

# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

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Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 3

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2017

## Toward Just Hospitality

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### Recommended Citation

Bruner, Ron (2017) "Toward Just Hospitality," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol3/iss1/3>

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# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

## Toward Just Hospitality

Ron Bruner

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**Abstract:** *The ministry of Jesus moved through times of seeking justice, sharing hospitality, and withdrawing for prayer. Though inescapably “other” because of his divine identity, he sought solidarity with humans by becoming human and interacting with humanity through hospitable practices. The Ancient Mediterranean customs of hospitality were well-defined, but Jesus took this powerful cultural framework and changed its practice so that it produced reconciliation and justice.*

*This work briefly reviews the practice of hospitality in the time of Jesus. It also presents the work of scholars identifying linguistic markers that would have cued readers in the Ancient Mediterranean to recognize a story as a hospitality narrative. Using biblical, theological, and philosophical materials, I construct a hermeneutic that equips readers of these narratives to see how Jesus brought justice through his practice of hospitality. When that hermeneutic is applied to our contemporary life narratives, it empowers us as the disciples of Jesus to work alongside God in acting justly in this world.*

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God is hospitable. Hospitality is demonstrably a divine virtue because it is the persistent practice of God and God’s people in the restoration of relationship between God and humanity throughout history. Not only does God walk among humans in hospitable encounters (Gen. 18), this hospitable God sends the people of God out into the world to share time, space, and resources with outsiders in imitation of divine hospitality (Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-12). Over the millennia, though, the practice and definition of hospitality have drastically shifted.<sup>1</sup> At a time when robust practices of hospitality could empower deeper missional impact, we find that the contemporary church in the United States too often limits hospitality to an

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<sup>1</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4, 6, 17, 31, 33, 47, 57. Pohl calls the reader’s attention to this changing definition.

anemic list of benevolent gifts offered at a calculated distance: cans from a pantry, meals on a holiday, or money for gasoline to leave town. For Jesus, though, hospitality was so fundamental to ministry that Elaine Heath calls it one of the legs of mission's three-legged stool: prayer, hospitality, and justice.<sup>2</sup> Events may be hospitable, but hospitality is a virtuous practice, a way of living. Disciples of Jesus, consequently, should practice hospitality in the way of Jesus, understanding that over time practices imitating those of Jesus will more closely shape individual and communal character into the image of Jesus.

The ideas about hospitality in this paper were born among a ministry team working with at-risk youth.<sup>3</sup> Although this community intuitively practiced hospitality, youth entering the community often tested the quality of that hospitality with unorthodox words and outlandish behavior. Understanding Jesus to model *just hospitality* to everyone, even difficult outsiders, this community sought a more robust understanding of hospitality rooted in the practices of Jesus. As the ministry team leader, I worked with my community to build concepts, tools, and practices for engaging in and evaluating hospitality as a lifestyle for disciples of Jesus. As we practiced this form of hospitality, we found these concepts applicable to any context.

To understand what hospitality meant in the days of Jesus, it is necessary to describe the contours of Ancient Mediterranean hospitality. We will connect those practices with biblical hospitality, specifically those of Jesus in the gospel of Luke. I will demonstrate that *just hospitality*—as modeled by Jesus—is not a simple practice but a complex, overarching virtue composed of other virtues. To evaluate the quality of our hospitable practices, we will construct a hermeneutic of hospitality, a theological tool for reading situations in life and ministry. In daily practice or discernment, this hermeneutic serves to interpret the community's situation, recognize the movement of God, imagine and gauge a just response, and—as a hospitable community—pursue the divine mission of reconciliation alongside God. Finally, I will show the practical value of this hermeneutic for Christian life by using it to interpret an episode of hospitality from the gospel of Luke and to read contemporary ministerial scenarios.

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine A. Heath and Larry Duggins, *Missional, Monastic, and Mainline: A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Traditions* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ron Bruner, "Communally Discerning a Covenant of Hospitality for the Care of Children at Westview Boys' Home," (DMin thesis, Abilene Christian University, 2010). Available at: [http://digitalcommons.acu.edu/dmin\\_theses/10/](http://digitalcommons.acu.edu/dmin_theses/10/).

### Ancient Mediterranean Hospitality

In Ancient Mediterranean hospitality, three larger moves shaped hospitality. *Welcome* involved greeting the unknown stranger in a public place and inviting them into a safe space. *Abiding* called host and guest to share resources and remain in conversation within that space. In *sending forth* the host provisioned and launched the stranger's continuing journey.<sup>4</sup> Hospitality narratives in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Gen. 12:10-20; 18:1-33; 20:1-18)<sup>5</sup> and Hellenistic literature exemplify these moves.

### Homeric Hospitality

Hellenistic literature described and defined Ancient Mediterranean hospitality, lauding it as a core virtue of the exemplary citizen. In the *Odyssey*, for example, Homer establishes the character of each person Odysseus and his son Telemachus meet by the quality of hospitality each of these hosts extends.<sup>6</sup> Over the course of Odysseus's ten-year journey, feuding deities strip this rich, connected, and sage warrior of his resources, relationships, and hope.<sup>7</sup> Justly or not, legendary Odysseus becomes a "nobody."<sup>8</sup> Throughout his journey, flawed hosts—Cyclops and Circe, for example—are dangerous; their power feeds their hunger, not their guest's needs. In contrast, virtuous Nestor and Menelaus open their homes, provide for their guests, and send them onward refreshed and resupplied.

