

# Hospitality Remembering Jesus

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In his fiendish letters to Wormwood, Screwtape once reminded his underling that “all the great moralists are sent by the Enemy, not to inform men, but *to remind them*, to restate the primeval moral platitudes against our continual concealment of them.”<sup>1</sup> Even moralists who fall far short of greatness can take some comfort from that diabolical advice. I know I do. All I want to do in this essay is remind my readers of one primeval platitude: be hospitable to strangers. And I want to do that by reminding my readers of Jesus.

## Starting with Suspicion

That hospitality was an ancient platitude there can be no doubt. Many ancient traditions, both religious and cultural, could be cited. And the Jewish tradition is not least among the ancient traditions in extolling the virtue of hospitality. There is the example of Abraham in Genesis 18, who welcomes the visitors who come to his door, offering water to wash, a place to rest, and a generous meal. In that encounter with strangers, the story is, Abraham encountered God, and in the encounter with God there was promise and blessing. Hard on the heels of that story is the contrast between Lot’s hospitality and the treatment of strangers by the men of Sodom. Lot did his best to protect the strangers who had, as he said, “come under the shelter of my roof” (Gen. 19:8). Leave aside, for now, the fact that Lot’s “best” would have surrendered the vulnerable members of his own family to attack. Lot was hospitable to strangers, and the men of Sodom were not; and that marked the righteous from the unrighteous. The poor and powerless, notably foreign women, provided hospitality out of the little they had.<sup>2</sup> There were not only stories celebrating hospitality but also statutes requiring it: “You shall not oppress the alien. . . . You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:33-34). And Job’s account of his righteousness included his hospitality (Job 31:32). Hospitality is an ancient virtue, a primeval platitude.

Lately, however, I have noted some suspicion concerning hospitality. I have attempted from time to time to play the role of the great moralist and to remind people of this platitude. I have commended this ancient virtue from time to time as instructive for the common life of the various communities to which I belong. I have usually simply repeated the old platitude: “We ought to be hospitable to those who are different from us. The college (or the church, or the club, or the community) ought to practice hospitality.” Such remarks have sometimes been met with suspicion. I found the suspicion a little surprising, frankly, but I think I am beginning to understand.

The suspicion has taken different forms, of course. Sometimes there is a worry that hospitality is an antiquated virtue, a bit out of date. Hospitality may have been an important virtue once upon a time, but times change. We now have a “hospitality industry,” hotels and motels and restaurants and the like, and neither we nor other people are quite as dependent upon the hospitality of strangers as we once were.

Another worry is that hospitality is, well, a bit too tame. We do tend to think of hospitality sometimes as a matter of inviting family home for Thanksgiving dinner or friends in for coffee. But even if we do not reduce hospitality to kindness to family and friends, it may still be too tame a virtue; the worry is that hospitality is not subversive enough. It leaves the powerless powerless and the powerful in charge. Like charity, hospitality is a poor substitute for justice and the rights of strangers among us.

Like charity, hospitality can sometimes be used to salve the consciences of the rich and powerful, while it leaves the community unchanged and injustices unchallenged. Both charity and hospitality can be corrupted by the conceit of philanthropy. Our acts of charity and hospitality can sometimes serve to divide the world up into the needy beneficiaries and the self-sufficient benefactors – and can reinforce that great divide. Hospitality can thus serve to reinforce both our status and our virtue – and to put (or keep) others in their place as needy and as dependent upon our kindness. By practicing hospitality we can claim the status and virtue of hosts and relegate others to the status of guests. Such “hospitality” is condescending and demeaning. That’s a worry worth taking very seriously indeed!

Finally, there is the quite different suspicion that hospitality may be a threat to the identity and integrity of particular (and cherished) communities. In a club I belong to the members meet for dinner; after dinner one of the members delivers a paper on an item of political, cultural, economic, or political importance; and then we talk about it. About a decade ago this club was called “The Holland Professional Men’s Club.” The name has been changed, but perhaps only to protect the guilty; some of the men are still suspicious that hospitality to women guests and members would be a threat to the little community we appreciate. In a neighborhood I used to live in, one of the homes was considered as a possible residential facility for developmentally retarded individuals. Some neighbors argued against it and were suspicious of arguments reminding us of an ancient platitude because hospitality might change the character of the neighborhood, might threaten the identity of the little area we loved. In the college at which I teach, the Christian tradition is taken seriously, and the language of hospitality is fairly commonplace, but it is sometimes met with the suspicion that our particular common life and our mission may be put at risk if we practice an

