



Just Hospitality

GOD'S WELCOME IN A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

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Just Hospitality

Just hospitality is the practice of God's welcome by reaching out across difference to participate in God's actions bringing justice and healing in our world of crisis and fear of the ones we call "other." To live out God's welcome as just hospitality is a calling and a challenge. As strangers ourselves, and strangers to so many other people, we have the possibility of partnering with others as a sign of God's concern for us all, and for all creation. Hospitality is not *the only* answer to difference, but it is a challenge to us, pointing us to a future that God intends, where riotous difference is welcomed. After the September 11, 2001, attacks, Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth shared his Jewish New Year message:

I used to think that the greatest command in the Bible was "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." I was wrong. Only in one place does the Bible ask us to love our neighbour. In more than thirty places it commands us to love the stranger. Don't oppress the stranger because you know what it feels like to be a stranger—you were once strangers in the

land of Egypt. It isn't hard to love our neighbours because by and large our neighbours are people like us. What's tough is to love the stranger, the person who isn't like us, who has a different skin colour, or a different faith, or a different background. That's the real challenge. It was in ancient times. It still is today.¹

The basis of this practice of hospitality is that we were once strangers, exiles, nobodies and are now welcomed by God so that we might welcome others. At the same time, hospitality is a gift in which we discover the presence of God in our mutual interaction with the stranger, as did Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18:1–15). The Greek New Testament abounds in exhortations to hospitality as well, and Matthew 25:31–46 tells us that Christ promises to be present to us through our actions of solidarity with the stranger. As we know, the relationship between a stranger and the person or people offering hospitality is not one of equal power. *Just hospitality* requires us to recognize the “otherness” in the relationship of hospitality and to respond in a manner reflective of God's welcoming example.

UNEQUALLY YOKED

Inclusion is certainly a linchpin of any definition of hospitality. Perhaps we each know best our own tradition, and so I look now at what a theologian from my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has said about the issue of inclusion.

Any believable theology of “welcome” must somehow seek to achieve real welcome, a real reaching out to the Other in word and deed—especially the “Other” whom we find most difficult to embrace, the one over there on the other side of the aisle.²

With this generous description of hospitality Professor William Stacy Johnson of Princeton Theological Seminary concludes his

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appeal that all factions in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) be "equally yoked" in their willingness to be open to one another. He penned this statement in the "Table Talk" section of *Presbyterian Outlook*, a journal of the denomination. His choice of the phrase "equally yoked" is interesting, for he turns inside out the translation of a phrase in 2 Corinthians 6:14, found in the King James and American Standard versions of the Bible. There Paul writes "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers: for what fellowship have righteousness and iniquity? Or what communion hath light with darkness?" Certainly hospitality was not on Paul's mind when he uttered this warning. In Johnson's favor, he changes the adjective from unequal to equal, but are the parties in fact equal, or are they still unequal? Those denied ordination because of their sexual preference are asked to join with those opposing their ordination in order to follow Johnson's idea that they should be equally yoked.

He wrote these remarks in response to a document entitled Affirmation 2001, and they are worded with care and rooted in the denomination's historic 1923 Auburn Affirmation, which was written in opposition to fundamentalism in the Presbyterian Church. The Auburn Affirmation was a response to the requirements imposed by the Presbyterian General Assemblies of 1910, 1916, and 1923 requiring candidates for ordination to be asked five questions dealing with articles considered fundamental to the faith. These concerned such issues as the virgin birth, biblical inerrancy, and Christ's physical second coming. At the turn of the twenty-first century and in a similar manner, a group gathered several times in Baltimore, New York, and San Francisco, to answer a call from the Reverend David Bos to create a new Auburn Affirmation. As one of the many drafters of this document, eventually titled Affirmation, 2001, and an enthusiastic signer, I will use it to clarify the meaning of hospitality when persons in a dialogue are "unequally yoked."

Professor Johnson writes about hospitality and equal regard from a position of the "superior middle." As a male, heterosexual professor at Princeton he is able to stand back, reflect on the issues, and point out that both sides are wrong and need to get

along together. For those like me, whose standing in the church is in question because of the church's legislation and practice, it is difficult to see how we are equally yoked. Although, for instance, I was ordained in 1958 and have served the church since 1951 as a pastor and educator, I am no longer eligible to be a pastor in any Presbyterian church because I am a lesbian. My fifty-plus years of service are invalidated by the present constitution.