Homer described Ancient Mediterranean hospitality with specific language and practices. An outsider *enters* a community, a *host* greets them, brings them into their *home*, and meets their needs. Only after the *guest* was bathed, clothed, and well-fed would the host ask the guest's identity.<sup>9</sup> The guest would *remain*—sharing food, space, and story—until prepared to depart. The host would then provide the guest with needed resources and,

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<sup>4</sup> Bruner, "Covenant of Hospitality," 26, 51-52.

<sup>5</sup> For OT examples of failed hospitality, see Gen. 12:10-20; 19:1-11; 20:1-18; 34:1-31; Judg. 19:22-30; 1 Sam. 25. See also: Ron Bruner, "Weeping in the Hills: Hearing Children Dwelling as Outsiders among Us," *Restoration Quarterly*, 53 2 (2011): 81-95.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 32; Ladislaus J. Bolchazy, *Hospitality in Early Rome: Livy's Concept of Its Humanizing Force* (Chicago: Ares, 1977), 2; Bruce Loudon, *Homer's Odyssey and the Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 32.

<sup>7</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*.

<sup>8</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 9:366

<sup>9</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.120-210; 3.29-100; 4.20-182; 5.85-95; 6.13-320; 7.140-315; 14.30-120.

sometimes, an escort for the next leg of their journey.<sup>10</sup> Specific terms in Greek marked episodes of hospitality; our English equivalents are: welcome, host, guest, enter into the house, find lodging, stay (abide, remain), and rest.<sup>11</sup>

### Lukan Hospitality

In his 1965 dissertation, John Mathews noted the use of ancient hospitality language in numerous biblical narratives.<sup>12</sup> Andrew Arterbury subsequently marked Luke's particular use of Ancient Mediterranean hospitality language.<sup>13</sup> Using the language markers described above to select texts, we find at least ten hospitality narratives in Luke that first century readers would have understood to describe hospitality (Luke 4:38-44; 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 9:10-17; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; 19:1-10; 22:7-38; 24:28-32,36-49). Five of the parables of Jesus address hospitality (Luke 10:25-37; 12:35-40; 13:22-30; 15:11-32; 16:19-31). Three passages narrate a distorted or interrupted hospitality (Luke 4:1-13; 5:17-26; 9:28-36).

The Lukan writer reports the language and behavior of Jesus to show that Jesus changes and deepens Hellenistic or Jewish cultural practices of hospitality for his disciples and himself. Jesus adds salvific terms to the language of hospitality: "peace" used as a term describing reconciliation and salvation (Luke 10:5,6) or, more directly, "forgiveness" (Luke 7:37-38) and "salvation" (Luke 19:9). In the ministry of Jesus, the aims of virtuous hospitality shift from merely maintaining good manners or forming good character to the practice of *reconciliation* and *justice*. This shift becomes more obvious when the reader uses a hermeneutic of hospitality to read the Lukan texts.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 3.346-498; 8.25-45; 13.47-92.

<sup>11</sup> Scholars interested in Greek wording should consult: Bruner, "Covenant of Hospitality," 24-36.

<sup>12</sup> John B. Mathews, "Hospitality and the New Testament Church: An Historical and Exegetical Study," (Th.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1965). In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=757933461&sid=2&Fmt=6&clientId=46809&RQT=309&VName=PQD> (accessed July 8, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels*. Matson also notes hospitality language in Luke and Acts and connects early church hospitality and evangelism. David L. Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts: Pattern and Interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> There is not space to adequately defend this claim here; for supporting evidence, see Bruner, "Covenant of Hospitality," 56-89.

## A Hermeneutic of Hospitality

Any experience of texts or situations involves some method of reading: a hermeneutic.<sup>15</sup> A hermeneutic is a method used to interpret texts, communication, or behavior. When an interpreter or interpreting community identifies an episode—whether lived or read—as one involving hospitality, a hermeneutic evaluating the quality of that hospitality may provide a critical assessment of the justice of that hospitality and direction for improving practice to become more like that of Jesus. In the following pages, I develop a hermeneutic for just hospitality.<sup>16</sup>

Letty M. Russell created a theological hermeneutic to evaluate the justice of hospitality. Accessing feminist and post-colonial theology, Russell saw “just hospitality” as a means to obtain solidarity among human beings. Her hermeneutic uses three lenses: “pay attention to the *power quotient* in what is being said or who is saying it,” “give priority to the *perspective of the outsider*,” and “rejoice in *God’s unfolding promise*.”<sup>17</sup> This hermeneutic outlines a useful theological foundation, but because other factors shape hospitable events besides power, perspective, and promise, I will broaden and balance Russell’s categories by connecting them with a set of virtues.

