in the midst of a drought and while he battles foreign gods. Elijah assures her that her supplies will not run out until the end of the famine. When her son dies, he restores him to life through God's power. This is the element of reciprocity. Similarly, Elisha receives hospitality from a wealthy Shunammite widow according to 2 Kings 4:9-10. She sets aside a chamber for him with a desk, bed, lamp and chair. She also and in turn receives the promise of a son and when he dies Elisha, like his predecessor, restores him to life. In two cases, the more private sphere in which women are located becomes more public when a stranger is shown hospitality in it.

Rationale for Extending Hospitality

Throughout Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the Hebrew people are instructed again and again to take care of the less fortunate. Whether it is leaving a portion of one's crop unharvested so that the poor may come anonymously to partake, or one's attitude toward such charity, the Old Testament makes it clear that failure to take care of the poor and destitute is unacceptable. In Talmudic commentary on Numbers 28:2 we have a precursor to Matthew 25: God says to Israel, "My children, whenever you give sustenance to the poor, I impute it to you as though you gave sustenance to Me." Does

God then eat and drink? No, but whenever you give food to the poor, G-d accounts it to you as if you gave food to G-d.”

The reasons for this are fairly obvious; first of all, all of our blessings come from God and therefore we must share our good fortune with others; it is not our good fortune, after all, but luck and circumstance, blessings, which have afforded us enough food and clothing. To hoard it when others of God’s children go hungry is unacceptable.

A second factor underlying the Talmudic injunctions is the fact that, since the fall of the 1st Temple in 587 BCE, the Jewish people have been largely diasporic. They have been wanderers and strangers in lands not their own. This only becomes a complete Diaspora after the Roman conquest and destruction of the 2nd temple, but it would be fair to say that for the bulk of their history as a collected people, the Israelites and Jews have been strangers themselves. As the chosen people, called to always be the one with the least, the one in need of charity, the Talmud nonetheless calls for these poor and destitute ones to give what they have.

Christian interpretation tends to locate hospitality in the home. Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg in an article, "Abraham's Hospitality to Strangers: A Model for Interreligious Dialogue" in the Bulletin for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue for July 2007, describes Abraham and Sarah as models of hospitality welcoming three strangers into their tent. She has thus read Genesis 18 through post-biblical lens. Her reading is actually a widespread mis-reading of the text. She continues, "They bring the strangers into their home, into a circle of compassion and concern, where they nourish them by both food and kindness. Hospitality is timely, gracious, and abundant. It is indiscriminating and welcomes all who come." Such interpretations rely exclusively on post-biblical traditions, neglecting the text's description of Abraham's hospitality offered under a tree. As we shall see, such a (Christian) reading neglects the mobile hospitality of Jesus. Before we explore other examples, we need to pause to consider ways in which our modern interpretative context is one that has shaped interpretations like that of Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg.

Modern Assumptions about Hospitality to Strangers

We can all agree that hospitality is a Christian virtue. But why do we write books and articles about it? Hospitality is, after all, central to most religious traditions. Abraham’s offering of food and protection to the three messengers in Gen 18 becomes the paradigm for ancient Israelite, Jewish, and early Christian hospitality as we have seen. We've noted that hospitality to strangers is a mandate in most non-Western societies. I've been welcomed into the houses of complete strangers in Matere Valley, Nairobi and in the favellas of San Paulo, Brazil in ways that I would never be welcomed into the apartments of strangers in Manhattan. We write articles and books about it because Western Christian communities struggle with welcoming the stranger and so we need to make the mandate for hospitality explicit. Think of discussions in parish communities about how to welcome visitors to Christmas. In preparing for Easter services in church I have heard the plaintive cry about strangers, "Who are these people and what are they doing in *our* Church?"