There is no way that the many persons who have served or would like to serve the church but are presently excluded because of issues of sexuality can consider themselves equally yoked with other groups in the church. Johnson also says that we need to come to theological consensus on "gay ordination" before moving to polity considerations. When the question of ordination of gay and lesbian persons came to the General Assembly in 1978, it was decided to move away from polity and instead study the issue. We were still studying it in 1991, when the church refused the Human Sexuality report. Backlash has been around a long time, and many of us are very tired of waiting for the church to open its heart to us. In a diverse church there never will be just one theological interpretation of issues of Christian faith and life, but practicing hospitality would lead us to recognize and respect differing interpretations and stop legislating people's faith.

There is a *crisis in the church*, and that crisis has to do with "one faction's inability to affirm Christ's presence in the lives and ministries of all faithful Presbyterians."³ Those who signed Affirmation 2001 were not trying to exclude any group. Rather, they said that all persons who declare their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ should be welcome as members and eligible to be officers in this church. The historic nature of the church itself is in crisis when new criteria are established for membership in the church beyond that of faith in Jesus Christ.

This brings us to the question of how one *does* practice hospitality among persons who are "unequally yoked." I couldn't agree more with Dr. Johnson when he describes hospitality as a biblical theme that is "a statement of who God is and of who we

are called to be as the people of God.”⁴ God’s hospitality toward all of us and all creation in Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the gospel message of good news to all who have been “the despised, the rejected, the neighbor in need.”⁵ What is missing from the idea of “equally yoked,” however, is the acknowledgment that the practice of hospitality does not begin with the preservation of unity at the expense of those already excluded. Some who have served the church as pastors their whole lives long cannot, for example, leave their pension to their partner, should they die. Similarly, health benefits are denied to partners in relationships that are not heterosexual. Here the Presbyterian Church is behind other parts of U.S. society, where oftentimes partners are included in pensions and health-care benefits.

Instead, hospitality begins when we seek to welcome one another in Christ by taking very seriously the social situations of our lives and those of other persons. There are many factors that lead people to disagree. It is not just doctrine, or just Scripture, or just the community of faith. It is our differing class, race, gender, ability, age, and sexual identity and orientation. It is also the way each of us individually has been taught to understand the gospel message. It is political ideologies that feed on people’s fears and insecurities, as well as their need to be “right.” To welcome another person or group is to look beneath the surface of what they say and do, to understand “where they are coming from,” and to address the social context out of which the conversation comes. If we think someone is being used by those who would manipulate that person, we need to take the person and the possibility seriously, not just dismiss it or dismiss them. If we hear a person crying out in fear, hospitality includes addressing the issues of fear, not just offering comfort.

When we extend a welcome to others on the basis of hearing and learning and trusting in the possibility that Christ is present in the other persons, we will hear a gospel that is situation variable, just as it was in Jesus’ day. For instance, for the deaf, the news that the blind could see was nice, but not as nice as it was for the person who was blind. This good news from

Christ will call some to repent, some to stand up and walk, some to share a gift, or pray without ceasing. For the church to practice this form of hospitality in Christ, it must be open to the full participation of all persons. In this church we will no longer find "them and us," but all those whom Christ has called in many and various ways to be together in a very diverse community of faith.

JUSTICE IN "JUST" HOSPITALITY

Our struggles to overcome the fear of difference and to "break all the bars that still keep us apart" challenge our local, national, and global institutions to practice hospitality with justice. Christian hospitality is more than a cheery smile from the sunshine lady. It includes providing food, clothing, and shelter to the homeless and welcoming strangers in our sanctuaries. But it also includes actions of genuine solidarity with those who are different from us. It goes beyond caring for the other to enabling them to care for themselves and others.

The sort of hospitality that makes this possible would be one that sees the struggle for justice as part and parcel of welcoming the stranger. According to Robert McAfee Brown, if you read your Bible you will discover that *justice* appears to be God's middle name!⁶ God's justice, or putting things right, includes the absence of oppression, not just the presence of distributive rights.⁷ Difference is the gift that challenges us to practice such hospitality by resisting oppression and working for full human life and dignity for those with whom we stand in solidarity.