indiscriminate hospitality. In churches hospitality is celebrated, at least until hospitality to the stranger is perceived as threatening a particular style of worship or an aesthetic tradition cherished there. The city in which I live cherishes its Dutch traditions and celebrates them. Some who live in it are a little suspicious of efforts to cherish and celebrate the traditions of other groups who also live in the city. Some of these cases are much more difficult to deal with than others, but in each case there is a suspicion of hospitality as a threat to cherished particular identities and communities. Limits to the differences we can tolerate – and to the hospitality we can extend – seem given by particular identities.

It is a daunting set of worries when collected, and I have learned to share them. I too have grown a little suspicious of “hospitality.” It is not that I think one who makes a living as a moral theologian ought to be more original. And it is not that I distrust the primeval platitudes. I suspect, rather, that His Infernal Excellency has adopted a cunning new strategy, concealing the truth of the ancient platitude while paying homage to a counterfeit hospitality. It is a devilishly clever strategy, and against it simply repeating the advice to be hospitable will not be sufficient; it will be necessary to invite people to think again about what hospitality really is and really requires. And to that task I now turn, revisiting hospitality in remembrance of Jesus.

### **Remembering Jesus**

Jesus came announcing the good future of God and already making its power felt in his works and words. “The kingdom of God has come near” he said (Mark 1:15), and he made that future present in his conduct and in his conversation. To that announcement, of course, there was joined the invitation to welcome that good future; to “the kingdom of God has come near” is joined the invitation to “repent, and believe in the good news.” To encounter Jesus was to encounter the good future of God. To welcome Jesus was to welcome that kingdom. To repent was not simply a matter of remorse; the invitation to repent was an invitation to live in discipleship. And to live as a disciple was both a grateful response to the good future of God already made real and present in Jesus and a watchful anticipation of that future.

The good future Jesus proclaimed and performed was the hospitality of God. In Jesus’ announcement of that future he sometimes used the image of the eschatological banquet (e.g., Matt. 8:11, 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24). It was already a familiar image, and it pointed, at least in Isaiah 25:6, to a hospitality that included “all peoples.” God is the host at that feast, and the guests included Gentiles (Matt. 8:11), sinners (Matt. 22:9-10), and those on the margins of Jewish life, “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” (Luke 14:21). The parable of the Great Banquet, of course, disclosed not only the good future of God’s

hospitality to sinners and the poor. It also disclosed the judgment on the religious elite who refused the gracious invitation of such a host and on the wealthy who refused to live in grateful response and hopeful anticipation of such a generous hospitality.

Jesus performed that good future and made that future present in his own hospitality, in feeding the multitudes (e.g., Mark 6:30-44, 8:1-10), in serving the guests at the table he had prepared (e.g., Luke 22:14-27), in welcoming children and blessing them (Mark 10:13-16), and even in washing the feet of his guests with his own hands (John 13:3-5). God's lavish hospitality was present already in such conduct. And the guests may simply welcome such hospitality and be grateful for it. Well, there is a little more to it than that. To receive such hospitality and to be grateful for it is also to receive the grace and the vocation to perform it.

To welcome a good future of God's generous hospitality is to be called to be hospitable ourselves, to disclose God's hospitality and to make it present to others. Just as to receive already the good future of God's forgiveness requires that we forgive one another, so to receive God's hospitality requires that we be hospitable. To welcome the kingdom requires that we be hospitable ourselves, that we also give some small token of God's generous hospitality. To be a disciple requires that we be hospitable to children (Mark 9:37), to strangers, to the poor, and to others who don't count for much as the culture counts. And it requires, of course, that we "wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Grateful response and hopeful anticipation of God's hospitable future requires the performance of a generous hospitality. In Luke's gospel Jesus said to his host,

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friend or your brothers or your relative or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12-14).

Evidently Jesus had his own suspicions about hospitality, or at least about what sometimes passed for hospitality. The hospitality that was conventionally practiced, the hospitality based on reciprocity, was not the hospitality that Jesus called for. Conventional hospitality did not welcome the poor and others on the margins; a hospitality that was a response to and an anticipation of the hospitality of God's future did invite and welcome strangers and the poor.