We have to recognize the fact that openness to strangers reflects a mindset most of us who are Western don't intrinsically possess. This is probably why our discussions of hospitality can sometimes dwindle to stories of our hosting (non-Western) strangers in our homes. But if our discussions and practice of hospitality become questions of whom we welcome into our homes (and for how long and under what conditions), then we have lost the dynamic of exchange that hospitality presupposes. Hospitality has become a one-way street. We determine who is invited and who is excluded because it is our home, our castle. Such an interpretation is not about welcoming anyone—it is about control. Welcoming someone has become secondary to an assessment—a judgment by me as host about the kind of stranger that is welcome and the duration and type of welcome that is appropriate. If we reduce hospitality to an arbitration of who is and who is not welcomed by us as hosts into our homes, and under what conditions and for how long, is this not a diminution of the biblical mandate of hospitality to the point of distortion?

I believe this is also true of debates about conditions and circumstances under which people may approach the communion table. If we enter into such debates, we have already decided that there is such a debate about who is welcome and who is not. I myself believe that on this question, the evidence of the gospels is unequivocal: Jesus practiced open table fellowship with respect to God's hospitality. It wasn't his table. He was received as a stranger, welcomed as a guest, and gave hospitality at the tables of strangers or acquaintances. Sometimes he learnt from others about brokering God's limitless inclusion.

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman

The Canaanite woman wrested from Jesus a concession that she could claim hospitality. When the story opens, Jesus has withdrawn outside the boundaries of Israel to the coastal regions of Tyre and Sidon. But he has not withdrawn beyond public notice. An anonymous woman cries out to Jesus in public and in a language he understands, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon!” He makes no response. Then the disciples ask him to send her away and he tells her why: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Faced with her second plea for help, Jesus explains that his mission to Israel is not to be snatched away and thrown to the dogs. Only when the woman retorts that even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from their masters’ table does Jesus publicly acknowledge her faith. Her daughter is healed instantly. The organizational challenges faced by early Jewish Christian communities devolved upon setting and maintaining boundaries, and that is reflected in the New Testament documents. But the story of the Canaanite woman shows us something else. Matthew didn't go back through the manuscript and scrape out all the places where Jesus said he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but instead showed how Jesus, the ultimate paradigm for the believing community, was made to revisit and revise an assessment of who gets included in the Kingdom. Through her insistence, the Canaanite woman is finally shown hospitality by Jesus and by implication the Matthean community shows her hospitality too.

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

By locating Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman before the judgment parable of Matthew 25:31-46 in which the Son of Man seated on a throne separates the nations into the sheep and goats and identifies the sheep as heirs of the kingdom of Jesus' father on the basis of their treatment of "the least of these my brethren," Matthew indicates implicitly that Jesus' notions of hospitality have changed. When Jesus identifies the care offered to the "least of these" with care given to himself, he challenges followers to put their focus on those who do not appear to have much to offer. He identifies responses to the most vulnerable ones (those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, sick, or in prison) with responses to his own needs. In this extraordinary passage, Jesus does not identify a specific place for hospitality, but opens up the possibility that, in every setting, his followers might see an opportunity for offering hospitality to those ordinarily overlooked or undervalued.

Emmaus

In Luke's gospel, journeys characterize and shape ministry; Jesus journeys to Jerusalem for most of the gospel while in Acts, disciples and apostles travel from Jerusalem to Samaria, to Europe, and eventually to Rome. Hospitality facilitates and defines Jesus' journey to Jerusalem; it identifies followers and disciples who listen and extend welcome (Mary and Martha, the mission of the Seventy, the Good Samaritan, Zacchaeus) and solidifies opposition (some Pharisees and scribes).

Luke's gospel shows a particular interest in and assumes the practice of hospitality without regard to location. The gospel of Luke casts Jesus' birth, life and ministry as a visit from God (1.68, 78-9). Jesus is however born in an animal trough, a place of dislocation. Luke is replete with stories of invitations and hospitality offered, withheld, expected, accepted and rejected: Jesus' inaugural sermon (4.16-30), the call of Peter, James and John (5.1-11), the stories of Zacchaeus (19.1-10), the woman who anoints Jesus' feet (7.36-50), the Prodigal Son (15.11-32), Lazarus and the rich man (16.19-31) the Good Samaritan (10.25-37), and Mary and Martha (10.38-42), the sending of the disciples with no provisions (9.1-6, 10.1-16), the series of banquet parables (14.1-24), and finally the disciples on the Emmaus Road, where it is an act of hospitality that reveals the risen Christ is with them (24.13-25).