Justice, then, requires a practice of solidarity to end oppressions beyond working for individual access and insurance of rights. In defining the practice of justice, I am reminded of the reciprocal description of justice and love that my colleague Margaret Farley articulates. In her most recent book, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*,⁸ she observes that justice and love are not two separate actions. Rather, love *includes* justice

in the care for other persons, and justice *includes* love in our relationships. When this is not the case, a person receives care that lacks concern for their total well-being and the removal of the causes of their predicament. On the flip side, actions for justice with no concern for whom they harm or heal result in social structures that ignore the fabric of human relationships. In other words, justice and love flow into each other and are necessary components of each other. God's welcome is then an act of both love and justice through the offer of unbounded hospitality.

Amos's Message

To illustrate the connection between justice and hospitality further, picture the Sunday worship in your church. Are the women singing in the choir and caring for those who need prayer? Are the men preaching and counting the offering? Who decides about the worship service or liturgy and the language used for God and men and women? Who is not there and not welcome in the service? How many people of different classes, races, or community groups attend worship? These are questions many of us ask of our worship services as we seek to reflect God's way of justice and hospitality. And we begin to discover that our worship usually reflects our community's culturally assigned roles of gender, race, and class. These are also the sort of questions that the prophet Amos was asking long ago when he found that the worship at Bethel in northern Israel reflected the injustices in the Israelite community, rather than God's way of justice and hospitality.

Amos was the earliest of a series of prophets, known to us through their writings in the Hebrew Scriptures, who first arose in the eighth century BCE to confront the unfaithfulness and injustices of the people of Israel and Judah. They called the people to be faithful to the God who had delivered them from exile in Egypt and had formed a covenant of righteousness that recognized God's authority over the actions of kings as well as peasants. Amos was a shepherd, or herdsman, and fig cutter who cared for his flocks in Tekoa, a smaller fortress town in Judah,

south of Jerusalem. He did not belong to the priests or the group of prophets who served sanctuaries in Judah and Israel (Amos 7:14–15), and we don't know much about him. In fact, all we know is that he received a call from God to prophesy and crossed over the border into Israel. At the royal sanctuary at Bethel he proclaimed God's word of judgment against a people whose worship reflected a culture of affluence and ease for the rich and poverty and oppression for the poor. And like other prophets and like Jesus himself, he was rejected along with his message (Luke 4:16–30). Amaziah, the temple priest, considered Amos's message heresy and sedition against the king and attempted to expel him and report him to the royal authorities (Amos 7:10–17).

Amos's message of impending destruction is the message many remember from Scripture—because it came true. But his more abiding message is God's call for healing and justice in our communities and in the world around us. Thus in Amos 5:21–24 Amos proclaims God's message. He condemns religious festivals and “solemn assemblies” because they conceal a complacent community, full of economic and legal injustices, that no longer looks to God as its guide to righteousness and justice. He is demanding that in their life and in their worship people be life-giving to all: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

Amos's call for justice goes out to people in his community, but only certain people were in his consciousness—the elite, the powerful—the oppressed were not part of the problem or the solution. For his justice call to be effective, he must also be aware of the social context within which he lives; justice is more than distributive rights or correcting behavior, it is concerned with ending oppression.

So what was going on in Israel and Judah? The Hebrew people had become divided into two nations, the stronger northern kingdom of Israel and the weaker southern kingdom of Judah. Each kingdom had its own king, and there was a great deal of political strife between the two nations, which had formerly been unified under the rule of King David and King Solomon. Con-

stant harassment and strife defined their international relationships with neighboring nations as well as with the larger nations that dominated Israel and Judah—Assyria in the North and Egypt in the South. Soon after the prophecy of Amos in about 760 BCE, this strife led to the fall of the northern kingdom in 721 and the southern kingdom in 586, along with the exile of many of the Hebrew people.

Within the two nations the hierarchical structures of kingship and the developing economic structures of trade stratified the society. The kings, the royal court, and the elite copied the social structures of the surrounding and more powerful nations, where those at the top lived in luxury and those at the bottom in abject poverty and despair. The wealthy ignored the signs of external danger and believed that God's covenant with Israel would protect their nations, no matter what other nations did or whether the people abandoned the old traditions of justice and care for all the people. Their religion had become a comfortable ritual divorced from God's demands for justice.

Economic injustice had led to exploitation and slavery, and Amos speaks God's word against Israel's transgressions.

Thus says the LORD:
 For three transgressions of Israel,
 and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
 because they sell the righteous for silver,
 and the needy for a pair of sandals.
 (Amos 2:6)

Justice in the courts was perverted in favor of the rich. About the people who gathered at the gate for court cases, Amos says,

. . . And how great are your sins—
 you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
 and push aside the needy in the gate.
 (Amos 5:12)

Yet despite his words of condemnation, even in Amos's prophesying, he speaks *out of* and *to* a patriarchal community.