## The Concept of Virtue and Tensive Virtues

Work on practices—like hospitality—becomes habit, habit pursued with increasing excellence becomes virtue, an accumulation of virtues forms character. When empowered by God, this ongoing process transforms human character into a more accurate image of God.<sup>18</sup> Uninterrupted bad habits become vices. Virtues and vices in any moral code or hermeneutic might seem to exist in pairs; each virtue has an opposing vice. Courage and cowardice apparently stand in opposition.

Aristotle asserts a more complex concept: the virtuous mean.<sup>19</sup> The vice of cowardice might be an inability to function because of fear, and the virtue of courage could be an ability to function despite fear, and yet there

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<sup>15</sup> Using hermeneutics for texts is commonly understood; using hermeneutics for situations is an idea derived from pastoral counseling. See Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 20-22.

<sup>16</sup> Bruner, “Covenant of Hospitality,” 32-52.

<sup>17</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference*, eds. J. Shannon Clarkson and Kate M. Ott (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 43. Emphasis by Russell.

<sup>18</sup> Or, as described in Orthodox traditions, *theosis*. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 8 & 9.

is a third point. The vice of rashness results when one acts with no fear, ignoring realistic concerns or prudent evaluations of the stakes involved (see Figure 1). If one entered a house engulfed in flames to rescue a child, most would count that as courage. If one dared the flames to save a bowling trophy, most would consider that rashness.

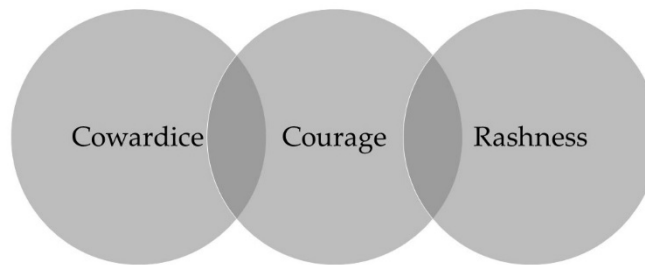


Figure 1 - An Illustration of the Virtuous Mean of Aristotle

Robert Adams suggests, using courage as an example, that virtues are contextual and modular. The virtue of courage differs in intellectual, physical, emotional, and social contexts.<sup>20</sup> Modules of virtue form larger, overarching virtues. Risking vulnerability for the sake of others is a module of courage (and rashness), not cowardice. In tension with vulnerability, self-safety is a modular virtue restraining one from rashness. The tensive virtues of safety and vulnerability are modular virtues constituting the virtue of courage; to remain virtuous, courage requires maintaining a dynamic tension that changes with the context.

Hospitality is a complex virtue, reaching excellence and accomplishing reconciliation and justice when we keep its modular virtues in the proper tension.<sup>21</sup> There are three sets of virtues in tension shaping hospitality: safety versus vulnerability, openness versus identity, and truth versus hope (see Figure 2). Each pair forms a lens through which we can examine practices of hospitality to gauge their justness. Together, they form a hermeneutic of hospitality.

<sup>20</sup> Robert M. Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 179-184.

<sup>21</sup> Although this particular hermeneutic is mine, I am not alone in suggesting that hospitality involves tensions. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 97-100; Pohl, 92-103, 136; Jessica Wroblewski, *The Limits of Hospitality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012), 45-47.

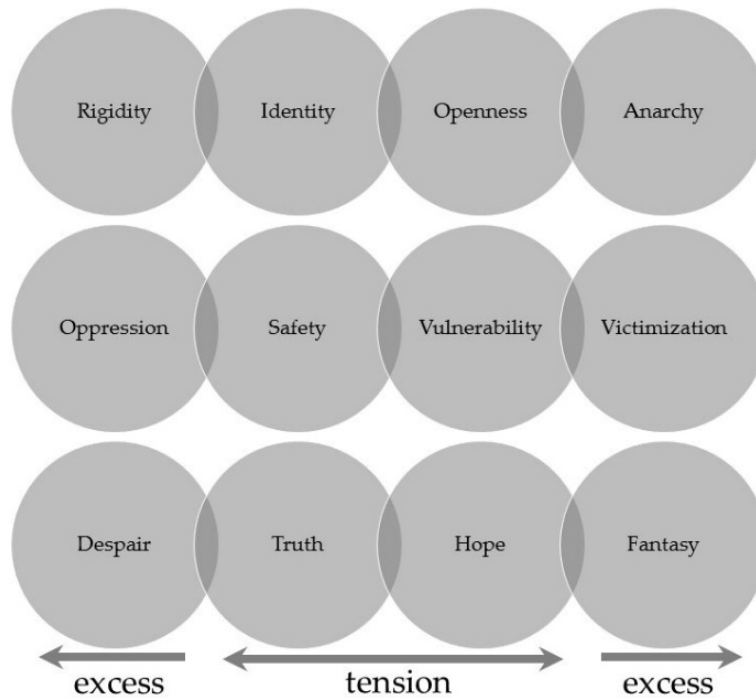


Figure 2 - *The Tensive Virtues of Hospitality*

### Lens of Safety and Vulnerability

Russell frames the first lens of her hermeneutic by establishing the importance of “attention to the *power quotient* in what is being said or who is saying it.”<sup>22</sup> This statement deserves both balance and extension. Like the tensive virtues described above, power is one side of a dyad: power and powerlessness. Jesus modeled the use of power, sharing it with and using it for others, particularly the marginalized. Refraining from the use of power on his own behalf, he refused to avoid suffering (Phil. 2:5-8). This deliberate self-emptying, or *kenosis*, is not powerlessness as most understand it because it retains the power of choice: to use, to share, or to yield.