We have noted the stories of Jesus as a welcoming host and that in those stories the good future of God's hospitality is manifest. But Jesus is not only the host; he is also the stranger, the guest. He not only signals the hospitality of God; he is

also the one who depends on the hospitality of others. The striking contrast fits a pattern, of course. The kingdom that he announced and practiced was a kingdom in which the exalted will be humbled, and the humiliated will be exalted (Luke 14:11). And it fits a second pattern, as well. To welcome the kingdom is to welcome Jesus; to be hospitable to the good future of God is to be hospitable to Jesus. But the contrast, the reversal, is no less striking for all that, and it undercuts any association of status with the roles of guest and host.

Already in the nativity stories Jesus is the stranger. He came as a stranger to Mary, who becomes a model of hospitality by her readiness to welcome this child. To Joseph, too, of course, he was a stranger. In horrific contrast to Mary and Joseph, Herod refused to welcome him; anxious about his own status, Herod saw this little stranger as a threat and practiced not hospitality but violence. In the prologue of John's gospel, the point is made in a different but no less arresting way. The Word who was involved in the creation of the world comes to the world as a stranger, as unknown, and as the agent of an unknown God. Indeed, as a stranger he "came to his own home" (John 1:11, marginal reading), where he should have been recognized as host, and his own people did not welcome him. As an alien he lived in a tent (John 1:14, cf. also Luke 9:58).<sup>3</sup> In his ministry he depended on the hospitality of others (e.g., Mark 1:29, 2:15, etc.). At his death he depended on the kindness of Joseph of Arimathea to provide a place to receive his body (Mark 15:42-47). And even when he was raised from the dead, it was when those disciples on the road to Emmaus practiced hospitality to him and broke bread with him that they recognized that this stranger was the risen Lord (Luke 24:28-35). Jesus was among us – and is among us – as a stranger.

Little wonder, then, that in the magnificent parable of the last judgment he identifies himself with the stranger: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt. 25:35). Little wonder, but no less shocking. It was surely shocking to those whom Jesus commended. One can almost hear their incredulous responses: "Do you mean to say that that was you, Lord? That that little kid was you? That that lonely old man was you? That person so different from me in so many ways, that strange stranger, was you?" And the answer is always yes, and that answer always calls for a kind of reverence for the stranger. It privileges not the host but the stranger. It reverses conventional assessments and evaluations no less than the axiom that in God's kingdom "the last shall be first." To welcome the good future of God is to welcome Jesus, and to welcome Jesus is to welcome the stranger.

### **Remembering the Early Church Remembering Jesus**

God raised this Jesus up, vindicated this one who displayed and proclaimed God's hospitality, exalted this stranger to a place of honor at God's right hand.

God raised this Jesus up, the firstborn from the dead, and poured the Spirit out, the first fruits of God's good future. It is not yet that good future, of course, but while we wait and watch for it, the Spirit provides a foretaste of it. The Spirit reminds us of Jesus, of his words and way, which made the future present. And the Spirit forms the church as a community of those who remember Jesus and therefore hope, as a community of those who remember Jesus and therefore forgive, and as a community of those who remember Jesus and therefore practice hospitality to strangers and the poor.

On the day of Pentecost the presence and the power of the Spirit overcame the division of languages that had been the curse on humanity since the tower of Babel. People were suddenly and quite remarkably capable of understanding each other. It was a gift, of course, but a gift that established certain assumptions for the practice of hospitality, for dealing with difference. The Enlightenment would (much later) assume that we need to be able to locate universal and rational principles before we can talk together peaceably in the midst of our differences. It settled for a tolerance that leaves us strangers to each other and nurtures a freedom capable of contracts but empty of covenant. Post-modernism (later still) would assume that our values are simply incommensurable, that we cannot really talk together. It settles for a celebration of difference and of a freedom that is ever only a step away from violence. Pentecost teaches us to make different assumptions about difference.

Pentecost teaches us that in the presence and the power of the Spirit, who is never under our control, who comes always and only as a gift to the world, people can talk together even if there is no moral Esperanto, no universal language that simply transcends our particular traditions. Pentecost trains us to hope that in such conversations people may discover in the stranger not only a rival and an enemy but a friend and a sibling. Pentecost evokes a sense of new possibilities for people to discover both themselves and a peaceable community in the context of difference.