Take, for example, his use of evil women, as a scapegoat for the sins of the people. He mentions the sins of elite women whom he calls, "cows of Bashan," but ignores the particular hardships of poor women in times of war, or circumstances of great poverty and injustice toward the poor. His only other mention of women is as wives and daughters of the men he addresses (7:17). Amos emphasizes justice, to be sure, but he gives no thought to gender justice in his oracles. Similar blinders are often worn today, when, for example, women are scapegoated for the evils of the community—for example, women with HIV/AIDS in Africa, the mothers of children who grow up as delinquents in the United States, and wives in Korea who fail the family because no male heir is born. The problems of Amos's time read like our daily newspaper, portraying the daily struggles of people and nations around the world. The full participation of women is needed in the struggle to find paths to healing and justice.

Although righteousness and justice are two different words in both Hebrew and English, they are used by Amos and other Hebrew writers in ways that are synonymous. Righteousness (*sedaqah*) means the standard for what is right according to the laws and traditions of Moses and the people of Israel. Justice (*mishpat*) is the realization of those standards in our lives as we love God and our neighbor. Amos calls upon both the laws and traditions—righteousness and the act of realizing those standards—and justice in the parallel poetry of 5:24, as well as 6:12:

But you have turned justice into poison
and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood.
(Amos 6:12)

In other words, God has made a covenant with Israel, and that covenant faithfulness, or loyalty, is to be expressed by God's people through righteousness and includes material as well as social well-being. Because God is just in keeping a right relationship with the people of Israel and the whole creation, the people are to be just in their relationships to other persons, animals, and the natural environment. The righteousness of

God means that *God puts things right* as the creator and sustainer of the world.

The justice of God is not only about giving each person their due; it is about the restoration of right relationships and about God's judgment on those who are unjust. For instance, Amos declares that the day of God's vindication will be a day of judgment, because people have broken the covenant (5:18–24). Religious leaders and religious communities are included in this call to heal relationships and live according to the design of God, in which women and men were created to image God as equal partners in the care of the earth (Gen. 1:27).

Justice as Hospitality in Worship

With Amos's biblical example in mind, let's return to my original questions about our worship experiences. We all have a long way to go to have our worship and our lives express God's just hospitality. But as we ask ourselves about the things most needing justice and healing in our own churches, we can still know deeply that there is *no separation* between things spiritual and material, religious and political, sacred and secular in our lives. God is in all of it, calling us to make connections and work on mending our lives, churches, and world. Amos's story provides at least three clues to working toward a more just community.

First, *worship cannot be separated from the rest of our lives*. We must pay attention to the social context, as Amos did in his calls for justice. Worship gives praise to God insofar as it mirrors the efforts of the congregation to give praise in their lives as well. Worship can, for example, become death-dealing rather than life-giving when it teaches women that they are inferior to men and makes them a scapegoat for unrighteousness. This is happening over and over, when, for instance, some churches in Africa ignore the issues of human sexuality, the status of women, and poverty, and preach that HIV/AIDS is God's punishment on sinners. Their message ignores the plight of the many children, caregivers, faithfully married women, and powerless, sexually

exploited women who are infected. The question that is asked by women and justice-seeking men in these and other churches around the world is whether the theology of their communities is *life-giving*, calling for healing and justice rather than condemnation.

Second, *healing cannot be separated from justice*. When we call for healing and reconciliation between peoples, religions, nations, women and men, we are not calling persons to conform to the pattern of the most dominant group doing the calling. There is no way to heal from violence, terror, or brokenness if the injustice that caused the problem is not also addressed. This is why Amos so clearly names the economic injustices and the faults of courts in his day. If a nation such as the United States wants to eliminate terrorism, it needs to do more than use military force and destruction, for terrorism at its base is a response to political, economic, and religious injustice and will disappear only when communities demonstrate respect for human rights and right relationship among peoples.

Last, *gender justice cannot be separated from other forms of justice*. If we want to change the role of women in their homes and churches, we must prioritize gender justice: just relations between women and men in their communities. In the patriarchal culture that existed in Amos's time, the call for justice focused mostly on the needs and perspectives of the dominant men in the community and was expressed through forecasts of war and destruction. But then and now, and in all our communities, there is no possibility of just relations to one another, to creation, or to God if justice is denied to half of the human race. This applies to worship and conduct alike.