Sarah Coakley has responded to objections about practicing *kenosis*, especially for those with limited power, by connecting it with ascetic practices.<sup>23</sup> Coakley suggests that all humans have some sort of power; they

<sup>22</sup> Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 43. Emphasis by Russell.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 3-37. Coakley’s arguments are more elaborate than can be detailed here. For another useful perspective of *kenosis*, see David Hooper, “Cruciformity,



must engage in ascetic spiritual practices to avoid mindless release of power or abuse of it.<sup>24</sup> In meditative silence, one invites God into a place to empty oneself of power, awaiting divine insight for appropriate discernment of its use. That insight clarifies whether to release power back to God, share it with others for use for themselves or others, or retain it for divine purposes. Such practice is obviously susceptible to abuse, but the idea of using power for God's desired future, and not for ours, has merit.<sup>25</sup> An enhancement of Coakley's concept is communally discerning power's use, thus engaging multiple perspectives for decision-making and accountability.

The kenosis of Jesus involved more than power; it also included resources, relationships, reputation, status, and will. The kind of kenosis Jesus enacted required leaving divine *safety* for mortal *vulnerability*. Christopher Southgate differentiates human kenosis from the kenosis of Jesus and calls the human version "ethical kenosis," which he describes as kenosis of aspiration, appetite, and acquisition.<sup>26</sup> Kenosis of aspiration requires our refusal to seek identities that do not belong to us; for example, we are neither God nor the axis of the universe. Kenosis of appetite rejects developing a taste for power and sensations that might lead to an idolatry of that which is desired and a disregard for others or the environment in order to obtain it. Connected is the kenosis of acquisition, which requires ordering life so as to reject material wealth "at the expense of the well-being of others."<sup>27</sup> For Southgate, "others" includes other species.<sup>28</sup> Ethical kenosis is required to enact a vulnerability to others necessary for disciples of Christ seeking just hospitality.

In contrast, *safety* is a condition and virtue more broadly descriptive of the human need to avoid suffering, whenever possible, for self or another.<sup>29</sup> Safety is more than avoiding pain resulting from the abuse of

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Self-Differentiation, and the Practice of Christian Leadership," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* 3 1 (2017): 1-18.

<sup>24</sup> Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 34-37.

<sup>25</sup> This coheres with Ignatian discernment practices. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Practices of St. Ignatius*, trans. Luis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola, 1951), 169-88.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 101-103.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>28</sup> Oden demonstrates that early Christian writers also believed that animals could be the "other" involved in hospitality. Amy Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 70-72.

<sup>29</sup> Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 86-91. Russell understood the importance of safe space, or sanctuary, although she did not place it in tension with vulnerability.

power; it is security against injury from natural or human dangers, and providence for resources and relationships that are life-giving. Safety is important, but preoccupation with it tempts humans to acquisition, appetite, and aspiration. *Vulnerability* is more than self-emptying; it is the willingness to hear, see, receive, sympathize, and possibly even suffer with or for the other. Therefore, the broader terms of safety and vulnerability in hospitality include power and powerlessness (whether real or chosen) and the tensive virtues describing the use of possessions: stewardship and generosity.

Both safety and vulnerability are desirable, yet keeping the tension between them amid a changing context is necessary for the hospitable community.<sup>30</sup> Life ceases to be tolerable as people approach either complete safety or complete vulnerability, even if obtaining either were desirable or possible. Bonnie Miller-McLemore asserts that child's play can only happen in this tension between "ultimate vulnerability" and "extreme safety",<sup>31</sup> a tension that may be necessary for the creative work and play of all humans. When people abandon vulnerability and become overly concerned with safety in relationships—whether a result of bad experiences or in fear of them—they create overwhelming physical, emotional, and social boundaries that impede enacting the gospel. This behavior is neither child-like nor God-like. Relationships suffer.

Unboundaried vulnerability, though, seems to invite violence and victimization. Donald Burt defines violence as "any act which *contravenes the rights of another*. It can also be described as an act which *causes injury* to the life, property, or person of a human being, oneself or others."<sup>32</sup> The threat of violence to the vulnerable, though, sometimes appears to require violence to protect the vulnerable. Although some contend violence is unnecessary to maintain hospitality, Jacques Derrida connects all hospitality with violence. The practice of "conditional hospitality" implies violence in that "you control the borders, you have customs officers, and you have a door, a gate, a key and so on." If instead hospitality were completely vulnerable, then one must "accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything, or

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<sup>30</sup> Pohl, 92-103.

<sup>31</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2007), 150. This concept emerges from her reading of Isaiah 11:8.