A primary theme of the narrative is whether or not God's visit will be welcomed or rejected, and whether or not those who do welcome it, will themselves commit to a practice of radical hospitality – not just for Jesus, but for all who have welcomed him. Will the poor and rich alike hear the invitation and join the new household they have been offered – the kingdom of God? Will any of them, in turn, extend hospitality to others as a sign of their commitment to God's kingdom? Luke frames Jesus' ministry as an invitation into the kingdom and an expectation of response, which includes extending hospitality.

The parables and stories after Jesus' "sets his face to go to Jerusalem" at 9:51 all take place on the journey to Jerusalem. Hence the welcome hospitality of Martha and Mary is not simply into their home but on the way to Jerusalem. So too is the hospitality offered to disciples as they are sent out and that offered by Zacchaeus to Jesus when he passed

through Jericho. Injunctions to behavior at meals are all within the context of the travel narrative and cannot be taken as examples of hospitality within the home.

In Luke 24:13-35 Luke describes two disciples walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus after Jesus' crucifixion. These two disciples had heard reports about Jesus' resurrection, but they were slow to believe (24:18-25). A "stranger" joins them on their journey (24:18). Although they do not know it, the stranger is none other than the resurrected Jesus in an unrecognizable form (24:15-16). In this respect Jesus' actions resemble the visit of strangers in Genesis 18. As the disciples arrive at their home in Emmaus, the stranger continues to travel onward. But the disciples insist that the stranger accept their hospitality, especially because the day is drawing to a close (24:28-29). Once inside, the hosts prepare a meal for the traveler. When the stranger breaks the bread, the disciples' "eyes [are] opened" and they recognize Jesus. At that point he vanishes from their sight (24:31). As a result, the two disciples believe fully in the resurrected Lord and return to Jerusalem to spread the good news to "the eleven and their companions" (24:33-35). Jesus forbids his disciples from evaluating hosts by their status. Christian guests must form deep and loyal bonds with people they encounter and not be looking constantly for better offers and more advantageous hosts. This story presents Luke's readers with implicit ethical directives for Christian hosts. The burning question in this passage is: Why does Jesus take on the form of a stranger? Surely Jesus' dramatic appearance and his interpretation of the Scriptures would have been just as effective and memorable had he appeared in a recognizable form from the beginning. (In several other post-resurrection appearances recorded in the Gospels and Acts, the risen Jesus is recognizable from the outset.) Moreover, if Jesus is to take on an unrecognizable form, why does he not choose a more prestigious one—perhaps appearing as a priest or government official? Initially, Cleopas and the other disciple think the stranger is foolish, uninformed, and slow to understand. Yet, to discover the truth about the resurrected Jesus, they are forced to listen to and learn from the unassuming stranger. It is only as these two disciples journey with the stranger, listen to him, extend hospitality to him, and break bread with him that they are able to experience the risen Lord and receive his message for them and for the other disciples. These two disciples in Emmaus become prime examples of Christian hosts. Rather than shunning strangers, Jesus' disciples would do well to journey alongside them. Rather than exclusively speaking to those they encounter along life's journeys, Jesus' disciples would do well to listen first. Rather than deeming others to be foolish, ignorant, and of no benefit, Jesus' disciples would do well to assume that God might have revealed himself to strangers. Rather than taking things at face value, Jesus' disciples should realize that the Spirit is at work in the world around them. Almost certainly Luke is inviting his readers to conclude that if they extend hospitality to strangers like these two disciples did on the road to Emmaus, they too might "entertain angels without knowing it" and thus experience the resurrected Jesus.

The practice of hospitality is not about being a good host: it is about participating in a continual exchange of the roles of stranger, guest and host. It presupposes a network of relationships—an awareness of interdependence. We can see this best in the story of the two disciples encountering a stranger on the road to Emmaus. That stranger walks and

talks along the road with them about recent events in Jerusalem. They offer him hospitality at the end of the day whereupon, invited to stay as a guest, he assumes the position of host and is identified by them as he breaks bread. On the road to Emmaus and in a place that is not his, a homeless, resurrected Jesus moves fluidly between roles of stranger, host and guest. Luke's Jesus offers Westerners the challenge of receiving and giving hospitality "to go."