Amos was called to speak God's word of healing and justice. This is the same calling that we continue to receive as women and men (Acts 2:14–21). It is God's call to each of us to seek out ways to live in just relationships among ourselves and with God, to live out Amos's vision of justice rolling down like waters "and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24). There is still hope for all of us, hope that one day we will be a voice for justice among the oppressed of every nation. We reflect this

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hope in our worship. It seems to be an impossible possibility (see chapter 3), which may come to pass, for God is at work in the world to help us learn what it means to welcome the stranger as God has welcomed us.

Our world is full of structures of domination that cannot be altered without attention to social, political, economic, and religious factors. For instance, the AIDS pandemic in Africa incorporates many factors, such as colonial and neocolonial exploitation, gender inequality, ecological destruction, poverty, harmful cultural practices, political instability, and the lack of health care, to name only some.⁹ Each of these individual dilemmas must be attended to in the practice of hospitality and healing, even though that practice begins with one family, one medicine, one act of just hospitality at a time.

HOSPITALITY IN JUST HOSPITALITY

In the midst of fear and danger we seek safety in God and the assurance that the "everlasting arms of God" do not abandon us. At the same time, we look to our neighbor and remember that the One who convicts us of God's Welcome bids us, in the words of Romans 15:7, to "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us." Welcome has been personified as ways of speaking about God's presence in our world, as Jesus Christ who embodies that welcome among us. Christ is God's Welcome because in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are invited to trust God's love for us. Given the events of the last decade, with the terrorist attacks in the United States and the bombing terror in Afghanistan, Christ as God's Welcome is a metaphor that connects with our lives.

Welcome as a Metaphor for Action

Christ as God's Welcome is a metaphor for God's action in reaching out to us and for our response. In Luke, Jesus is pictured moving from house to house, and table to table. Even as

the risen Christ, Jesus returns to break bread at Emmaus and to eat fish in a Jerusalem room (Luke 24). Our own story of Christian community is also constructed around ways of expressing God's hospitality, not only with one another, but with all of God's creatures and creation. In 1997 a group of Presbyterians felt called to form a group called the Covenant Network to encourage support for a change to the church constitution to allow the ordination of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered ministers of the Word and Sacrament, elders, and deacons. They invited churches and individuals to sign "A Call to Covenant Community," which affirms that

the church we seek to strengthen is built upon the hospitality of Jesus, who said, "Whoever comes to me I will not cast out." The good news of the gospel is that all—those who are near and those who were far off—are invited; all are members of the household and citizens of the realm of God.¹⁰

God's hospitality in a world of difference and danger is the source of our life, and it is not an optional action for us or our churches.¹¹

The table we gather around is a symbol of God's hospitality in welcoming strangers, persons who are on the margins of our churches and cultures.¹² Not only at Communion, but at Ground Zero serving coffee and sandwiches; in soup kitchens, hospitals, and prisons; as well as at potluck dinners, family reunions, and conferences, we gather to share bread, and recognize Christ's presence in our midst. Jesus welcomes all.

Transforming God's Welcome

The metaphor of Christ as God's Welcome is particularly important to those of us who feel that we are in danger or crisis. The power of the metaphor is dependent on what is happening in our lives and world, and in this culture. As I have said, the gospel is situation variable. Knowing this gives us

an important clue to our understanding of H. Richard Niebuhr's phrase "Christ transforming culture." *Transformation is a two-way street.* As Niebuhr recognized, culture is always changing, and we are constantly needing to give an account of our faith in Jesus Christ in new circumstances. We draw our theologies out of biblical and church tradition, and we develop careful arguments for what we believe, but ultimately they have to be *seriously imaginable* to people in a particular time and culture.¹³

Transformation is a two-way street in that *both our culture and our Christology are being transformed.* Reimagining Christ, or making Christ the metaphor of God's Welcome, requires speaking to the hearts and minds of the growing diversity in culture and religion, both in this country and abroad, and thus transforming culture as we put our metaphor into action. The metaphor also has the potential of transforming our understanding of Christ's presence in our lives. That is why typologies never precisely fit our reality but only provide guidelines for looking at Christ and culture in an ever-changing landscape. In other words, the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection does not change, but, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our Christologies transform along with culture and community, making God's Welcome clear to us in our current context.