<sup>32</sup> Donald X. Burt, *Friendship and Society: An Introduction to Augustine's Practical Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 162. Italics by Burt.

killing everyone.”<sup>33</sup> To prevent victimization, it is equally necessary for those who have power prone to abuse to release it, and for those who are vulnerable to the abuse of power to reject vulnerability within a persistently abusive relationship.<sup>34</sup> Both require a kenotic move.

How, though, does one protect the vulnerability of one party without violating the safety of the other? Hans Boersma responds to Derrida, not by denying the possibility of violence, but by disputing that protecting hospitality with violence is necessarily immoral. Describing a hypothetical suicide attempt, Boersma applies Augustinian ethics to demonstrate the use of violence to prevent suicide is arguably justified. Even though this preventative violence might cause injury to the will and body of the suicidal person, it prevents greater harm. One cannot call this exertion of power—however justifiable by safety concerns—non-violent. Instead, Boersma notes, “In an imperfect world violence (the infliction of harm or injury) is at times the only option and as such a moral obligation and an act of love.”<sup>35</sup> Even God, Boersma argues, resorts to violence (as Burt defines it) in this imperfect world to move toward the perfectly hospitable world at the end of time, where violence becomes unnecessary.

Thus, the boundaries Derrida labels as violent necessarily facilitate earthly hospitality. Christians approximate the kingdom of God in this world when they shape hospitality with a minimum of boundaries, but perfect hospitality without violence is apparently only possible in the new creation.

### The Lens of Openness and Identity (Holiness)

Who is the outsider? Amy Oden finds evidence in early Christian literature that the early church viewed outsiders as those who were at risk and unwillingly vulnerable. “Early Christians talk about hospitality to the sick and injured, to the widow and the orphan, to the sojourner and stranger, to the aged, to the slave and imprisoned, to the poor and hungry.”<sup>36</sup> These categories are rooted in Scripture, and in the communal experience of life as an alien people in this world (1 Pet. 2:11).<sup>37</sup> Miroslav

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<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999): 70-71.

<sup>34</sup> Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 118.

<sup>35</sup> Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 47.

<sup>36</sup> Oden, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Oden, 38.

Volf, though, cautions Christians not “to complain too much about Christianity being ‘alien’ in a given culture.”<sup>38</sup> We are not to see ourselves as powerless or without community. For the Christian, the true alien—the weaker or powerless outsider in hospitality—is the stranger to the community.

Properly welcoming strangers requires recognizing our own fears. Amy Oden observes, “The stranger may seem suspicious or even dangerous. The very presence of the stranger can be disorienting.”<sup>39</sup> Suspicions about strangers most often signal misinterpretation of our situation. In hospitality, the Christian must somehow sense the opportunity to accept—while resisting the temptation to reject—Jesus in the form of an outsider (Matt. 25:31-46). The acceptance of Jesus as guest brings Jesus into the hospitable event. This may cause confusion as to the roles of guest and host; welcome into the life of God and the blessings the guest brings to the table may cause the host to feel they have received more from hospitality than they have given.<sup>40</sup> This role confusion, though, may signal the peace brought by a just hospitality.

Volf, though, presses the Christian community much further in recognizing outsiders:

For the self shaped by the cross of Christ and the life of the triune God, however, embrace includes not just the other who is a friend but also the other who is the enemy. Such a self will seek to open its arms toward the other even when the other holds a sword. The other will, of course, have to drop the sword, maybe even have the sword taken out of his hand, before the actual embrace can take place. Yet even the struggle over the sword will be undergirded by the will to embrace the other and be embraced in return.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 39.

<sup>39</sup> Oden, 50.

<sup>40</sup> In such an event, Oden claims, “Christ becomes the host and the host becomes the guest,” 51. I disagree. The providence of God funds every hospitable event without requiring God to be host. Jesus was willing to yield power and assume either the role of host or guest as the occasion required. In fact, host-guest role confusion may signal the balancing of power and the emergence of peace among the host, guest, and divine presence.

<sup>41</sup> Volf, 146.

If Christians practice openness to the extent Jesus did, they must be willing to forgive and seek reconciliation with the perpetrator of the most brutal acts; not just acts against themselves, but acts against those they love. Volf underscores this; reconciliation must deal with violence lingering from the past in memory and consequence, and potential in the present. This imperative seems to require the oppressed to be open to further unholy violence from their oppressors, but Volf's metaphor of the sword and embrace illustrates a more nuanced approach to forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>42</sup> Even so, this radical openness to reconciling embrace and hospitality remains inherently risky.<sup>43</sup> Human beings are essentially dangerous. The experience of most humans warns that those proven dangerous tend to repeat dangerous behaviors. Therefore, reconciliation and hospitality risk the repetition of violence from either the incorrigible perpetrator or the fearful victim.

The most unsafe enemy, though, is not totally other. Emmanuel Lartey reminds those engaged in intercultural work that all humans are in some aspects "like all others," "like some others," and "like no other."<sup>44</sup> All humans bear the image of God, the *imago Dei*. Although finding this commonality within hospitality may help reconciliation, the other will forever remain other. There will always be aspects of each human "like no other" and apparently incomprehensible and dangerous.

