

Biblical Hospitality, Immigration,

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At the very heart of Hebrew and Christian scriptures, hospitality is a way to understand the unity of the commandments to love God and love neighbor. God's call to welcome the stranger reveals the radically universal love of God, the fact that God's love overflows for the whole of creation, and that we are called to share that love with all others in the world. However, practicing hospitality—or solidarity—is no easy task for North American Christians whose relative power and advantage may block us from hearing, much less practicing, the biblical call to welcome newcomers in our midst.

I say “the radically universal love of God” because in *Torah*, God's call to the people of Israel to extend love to the stranger and alien in their midst would have sounded absurd to a tribal people. It may sound too abstract to North Americans or lose its particular meaning if we do not attend

to its historical context. In the ancient Middle East, the gods of most groups were narrowly tribal or nationalistic. Also, there was no notion of the individual as it has developed in Western modernity. Identity was wrapped up with the tribe and in the demands of the tribal gods. Identity—and physical survival—was impossible if one was separated from the clan.

The *Book of Exodus* recounts Israel's experience of a radically different kind of God. In *Exodus*, we learn of a God who is intimate—who has “seen the affliction of my people in Egypt, and who hears the cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the Egyptians, and bring them to the land of milk and honey (*Ex 3:7-8*).” God is so present that God hears their cries and knows their suffering. This suggests a God beyond all gods, yet, because God calls a particular people to liberation from oppression, this intimacy might still be misconstrued as tribal.

The mark of universal love is the way God's hospitality erases any tribal or nationalistic boundaries. The Lord God calls the people to practice love in a radically different way: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God (*Lev 19:33-34*).” This call is unequivocal and radical.

God's call to Israel to practice hospitality is radical because in the ancient context, if an individual were separated from the tribe, one of two things would most likely happen: the person was either enslaved or killed. Not only does God call the people not to kill, God clearly calls the people to treat the widow, the orphan, alien, or stranger—anyone disconnected from their tribe—as a member of one's own family and community.

Welcoming the vulnerable, excluded, and strange is the radical mark of the universal love of God. God calls the people to recognize their commonality with, and moral responsibility for, vulnerable strangers in the land. This story is integral to Jewish memory as a covenantal people who recognize themselves and their shared humanity in others who are oppressed in any way.

The most important Gospel texts in the history of Christian hospitality, *Matthew 25* and *Luke 14*, are

central to Jesus' ministry and how he identifies with the marginality, vulnerability, and rejection experienced by strangers. Whereas *Exodus* and *Leviticus* reveal the interconnection between treatment of aliens and the covenant, *Matthew 25* and *Luke 14* reveal how Jesus appropriates roles of guest



and host, and calls His followers to practice hospitality in the same way. Matthew suggests an explicit connection between Jesus and those who are dependent upon others' welcome: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Luke 14:12-14 contrasts ordinary hosts who uphold social boundaries and expect repayment from their guests with Christian hosts who anticipate God's incoming community of hospitality by welcoming the poor, physically sick or disabled, the blind, and those who struggle for survival at the margins of society.

The Eucharistic meal calls Christians to re-member Jesus as host and guest who challenged social and religious patterns of exclusion. When Jesus offered healing, welcome, and meals, He recognized—and celebrated—the gifts of the many excluded members of His society. Jesus calls His followers to remember Him in a meal where no one is excluded and to live the memory of this meal throughout society by confronting boundaries of exclusion that foster distanced relationships between the relatively privileged and oppressed.

and the Boundary of Whiteness

Christian worship, as re-membering, reaches new possibility when we are so present with the oppressed that we hear their cries and know their suffering as God does. At these crossroads of community and marginality, we may be transformed by God's hospitality into a deeper humanity and realize our divine possibility.

As the theologian Christine Pohl explains in her *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Eerdmans, 1999), historical Christian practices of hospitality recover and renew their biblical meaning and inspiration when hospitality with vulnerable strangers is practiced: i) in a larger communal context of Christian faith and community; ii) at the margins or edges of society; and iii) by members who maintain an awareness of their need and dependence on each other and are open to welcoming vulnerable strangers.

Yet as Pohl and many other theologians and practitioners of hospitality warn, there are many pitfalls to hospitality when it lacks a communal and marginal context. There is a troublesome tendency for Christians who are located at the center of prevailing social arrangements to be unaware or uncomfortable with their own vulnerability and to insist on being hosts, thereby maintaining relationships of dominance and oppression. Without the context of community and marginality and without mutual recognition and care where both hosts and guests are aware of their mutual need and dependence upon each other, the possibility of a transformational relationship is very thin, if possible at all.

In U.S. society, our attention to external, geographical boundaries is heightened by threats that we perceive in the world today. These threats are real, and Catholic social teaching acknowledges the legitimacy of nation-states to secure national borders and protect people from legitimate threats.

However, within the U.S., we may miss how internal social boundaries that we create within ourselves and within society can thwart recognition of our own humanity and the possibility of hearing, much less practicing, the hospitality of the Eucharistic table. This is especially true in relationship to newcomers in our land, people who seek work to provide for their closest kin here and abroad.

The latest anti-immigrant movement against Latino peoples repeats past patterns of U.S. white cultural exclusion. This is systemic, social sin. This new movement includes private, citizen-rancher patrols that promote a white nationalism, such as the Minutemen and those so-called Tea Parties that vilify Latino newcomers through their slogans and even terrorize new immigrants in practice.

The stories of how ethnic European peoples endured great hardship when they escaped religious, political, or economic oppression to find liberty in the U.S. are woven into our national self-understanding. European immigrants crossed not only the geographical U.S. border but also the boundaries of alienation and exclusion to become assimilated into the U.S. American way of life.

Too often, however, the predominant telling of our immigrant history omits how Europeans constructed the internal boundary of whiteness. In his profound analysis of the "souls of white folk," W.E.B. Du Bois illuminates the creation of whiteness, the work of European Americans to set themselves apart, as "super human," worshipping whiteness and oppressing the darker peoples of the earth.¹ Du Bois' analysis unpacks the interrelationship between the personal and social construction of white superiority and how this superiority denigrates darker skinned peoples humanly, socially, politically, and economically.

Du Bois' ultimate insight, yet to be appreciated by North American whites or North American white Christianity, concerns how whites "devour" our own humanity as we set ourselves above and apart from others. This devouring, in Du Bois' analysis, concerns how white racism is wrapped up with other forms of oppression, including capitalism and militarism. Indeed, in his famous address to Clergy and Laity Concerned at New York City's Riverside Church, exactly one year before his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King developed Du Bois' insight by describing how the triple evils of racism, militarism, and consumerism fueled the devastation of Vietnam and America.

The American historical construction of whiteness is a problem not only for understanding the truth of U.S. history and identity, but, more importantly, from the perspective of Catholic social teaching, for understanding and practicing the intimate connections between God's hospitality with and for us and for recognizing our shared vulnerability and humanity with newcomers in our midst.

In his "Hymn to the Peoples," Du Bois prayed:

*Save us World-Spirit, from our lesser selves!
Grant us that war and hatred cease,
Reveal our souls in every race and hue!*²

Ultimately, justice for immigrants is about recognizing how the gifts of newcomers interconnect us in our shared vulnerability and humanity, the place where we may yet be transformed into new life through God's hospitality.

1 W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Washington Square Press, with an introduction by David Levering Lewis, 2004), chapter II.

2 Ibid., DuBois, *Darkwater*, p.212.