If we want the church to matter in the twenty-first century, we must become a community that practices God's Welcome and hospitality in a world of difference and danger. Perhaps in this matter we can give H. Richard Niebuhr the last word. When discussing the paradox of sin and grace in culture, he tells us that love is an *impossible possibility*.¹⁴ If so, then in God's grace, it is an impossible possibility that *the church will matter* in the years to come! As I have said, although the church is one in Christ, it lives each day torn by difference. It lives each day with the impossible possibility that one day God will fulfill the unity of the church and mend the creation that has been so torn apart. Our actions of just hospitality begin that mending.

RECOGNIZING JUST HOSPITALITY

To live out God's Welcome in our worship, our church, our lives is no easy task. That is why I continue to reiterate the concept of impossible possibility; we are called beyond what we believe are our limitations to live into a greater possibility. You probably know from your own reflection and experience that there are limitations on our practice of hospitality, many of which we have already discussed. First, there is the limitation of *the term "hospitality"* itself. For instance, as Christine Pohl says, it is no longer perceived as an essential aspect of Christian faith and practice, but often is connected to personal entertainment, the hospitality industry, and the use of women's bodies for sexual favors or financial gain.¹⁵ Second, difference is used as a way of excluding and dominating persons because of their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and more. For instance, we see class difference in a *dualistic frame of reference* when hospitality toward the poor is used to justify the superiority of those giving the aid. Last, hospitality is limited by the ways we practice it, the boundaries we place around it, and the temptations we find to abuse it. Let us turn now to look at three areas in which we learn to limit hospitality: personal relationships, social structures, and theological traditions.

Limits

Personal limits to hospitality include such things as burnout, limited resources, including space and money, finitude of those offering hospitality and the strings that are attached to the hospitality, and its misuse to reinforce the power of the givers over the receivers. I have referred to this as "deformation of hospitality."¹⁶

Social structural limits include the need to have a place to offer hospitality and to maintain it and the need of a community to have an identity in order to offer hospitality. Last, a need exists for boundaries that keep both the guest and workers safe. The *limits of the theological tradition* include doctrines that exclude nonmembers or declare that only certain people are saved.

We need to remember that just hospitality is a *relationship* that is rooted in our God-given human nature; it is not a commodity to be rationed. As British theologian Mary Grey points out, the fundamental activity of God is relational, as seen in the community of the Trinity, and in our creation as relational beings, in the *image of God*.¹⁷ It is *our need* to limit that makes us ask the question first off: "What about limits?" "What must I do to be saved?" (Matt. 16:19–22). When we think in a dualistic and hierarchical way about who is in or out, we also are more concerned about boundaries than about the center and meaning of our common life. There are limits, but they are ours. We need to be realistic, so we can be part of these relationships of care, but we also do not need to limit God's welcome.

A better way to think theologically is to ask how our practice of hospitality can be nourished and strengthened in relationships that point to God's concern to mend the creation and that are a sign of God's care, rather than a focus on human limitations. We know that what we do is inadequate, but we include God in the relationship, confident that the mending can be brought about by God, despite our limited efforts of hospitality. Hospitality is a gift of God to us, one that we need to practice, so that we are more open to its blessing. Like the gifts of faith, hope, and love, hospitality has to be used. It is a relationship to be shared, not buried in a field, or in our studies, or in our jobs. Hospitality builds relationships across difference and in this way is a catalyst for community that is built out of difference. In the words of the hymn by Doreen Potter and Fred Kaan:

Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us:
 Teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace.
 Be present, Lord, among us and bring us to believe
 We are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live.¹⁸

Even as we share together our own limitations, boundaries, and temptations, we can give thanks for God's just hospitality.

Essential Characteristics

The practice of just hospitality in a world of difference as I have laid it out does not make it easy to find unity across the many barriers that divide us from one another, but it provides the possibility of moving closer to unity. It pushes us to welcome many perspectives, and might even come out of much struggle and pain. Practicing just hospitality by recognizing and accepting difference would have a different look to it from practicing hospitality as we do it in the church today. I believe there are four underlying understandings essential to the practice of just hospitality in a world of difference: (1) clarity of mission, (2) reexamination of the Bible and traditions, (3) an alliance of partnership and power, and (4) the goal of justice. If we incorporate these into our practice in the church and in our lives, the face of hospitality will change, and there will be a shift in the ways we work together in our churches, our homes, our communities, and our world. Let's briefly *imagine* what such a shift might look like as we practice hospitality in a world of difference. Then I will leave it to you to ask how hospitality happens in your own churches, institutions, and communities.