Russell sought a hospitality offering an openness engendering ecumenism and diversity, allowing the other to cease being an outsider. Yet even if the community follows Russell's wisdom and gives others priority in conversation, openness that entertains the ideas of outsiders does not require communities to accept those ideas without question. That Russell found it necessary to construct a just hermeneutic for hospitality implies the existence of practices of hospitality that are acceptable and others that are not. One can fairly extend this idea into the assertion that a community might hear outsiders' ideas without necessarily endorsing or enacting them. Neither does openness require complete acceptance of the outsider. Acceptance into community can have several stages,<sup>45</sup> yet complete openness without the need for membership and conformance to communal

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<sup>42</sup> See Volf's lengthy discussion, 119-40.

<sup>43</sup> Volf, 147.

<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 34.

<sup>45</sup> This is historically true of the church. Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 21-22.

norms would result in a loss of communal identity.<sup>46</sup> It is necessary to place openness in tension to give it appropriate boundaries. Nouwen makes just such an observation:

But receptivity is only one side of hospitality. The other side, equally important, is confrontation. To be receptive to the stranger in no way implies that we have to become neutral 'nobodies.' Real receptivity asks for confrontation because space can only be a welcoming space when there are clear boundaries, and boundaries are limits between which we define our own position. Flexible limits, but limits nonetheless.<sup>47</sup>

The boundaries defining Christian community are those aspects that give it identity and make it separate, or holy. At communal boundaries, those who would fully belong confront the norms separating this community from other communities.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, openness and identity are tensive attributes of hospitality in a Christian community.

### The Lens of Truth and Hope

The last lens of Russell's hermeneutic requires interpreters to find ways an event or text might "rejoice in God's unfolding promise."<sup>49</sup> As interpreters, we must hope for that unfolding promise because the truth about our present is often very different from our hope. "In the light of the present promise and hope, the as yet unrealized future of the promise stands in contradiction to given reality," concludes Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>50</sup> Thus truth often stands in tension with hope. "The truth will make you free" (John 8:32, NRSV), but its immediate effect is often not so empowering. Humans regularly use truth selectively or wrongly to oppress

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<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 30-33. Nouwen, 99. Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 35. Thomas W. Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 55-56.

<sup>47</sup> Nouwen, 98.

<sup>48</sup> Pohl concurs: "Within much of the biblical tradition, there are tensions between living a distinctive life, holy to the Lord, and the command to welcome strangers." Pohl, 136.

<sup>49</sup> Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper and Row, 1967; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 224-25.

others, intentionally or not. A constant dose of reality—a litany of the true but lamentable in one’s life—without hope that things ought to be and can be different often leads to despair.

Truth can be beautiful, particularly when describing the action and person of God, yet the truth about human behavior is often difficult. Evil in this world is an ugly truth. The intrusion of moral and natural evil into life frequently generates difficult truths resulting in poverties of resources, relationships, and health. These evils often result in outsider status, either in perception or reality. Yet when understood from the horizon of faith, evil need neither deprive us of hope<sup>51</sup> nor diminish our view of deity.<sup>52</sup>

There are two strategies that help us balance truth and hope: knowing God and acting alongside God. First, Moltmann counsels those caught between truth and hope to seek to know God. A knowledge of God’s past faithfulness kindles hope for God’s promised future.<sup>53</sup> Hope in the power of God, Boersma maintains, includes the expectation that one day God will transform the flawed and inescapably violent hospitality of humans into the perfectly peaceful hospitality of the new creation.<sup>54</sup> Yet hope is not merely fond anticipation of a distant future, but an active impetus to work alongside God to transform today’s truth into a piece of the promised future. Hope empowers the hospitable to visualize ways to bridge gaps between self and others, eventually forging relationships.

Consequently, communities should generate “practical theodicies” that address the real and true consequences of evil through practices enacting the virtue of hope.<sup>55</sup> Practical theodicy is the practice of exhibiting faith in a powerful God while accepting responsibility for human action to cope with the harsh truth produced by evil in the world. Practical theodicy does not replace the practice of lament but acknowledges that God’s active response to lament or intercessory prayer can involve human action.

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<sup>51</sup> Jerry L. Walls, “Outrageous Evil and the Hope of Healing,” in *Immersed in the Life of God: The Healing Resources of the Christian Faith*, essays in honor of William Abraham, eds. Paul L. Gavriluk, Douglas M. Koskela, and Jason E. Vickers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 188.

<sup>52</sup> Walls, 189-92; Nigel S. Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side: Putting the Power of Evil in Its Place* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), 55-100.

<sup>53</sup> Moltmann, 118.

<sup>54</sup> Hans Boersma, “Irenaeus, Derrida and Hospitality: On the Eschatological Overcoming of Violence,” *Modern Theology* 19 (April 2003): 163-80.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Surin proposes the term practical theodicy, and Walls discusses its use. Walls, 193-194.