The early church as described in Acts was a community that practiced hospitality, tending to the needs of the poor among them as energetically as they tended to their own needs (Acts 2:45; 4:34). They broke bread together and "ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). Luke described the community of goods in ways that evoke the hopes of both Jews and Gentiles. When he observed that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34), he alluded to the promise of Deuteronomy 15:4: "There will . . . be no one in need among you." Their hospitality and open-handed generosity fulfilled the ancient covenant hope. Here in the church, by the power of the Spirit was the reformation and restoration of Israel, the fulfillment of God's intentions for Israel, the first fruits of God's good and hospitable future. And when he

observed that they “had all things in common” (Acts 2:44, 4:32) and when he described these people as “of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32), he alluded to what was proverbial wisdom among the Greeks about friendship.<sup>4</sup> The hopes of the Greeks were fulfilled in this community as well. By their hospitality these strangers became friends. Their hospitality was not the hospitality of patrons and clients, based on reciprocity and nurturing the conceit of philanthropy, but the hospitality of equals.

The Spirit led Peter to Cornelius, the centurion, and then led both Peter to accept the hospitality of this Gentile and Cornelius to accept the generous welcome of God (Acts 10). The testimony to the work of the Spirit among the Gentiles led the Council of Jerusalem to welcome them as Gentiles (Acts 15), and Paul, of course, famously insisted that hospitality to the Gentiles required, well, hospitality, table-fellowship (Gal. 2). The truth of the gospel was at stake in such hospitality (Gal. 2:14).

Throughout the Roman Empire in the first century, the Spirit formed communities of hospitality to the stranger and to the poor, communities of peaceable difference. The Spirit formed communities that included both Jews and Gentiles, and it formed these communities in spite of traditional animosities and suspicions. They were “one new humanity” of Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:15). The Spirit formed communities that included men and women as equals, communities where the curse of patriarchy was being lifted. It formed communities that included both slaves and masters, and it taught them to regard each other as beloved brothers – “both in the flesh and in the Lord,” as Paul said to Philemon (16). There are exhortations to hospitality. For example, Romans 12:13: “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” Or, Hebrews 13:2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” But the exhortations only dimly capture the formative power of the story and of the Spirit that brings remembrance.

It was not easy, and there were no guarantees. But in the presence and the power of the Spirit they learned to welcome one another, to be hospitable to differences, to love one another. The Jew was not required to become a Gentile, or to speak like one, in order to be a member of this community and to have a voice in it. But the Jew was required not to condemn the Gentile for being Gentile. The Gentile was not required to become a Jew or to talk like one, but the Gentile was required not to despise the Jew for being Jewish. Paul exhorted Jews and Gentiles in the Roman churches to hospitality, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7).

The Spirit formed communities of peaceable difference neither by imposing an authoritarian hierarchy nor by nurturing moral indifference, but by forming communities of moral discourse and discernment. In the presence and the power of the Spirit they learned to talk to each other and to listen to each other. They became communities of mutual encouragement and admonition. It was a part of the welcome, the hospitality that they owed each other. To use Paul's wonderful compliment to the Roman churches, they were "able to instruct one another" (Rom. 15:14). That, too, was a gift of the Spirit, and it engaged the diversity of gifts present in the congregations. They needed each other, including and especially the stranger, the outsider, the one who was different, in order to discern a life and a common life that was worthy of the gospel, appropriate to the story, a life "according to the Spirit."

They talked together about many questions, about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, about the collection for the poor in Judea, about marriage and divorce, about this and that, and they did not always agree. But they continued to talk. And you can bet that they talked about the limits of acceptable diversity and the limits of acceptable unity. Permit me to say a word about each of these.

First, consider acceptable unity. The unity and peace the Spirit gave – and gives – were not the unity and peace of the so-called *Pax Romana*. That unity and peace was imposed, coerced, and built upon oppression of the weak and poor. To be sure, hospitality was practiced in the economic and political culture of the empire, but it was the hospitality of client and patron; such hospitality reinforced social status and was performed in expectation of reciprocity. Such a unity, such a peace, such hospitality were not acceptable. The unity and peace the Spirit gave – and gives – were not imposed but received as a gift, as a token of God's future hospitality. The unity and peace that is response to that gift must not be coercive; it must not oppress the weak and poor; it must practice a hospitality formed by the story of God's care and a generosity formed as gift answering to gift.