1. Clarity of mission. Hospitality is best practiced when we are clear about both our own mission as a church or institution and the importance of living out God's hospitality to us in the ways we break down barriers between ourselves and other people. When we do this, we have a distinct understanding of where we are headed, why our mission is important, and how it is in line with the biblical call for justice and hospitality. For instance, the work of Presbyterian Promise in the Presbytery of Southern New England is committed to getting the word out that not all Presbyterians reject "queer" persons and that many Presbyterians treat such persons as their neighbors, friends, and fellow church members. We are recognized as an advocacy group of the presbytery, not because everyone agrees with our stance of welcome and inclusion, but because the majority do agree that this perspective is an important part of the outreach or mission

of the church. We are modeling a justice position we hope others will begin to understand and take seriously as we provide workshops and represent the church at various community gatherings. We put into the hands of commissioners and advisory delegates at the last General Assembly copies of the book *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, by Jack Rogers, theologian and former moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Our mission statement reads, "Proclaiming God's promise of justice and love in Jesus Christ by organizing inclusive and inquiring churches in the Presbytery of Southern New England into a community of mutual support for the empowerment of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender persons, and for outreach, education and Christian evangelism."¹⁹ As the number of churches joining our organization increases, we can presume that the witness we bear through our group ministry is increasing the work for reconciliation, justice, and hospitality.

2. Reexamination of the Bible and traditions. Hospitality calls us to reexamine our own biblical interpretations and church traditions in order to see if they might in some way be part of the problem of limits to a just hospitality. Is our reading and interpretation of particular texts causing us to place restrictions on certain groups, such as homosexuals or women in leadership, particularly church leadership? Is this why we may think that the only way to know God is through Jesus Christ? We must constantly struggle with our tradition to break it open in ways that allow the spirit of Christ's love to become transparent in our lives. Reinterpreting and reexamining Scripture (see chapter 4) can help us as we seek to move away from church traditions and historical biblical mandates that restrict our openness to others, so that we might hear the Word for today. The United Church of Christ is fond of quoting a famous line by Gracie Allen: "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." Also on the UCC home page is a quote from John Robinson, seventeenth-century pastor to the Pilgrims, who said, "There is more truth and light yet to break forth from God's holy word."²⁰

In the discussion that follows, there are two strategies at work in looking anew at church tradition and the Bible. The first shows how people within a faith tradition can bring challenges to practices of that faith. The second illustrates how persons outside a particular group can lend support without prescribing the way in which change should take place or what that change should be.

In 2002, I attended a conference on HIV/AIDS held by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The Circle is a group of about 650 African women who meet every six or seven years to present and discuss papers on a particular topic; as I mentioned earlier, some of us at Yale Divinity School are working in partnership with them. At this 2002 meeting, the Circle women were hard at work seeking to change church tradition and cultural practices so that the sexual taboos and customs become part of the *solution* to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, instead of being part of the problem. The traditions they were seeking to change were several, yet they did not directly affect all of the participants. One such tradition that came up for discussion was female genital mutilation (FGM), which is performed in some cultures in Africa and elsewhere on young girls as they reach adolescence. According to the World Health Organization:

In Africa, about three million girls are at risk for FGM annually. Between 100 to 140 million girls and women worldwide are living with the consequences of FGM. In Africa, about 92 million girls age 10 years and above are estimated to have undergone FGM. The practice is most common in the western, eastern, and north-eastern regions of Africa, in some countries in Asia and the Middle East, and among certain immigrant communities in North America and Europe.²¹

A video of this practice, shown at the conference, shocked everyone, especially those who were unaware of FGM. Women from countries where it is practiced, while acknowledging the dangers of the procedure, also worried that if their daughters did not have it, they would not be considered properly prepared for

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marriage and would then be unable to find a husband. The pain of these revelations and the pain experienced by all of us watching the video were very real. Many wanted immediately to ban the ritual, while others cautioned that condemning another's culture was a serious matter. The four of us from Yale did not offer direct comments in the discussion, but later in informal settings supported those women who planned to move ahead to change the practice. In an earlier day, or before postcolonial consciousness, we might have barged straight into the conversation with our Western opinions on the issue.

3. Partnership and power. In the practice of hospitality, partnership and power go together, and we need to be constantly aware of the possibility/potential of misusing hospitality to demean those with less power and wealth and to make ourselves feel superior. For example, for a number of years I have used my power as an author to invite women from the South who have not published in the West to work together with me in edited volumes or collections. I have also used my influence to encourage editors to publish works by these women so that their voices might be heard in a broader context. Opening doors for publication is for me an instance of partnership and power working together for the common good.