Although there are many evils in this world that hospitality serves to heal, we will consider two here.<sup>56</sup> First, how does one find hope within the stark reality of a poverty of resources? Albino Barrera emphasizes the providence of God in contrasting the goodness of God's kingdom with the evil of poverty:

First, material sufficiency, perhaps even in abundance, is intrinsic to the gift of creation. . . . Secondly, the certainty that the earth will provide what people need is founded on God's unfailing providential care. . . . Third, sufficiency in human material provisioning is merely conditional. It is provisional on human conduct, particularly on their conformity to the demands of the Kingdom of God.<sup>57</sup>

Yet, because many operate from a perspective of scarcity instead of abundance, they hoard, misallocate, steal, or squander resources to guarantee their safety or pleasure instead of owning responsibility for "human material provisioning." Barrera connects economic life and righteousness, asserting that God's community shows its holiness when it yields its claim on resources to meet the needs of others (Southgate's kenosis of acquisition).<sup>58</sup> The faithful address the suffering brought by "poor human material provisioning" when, seeing that God has already acted in providence, they respond hopefully with resources to end this suffering and, potentially, the root evil. This exemplifies practical theodicy.

Arguably, the most painful evils result from the willful, amoral choices of human beings. Humans experience moral evil both as victim and violator. Individuals must accept responsibility for wrongful speech and action. Sharon Lamb advises communities that would help perpetrators: acknowledge the truth of the wrongful act, the longstanding character traits contributing to it, and the possibility that those negative character traits—though not excusable—are not permanent but capable of transformation. Transformation is possible because virtues in the perpetrator's character stand in opposition to the evil; no human being is totally evil.<sup>59</sup> Those who struggle to understand evil in apparently "good" people ought to heed the

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<sup>56</sup> For a more complete list, see: Bruner, "Covenant of Hospitality," 45-52.

<sup>57</sup> Albino Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 133.

<sup>58</sup> Barrera, 136-38.

<sup>59</sup> Sharon Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 85.



caution of N. T. Wright: “the line between good and evil runs through us all.”<sup>60</sup> Innocent victims may find their moral position more ambiguous than they might like. Volf explains: “The violence ensnares the psyche of the victim, propels its action in the form of defensive reaction, and—robs it of innocence.”<sup>61</sup> Hope for victim and perpetrator lies in the practical theodicies of taking responsibility, pursuing repentance, granting forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation—all within the context of hospitality.

The hermeneutic is complete. What remains is to demonstrate its usefulness with the biblical text and in contemporary ministry settings.

### **Interpreting a Text with the Hermeneutic of Hospitality**

Examination of the Lukan narrative of Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50) reveals the worth of the hermeneutic of hospitality and the efforts of Jesus to enact just hospitality.

In hospitality, power most often abides in the hands of the host, who ought to use (or share with the guest) the power to create a safe space for both. Simon, though, confronts Jesus with a test, not safety. Simon omits the kiss of greeting, the water for washing, and the oil of anointing—all of which communicate welcome, acceptance and providence—in sum, safety. A careless host might miss one culturally coded ritual of hospitality, but missing three seems a deliberate, vulnerability-creating insult. The uninvited woman, the least powerful person present, shows Jesus the elements of safety in hospitality that the host does not, but by reversing their normal order she draws attention to the dysfunctional hospitality of Simon that creates safety for some and vulnerability for others.

From Simon’s perspective, rule-breaking is everywhere in this event: the woman has a bad reputation, she arrives without invitation, she enters a masculine space within that home (according to the patriarchal norms of that society),<sup>62</sup> she pulls down her hair among men, and she touches Jesus in a way some might perceive to be sensual.<sup>63</sup> When Simon mentally

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<sup>60</sup> N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 39. Volf concurs: “From a distance, the world may appear neatly divided into guilty perpetrators and innocent victims. The closer we get, however, the more the line between the guilty and the innocent blurs and we see an intractable maze of small and large hatreds, dishonesties, manipulations, and brutalities, each reinforcing the other.” Volf, 81.

<sup>61</sup> Volf, 80.

<sup>62</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, “Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World,” in *Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 63.

<sup>63</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 310.

prepares to claim the moral high ground by noting these truths, he creates distance between his identity as a “clean” member of a “holy” people and the “otherness” of the woman and Jesus. Jesus denies that claim and distance by indicting Simon’s failure to hospitably provide safety as required the cultural norms. This self-inflicted failure dishonors Simon.

Because Jesus values relationships and reconciliation over rules, he does not mention flawed hospitality until Simon considers exclusive language against the woman. Jesus anticipates Simon’s verbal violence against the vulnerable and uses measured verbal force<sup>64</sup> to protect the defenseless woman from the abusively powerful host by revealing her actions as virtuous and truthful in the view of God. With limited power to defend herself (she could have withdrawn), the vulnerable woman discovers openness, safety, acceptance, hope, and justice at the feet of Jesus.

By creating a safe space in this inhospitable environment for the woman to belong and act, Jesus makes himself socially vulnerable to charges of impropriety. Others may likely misread her actions as sensual and the receptivity of Jesus as foolish; Jesus is not so insecure as to respond to such accusations. Instead, as guest he reciprocates the simple, if generous, practices of hospitality offered by his true host with a powerful proclamation, a hospitable gift of hope that transfigures the truth of her reality: “Your sins are forgiven” (Luke 7:48). These words reveal the divine purpose of Jesus in the practice of just hospitality: peace between God and humanity.