The unity and peace the Spirit gave – and gives – were also not the unity and peace of the Enlightenment. That unity and peace settled for too little. The virtue of the Enlightenment was tolerance, but tolerance leaves us strangers to each other, and wary strangers at that. If there is a place for hospitality it is a minimal hospitality embracing those with whom we already agree, with friends and family. The Enlightenment response to difference was to be suspicious of it, to attempt to transcend it by identifying universal and rational principles. Such a unity, such a peace, such hospitality were not acceptable. Response to the hospitality of God called the early Christians to be hospitable, not just tolerant, to welcome the stranger into community, not just into contractual agreements between self-interested individuals. Communities formed by the Spirit sought a

conversation about what should be decided, not just a procedural resolution to the question concerning who should decide. A hospitality that remembers Jesus sees the stranger and the rival as (potentially, at least) a friend and a sibling. Members of communities formed in remembrance of Jesus sought not just to protect themselves from the potential violence of strangers and rivals but to perform the hospitality of God, to give some small token of God's good and generous future.

Consider also, however, the limits of acceptable diversity. In the presence and the power of the Spirit these communities sought and celebrated diversity. The Spirit formed them to love the enemy, to be hospitable to the outcast and the "sinner." They were marked by the good future of God's hospitality. These communities and their members found their particular identity "in Christ" and in the generous hospitality he performed and required. They were normatively inclusive communities. How could there be a limit?

I suggest that there were – and are – two limits. The first is this: if mutual love and friendship is to be the mark of such communities, then they must abhor what destroys and thwarts it. What thwarts love is not difference. What thwarts love is envy and pride and greed and self-centeredness. What threatens love is deception and injustice. To such "works of the flesh" neither love nor a community formed by the Spirit will be hospitable. The response of love to such "works of the flesh" is to call for repentance.

Hospitality – both the wide embrace of God's mercy and grace and the human response to that gift that welcomes the poor and the stranger and creates a community of friends – has an important priority. Hospitality to difference is the first word spoken over our creation, when light and darkness are peaceably distinguished,<sup>5</sup> and in God's good future it will have the last word. Welcoming the other, making room for them, listening attentively to their stories and to their needs, hospitality is prior to any judgment on the stranger. But hospitality in remembrance of Jesus and in the expectation of the good future of God will require sometimes the mutual admonition and encouragement of friends. We welcome both each other and the truth – and we remember that the truth is that God has made us siblings and friends. We embrace both each other and justice – and we remember that God's justice is not the tight-fisted justice that provides a limit to self-interest but the open-handed justice that attends to the hurt of slaves, strangers, and the poor.

When Paul observed that the hospitality of the Lord's table at Corinth had been violated by behavior that humiliated those "who have nothing" (1 Cor. 11:22), he warned that they receive the hospitality of God "in an unworthy manner" (1 Cor. 11:27) and called them to repentance. When John is told that Diotrephes, "who

likes to put himself first" (3 John 9), refuses to be hospitable to strangers and, worse, regards his hospitality to the local house church as conferring the entitlements of a host,<sup>6</sup> John makes it clear that he is not acting in "a manner worthy of God" (3 John 6). And when the Afrikaner churches of South Africa excluded certain ethnic groups from their fellowship and from their tables, then many other churches quite properly called them to repentance. It is the refusal to repent in such circumstances that crosses the limits of acceptable diversity and leads to exclusion.

The second limit is this: idolatry. We may not give ultimate allegiance to things that are less than ultimate. In the church this limit is expressed positively in the requirement of ultimate allegiance to the God whose story is told in Christian Scripture. The church calls those who confuse God with the nation or the race or the family or wealth to repentance.