Theological Implications of Mobile Hospitality

When we relocate the practice of Christian hospitality from who is and who is not welcome in our homes to the recognition that hospitality is offered and received in other places along the way, a different more permeable dynamic opens up. But changing the location of the welcome is only half the solution. Offering someone food in a soup kitchen, while it is a good thing in itself, is not actually hospitality because it is not rooted in an exchange of roles. Abraham and Jesus confront our restrictive notions of hospitality, encouraging us to think about our human interdependence in giving and receiving hospitality on the way.

The Jewish theologian Martin Buber teaches us, in addition, something important about the practice of dislocated hospitality: in his book *I and Thou*, he advances the argument that all situations can be categorized under the two 'essential' relationships: the I-It relation, and the I-You or Thou relation. All of our dealings in the world are either relationships of objectification, exploitation, or relationships that call us out of our self-obsessed, self-controlled worlds into the 'between'. The I-Thou may exist not only between two human beings, but most famously, between the human being and, for example, a tree.

The I-Thou relationship for Buber is one of radical hospitality and receptivity. It is an openness to the other as Other, as some One whom I neither manipulate nor objectify. The I-thou is a relation that takes me outside of my enclosed inner world of experience, and places me in the 'between', where the other and I face each other in truth. There is no higher plane for this encounter, it does not 'transport' you or take you away. It does change your orientation, however. It moves you. The religious for Buber is not an other-world or other-time carved out for religious matters, but is having time, being in time, for the other. Everything is religious. To be in relation with God is not to go to church every Sunday, it is to face the other who faces you and calls to you. It is in the everyday that we find God for God is All. Somehow, Buber manages to put forth a seemingly pantheistic philosophy that nevertheless remains truly Jewish and monotheistic. While suggesting that it is in our relations to created others that we find God, Buber does not reduce God to simply 'others'. In our createdness, we are created as able to respond to others in their being, rather than as objects to be used and manipulated. We fulfill our created purpose; we are most truly ourselves, when we face another in an I-Thou relationship, rather than an I-It one. Buber says, "Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself. We are created along with one another and directed to a life with one another."

Thus, the stranger appears to us, comes to us or we to them, and we can respond humanly, that is, in openness. “The ethical in its plain truth means to help God by loving his creation in his creatures, by loving it towards him.” What is hospitality but welcoming? Recognizing that we are alone, all of us, and isolated in our own worlds, but nevertheless have this tremendous and mysterious capacity to respond to the other, we can acknowledge that our very createdness seems to exist for this purpose, and not for some sort of world-domination via I-It relations. Buber explains the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees with regard to the Greatest Commandment in this way:

“To the question which was the all-inclusive and fundamental commandment, the “great” commandment, Jesus replied by connecting the two Old Testament commandments between which above all the choice lay: “love God with all your might” and “love your neighbor as one like yourself.” Both are to be ‘loved’, God and the ‘neighbor’ but in different ways. The neighbor is to be loved ‘as one like myself’ (not ‘as I love myself’; in the last reality one does not love oneself) to whom, then, I should show love as I wish it may be shown to me. But God is to be loved with all my soul and all my might. By connecting the two Jesus brings to light the Old Testament truth that God and man are not rivals. Exclusive love to God is, because he is God, inclusive love.”

It is in the encounter with the other in times and places not of our choosing that human priorities are displaced; in fact, human existence is grounded in contingency and powerlessness because of the claim of the Other. This essay's focus is on the mobile aspects of the ancient practice of hospitality, the custom of welcoming travelers or strangers while committing to provide them with protection and provisions. Stressing mobile hospitality highlights that it is not a one-sided ministry: Jesus' disciples are called to be both exemplary hosts and exemplary guests as they carry out the ministry of Jesus in word and deed. Hospitality establishes a truly interdependent and reciprocal relationship that requires disciples, whether they are hosts or guests, to view the other, the stranger as embodying a divine claim.

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