### **Contemporary Ministerial Application of the Hermeneutic**

Not only does the hermeneutic of hospitality aid our better understanding of the practice of just hospitality by Jesus as recorded in biblical texts, it also helps identify the functional and dysfunctional in the practice of contemporary ministry. The following examples demonstrate success and failure in maintaining the tension between openness and identity, safety and vulnerability, and truth and hope.

Choosing identity (or holiness) over openness has consequences. In one rural Texas community, the local sale barn auctions cattle every Saturday.<sup>65</sup> When sales are large, workers toil through Saturday night and

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<sup>64</sup> Boersma argues that in Lukan hospitality narratives Jesus sometimes behaves in ways some would consider violent. Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 92-93. He also avers that Jesus can rightfully use violence to achieve justice without it being a “morally negative thing”, 43-51.

<sup>65</sup> This story is true, although the details have been modified to conceal the identity of the youth and the congregation involved.

into Sunday night before the cattle are loaded and gone. Years ago, one young worker would take his break every Sunday for worship, removing his dung-covered boots at the door and entering the sanctuary in stocking feet. Unfortunately, his faithfulness did not provoke openness from fellow disciples, but rebuke from members who judged his attire inappropriate for righteous assembly in this holy place. He continued his practice, though, until he left for college. Years later, he returned as a successful professional but attended a nearby congregation. He wanted his family to experience a communal openness that his home church did not provide. Meanwhile, the home church withers for want of younger generations.

Mallory Wyckoff gives an account of congregations struggling to maintain safety while remaining vulnerable to suffering in their midst.<sup>66</sup> Young women experiencing sexual abuse in their homes would “lash out” at others where they could: in the safety of the church. “Church staff,” Wyckoff reports, “would grow exasperated with these women and either threaten or enact their being banned from youth group.” “There was,” though, in each case, “a female mentor who chose to believe that there was a reason behind these young women’s behaviors and continued to love them well.” All human beings are dangerous; consequently, no ministry is possible without vulnerability. When the church recoils from the unsafe behavior of the wounded it places itself in danger of violating safety yet again through structural, institutional violence. Prophetic voices must call the church to its nobler self—offering safety and healing—even if vulnerability ensues.

In ministry, truth often stands in tension with hope. Sean stole cars.<sup>67</sup> His confession and a juvenile court decision established this truth. Yet, because his parents and law enforcement officials hoped he might find a truer and better identity than “car thief,” they sent Sean to Westview Boys’ Home. He agreed to go, but hope proved more easily imagined than achieved. He struggled with the work that change required. One night, under the cover of pouring rain, Sean snuck out of his room and ran a quarter-mile to another Westview house. He broke into the quarters of off-duty caregivers, stole their keys, and drove away in a Westview van. Just yards away, Sean skidded the van off the rain-slick road, into the ditch, and axle-deep in mud. Undeterred, he ran back and, true to form, stole a pickup

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<sup>66</sup> Mallory Wyckoff, “The Impact of Sexual Trauma on Survivors’ Theological Perception and Spiritual Formation,” (DMin thesis, Lipscomb University, 2016), 43.

<sup>67</sup> This story is true, although the details have been modified to conceal the identity of the youth involved.

truck. This vehicle carried him off the ranch, across the state line, and to his uncle's house. Soon, though, the Westview team retrieved Sean and the pickup. He had believed that, even if he were caught, his outrageous behavior would surely result in dismissal. Westview caregivers reminded Sean, though, that they were willing to work with him until he was willing to leave the truth of his car theft in the past and move toward a hopeful future—one where his God-given gifts would empower him to flourish among his family and friends. Whether Sean ever fully understood or not, some of his peers did.

Each of these three narratives exemplify one pair of the tensive virtues, but in reality the other tensions are inextricably present and connected. In Sean's story, truth and hope are not the only virtues out of balance. Openness and identity are also at risk. For example, if Westview keeps its doors open to Sean, how many vehicles does he have to steal before the surrounding community believes all young men at Westview are car thieves and the administration, naïve incompetents? How safe do residents and staff feel knowing that their prize possessions are vulnerable to theft? Or, if Westview were to dismiss Sean, would this not discount his hopes and dwell in the truth of his wrongdoing, cement his identity as a thief and misfit, and establish that—for him—Westview is not a safe place? In a similar way, a close reading of the other narratives reveals that imbalance in one of the tensions pulls other tensions out of balance as well. Balancing these tensions is an ongoing task in a constantly shifting context.

### **In Pursuit of Justice and Reconciliation**

Hospitality is a spiritual practice for individuals seeking to emulate Jesus and a communal spiritual practice for communities attempting to act alongside God in ways that bring about justice, reconciliation, and peace as part of a divinely desired future. Just as Jesus lived a hospitable lifestyle, so ought we. This work equips communities of hospitality with an interpretive tool empowering their transformation into communities whose daily practices cohere with the mission of God. These communities call others into the ever-open welcome of God. They abide as safe houses of relationship and reconciliation. They send messengers of hope to receive the hospitality of outsiders to share this news of grace and peace. Practicing ministry with this hermeneutic, though, reveals an uncomfortable reality: most of us still have much to learn about vulnerability, openness, and even hope in our pursuit of justice and reconciliation in the way of Jesus.

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