Consider, for example, James's suspicion of what surely passed for hospitality in the little community of "the poor" that he addressed. In memory of Jesus' announcement of a great reversal in God's good future and of "good news for the poor" James says, "Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low" (James 1:9-10). This is not said to glorify poverty; it calls the community to identify with Jesus in his identification with (and hospitality toward) the poor, those beaten down and crushed by poverty. The poor are to be welcomed here. The rich are welcomed, too, of course, if they welcome the humble roles of servant and friend rather than the exalted role of patron to poorer clients, if they "boast" about being "humbled." The problem is that the hospitality and honor this church offers to the rich, to those who come "with gold rings and in fine clothes" (2:2), practices favoritism toward the rich. And when these Christians practice favoritism, they express the conventional social attitudes of the rich rather than the reversal of values wrought by and taught by the Lord Jesus Christ. When the rich boast about their futures, thinking that they have secured their future by "doing business and making money" (4:13), then they do not boast in being humbled; then their boasting is the boasting of "the rich" and not a boasting in the Lord; and "all such boasting is evil" (4:16).<sup>7</sup> The church must form its hospitality in memory of Jesus. It must test its traditions and performance of hospitality, its account of acceptable unity and diversity, by whether they are "worthy of the gospel" of God's generous hospitality.

### **Hospitality – and Suspicion of It – Revisited**

It is still not easy, of course, and there are still no guarantees. But in remembrance of Jesus and in anticipation of God's good and hospitable future, we are still called to hospitality. And in memory of Jesus and in hope for God's

grace, we must continue to test our traditions and performances of hospitality, including our accounts of acceptable unity and diversity.

We are still called as Christians to welcome the stranger, to be hospitable to difference, to embrace the poor, to love one another. This is hardly an antiquated virtue, hardly out of date. That was the first suspicion, you remember. To be sure, times have changed. To perform hospitality in precisely the ways it was performed in the first century would often be appropriately regarded as an anachronistic eccentricity. Fidelity to this tradition of hospitality will require creativity. Fidelity to any tradition requires creativity. But we must find ways to be faithful to it if we would remember Jesus faithfully.

The second worry was that hospitality is too tame a virtue, not subversive enough. In remembrance of Jesus we should share this worry, but it is properly a worry about us and about our conventional performances of hospitality, not about the hospitality that Jesus announced, performed, and commended. We need to test our traditions and performances of hospitality against the story of Jesus, seeking to form and reform our practices until they are “worthy of the gospel” of God’s hospitality. God’s hospitality is hardly tame. It turns the world upside down. The first will be last; the last will be first. The exalted will be humbled; the humiliated will be exalted. Such reversals, signaled indeed by the host who comes to us as a stranger, can hardly be domesticated. The hospitality of God gives power to the powerless and challenges the powerful and the wealthy to “boast in that they are humbled.” It does not neglect or dismiss the legitimate claims of the strangers among us; it will be an advocate and a performer of the justice that hears the cries of the slave, the poor, the powerless, the stranger.

A related suspicion was that hospitality has been corrupted by the conceit of philanthropy, that it serves to reinforce both the status and the virtue of hosts by dividing the community into self-sufficient benefactors and needy beneficiaries and by reminding everyone which side of that divide they stand on. Such hospitality is condescending and demeaning. But this suspicion, too, is properly focused on our traditions and performances of hospitality, not on the hospitality that Jesus offers and commands. Remembering Jesus challenges such self-serving hospitality and should reform our practices. Jesus himself was the host who was stranger and guest. In him and in his words and works the stranger and the poor were given a privileged position. They were exalted, not demeaned. Any hospitality “worthy of the gospel” will reject the division of the community into self-sufficient benefactor and needy beneficiaries. We are all needy beneficiaries of God’s generous hospitality, and our own humble performances are simply gift answering to gift. In God’s good future we are all guests. And while we wait and watch for that future, we receive the stranger as God’s gift to us, as Christ’s presence among us. Far from being self-sufficient

benefactors, we depend on those who are different from us – and on their diverse gifts – to be the community the Spirit forms. There is no place for the conceit of philanthropy where Jesus is remembered. If we boast, we do not boast about being self-sufficient but about the hospitality of God.