One of the most difficult aspects for me as a teacher in the San Francisco Theological Seminary DMin program for women from Africa, Latin America, and Asia has been trying to work with these women, who are all leaders in their own countries and churches, without using/abusing my power as teacher and white U.S. citizen to manipulate them or demean their important contributions to the course. They in turn have power as educated elite women in their own countries that they must struggle not to misuse, even as they struggle to find access to further education in feminist/liberation theologies. I can't join them as a partner in cross-cultural learning if I do not pay attention to the way my inherent position of power affects our relationships. Working in partnership with their advisers and women in their local situations, seven of them have had

their dissertations published, adding new voices to the world dialogue.

4. The goal of justice. Finally, hospitality in a world of difference needs to be practiced in a way that seeks to be just with those involved. God's justice or righteousness includes all the ways God intends to put things right and to mend the creation. In our practice of hospitality, justice includes not only an equal distribution of goods and opportunities, but also the creation of institutional conditions that allow persons to flourish and have a say in the shaping of their lives and communities.²²

In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990 and included the statistic that 51.2 million Americans, or 18 percent of the population, are disabled. Many changes were made, affecting us all. Curb cuts made stepping into the street easier for those in wheelchairs, but also for persons with strollers, and older people who have trouble with steps could now safely cross the street. The ADA covers people with all types of disabilities, from AIDS to cancer to epilepsy to depression to learning disabilities like dyslexia or attention deficit disorder. Kathi Wolfe, one of my former students at YDS, has spent her life contending with obstacles because she is legally blind. She calls to keep me updated on events in her life, like the time she went to a McDonald's in New York City to place an order for a Big Mac. She was told by the counter person that she would have to get it to go, as they didn't allow blind people to eat in their store! Of course she talked with the other staff and received an apology, but changing laws is a good way to ensure that people begin altering their attitudes and prejudices.

Kathi is a writer and knows the importance of telling a story well. She notes how important it is for the voice of the writer to come forth, which is

especially important, if you have a disability, and live in a culture such as ours, which considers those of us with disabilities to be "other"—as exotic as rare birds or esoteric

tropical fish. When you're "the other," you seldom get to call the shots when it comes to telling your story. Either you're left out of the narrative, or someone from the dominant culture tells your story as he or she imagines it to be.²³

As I have worked on issues of inclusive language, she has often pointed out failures in our language, and particularly the way persons with disabilities are portrayed in literature, "We're metaphors. Sometimes clichéd. Other times stunning, similes for love, death, evil—every quality of the human condition. But we're not us."²⁴ If the postcolonial discussions in earlier chapters seemed distant from your life, perhaps the issues raised by Kathi will resonate with you. We recognize that people can be just "like us" in some aspects and very "other" at the same time. For instance, we could meet someone who was white, female, and a U.S. citizen, all qualities we would share, and then notice that she was blind, putting her in the category of "other." As long as we consider our own characteristics as the norm, we distance ourselves from those who are different. When we begin to realize that there really is no norm, and that each individual carries a host of varied characteristics, we realize that margins and centers are fluid concepts. Our consciousness calls us to be mindful of those who are excluded, those enumerated for us in Matthew 25:31–46.

Our calling to welcome others in Christ is no easy task (Rom. 15:17). It is an impossible possibility! Just hospitality will not make us safe, but it will lead us to risk joining in the work of mending the creation without requiring those who are different to become like us. One of my final memories of Paul Tillich during my graduate school days in 1957 is of a man who was not afraid of the future, but rather eager to participate in the "more to come." Looking ahead, Tillich sent our entire theology class out of the Semitic Museum into the cool October air so that we could watch *the future space age happening overhead* as the Soviet satellite Sputnik I swept by. He did not see it all, and neither do we, but we know that the future that awaits is one that is surely as chaotic as the past—a future open

to the work of those who choose to join in God's intention to restore creation's rainbow of difference!

Questions for Thought

1. Like Amos, God calls us all to speak for healing and justice. What has your response been? Has it changed?
2. What to you is the most meaningful story or example of Christ as God's Welcome for you? Why have you chosen that story?
3. What are the limitations to your own practice of hospitality? How do you see God working through and beyond your limits?
4. Which of the essentials of hospitality are you already working on in your ministry?