Finally, there was that quite different suspicion that hospitality may be a threat to the identity and integrity of particular (and cherished) communities. Unlike the previous worry, this worry may in fact be a worry not just about our conventional and distorted practice of hospitality but about the ancient platitude. The first response to this suspicion must be, I think, that it is right. There are indeed some communities and associations that are inconsistent with God's hospitality and with Christian hospitality in remembrance of Jesus. There are indeed communities and associations that must be called to repentance; sometimes these are particular churches and their traditions, unfaithful to their own identity as hospitable communities; sometimes they are other associations. There are ways of identifying ourselves that must be challenged. Jesus challenged the Pharisees for their elitism, for their readiness to judge the stranger as "sinner," for their narrowness of vision and of hospitality. Paul challenged the Jewish communities who condemned the Gentile Christians and the Gentile communities who despised the Jews. Our churches, too, must be constantly tested and reformed by God's hospitality. And so, of course, must our lives be tested and reformed – and the other communities and associations in which we live and work and play.

This does not mean that there is not a place for particular communities. Because the cause of God is manifold, diverse associations may (and must) focus on limited pieces of it. Diverse associations are called to serve the cause of God in diverse ways. The particular mission will establish particular identities, and particular identities may require certain limitations on participation. This is obvious, I suppose. A retirement home serves the cause of God in a particular way. Its particular mission attends to elderly people and their needs, and a refusal to sell or rent an apartment to a teenager would not be regarded as inhospitable. A college serves the cause of God in another particular way, and fidelity to its mission may require standards that potential students and faculty must meet. It may insist, for example, that students and faculty meet certain academic standards. A club, a neighborhood, a city, a church may serve the complex cause of God in particular ways, and their particular identities and traditions are usually both cherishable and challengeable.

Even the little club I belong to is both cherishable and challengeable. I think the cause of God is large enough and hospitable enough to include the practice of friends to eat together and to talk together about issues of social significance. But while it serves that little piece of the cause of God, it should be welcoming in

ways that fit its “mission” and the hospitality of God, and when it fails to be hospitable, it should be challenged. This is obvious, I say, but how to negotiate our membership and participation and leadership in such communities is frequently far from obvious.

Cherishable and challengeable – we will have to exercise Christian discernment. Christian discernment always happens in community. The mutual admonition and encouragement we owe each other is part of hospitality. Discernment requires attention to diverse voices, including the voices of saints and strangers, including the voices of those who are different from us, including the voices of those whom we would not enlist or invite to pursue a particular piece of the complex cause of God in a particular association. And Christian discernment also always requires attention to the story that is constitutive of Christian identity and normative for discernment, the story of God’s hospitality.

In memory of Jesus and in anticipation of the good future of God, we are responsible for challenging the envy and pride that turn siblings into rivals. We are responsible for practicing the kind of hospitality that is only gift answering to gift. In such hospitality we may discover the stranger as friend – and as the presence of Christ. We are responsible for nurturing a readiness to forgive and to love “the enemy,” and for nurturing a readiness to repent and to receive forgiveness and the hospitality of the one who is different from us. It is not just tolerance toward which we must aim. It is not just a self-serving individual freedom or corporate autonomy that we must serve. We are responsible for enlisting our particular communities and their particular causes in service to God’s cause, and that cause will always be marked, if Jesus is to be trusted, by a generous hospitality to the poor, the outcast, and the stranger. We are responsible, in resistance to the cunning Screwtape, for reminding one another from time to time both of Jesus and of an ancient platitude.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 118. The emphasis is mine. See my *Remembering Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) for an account of “ethics by way of reminder.”

<sup>2</sup> Note, for example, the stories of Rahab’s hospitality to the Israelite spies in Joshua 2, the widow of Zarephath practicing hospitality to Elijah in 1 Kings 17-18, and the Shunammite woman’s hospitality to Elisha in 2 Kings 4.

<sup>3</sup> To be sure, to say that “he tabernacled among us” is to say that in him is the presence of God, but the *Shekinah* is found in this stranger, and it is the *Shekinah* of an unknown God.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle had cited “friends hold in common what they have,” “[friends have] one soul,” and “friendship is equality” as proverbial wisdom. *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 9, ch. 8, 1168b, trans. Martin Ostwald (The Library of Liberal Arts; New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1962), 260.

<sup>5</sup> One might contrast the violence of the story of the creation in the *Enuma Elish* with the peaceable difference in the story of creation in Genesis 1. In the *Enuma Elish* violence is at the bottom of our world. In Genesis God’s *shalom* is foundational.

<sup>6</sup> So that he expels those who differ with him from the church that meets in his house. See Abraham Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, (2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 103-110.

<sup>7</sup> See further Verhey, *Remembering Jesus*, 297-301.