

Session Three: Practical and Social Theology I  
 RECONCILIATION HOSPITALITY: PHILOUXENIA VS. XENOPHOBIA

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Fifteen-year ministry in an urban setting of Moscow revealed a constant need to address a problem of xenophobia that tries to take residence in the Church as people bring in their fears and stereotypes about others. I am using the word “xenophobia”<sup>1</sup> in its wider sense as any unreasonable fear often followed by hatred not only of foreigners but of strangers in general or of anything foreign and strange to us. I say “unreasonable” because in my experience people can fear or dislike most all of the representatives of a certain people group but will always make an exception for those few whom they happen to know personally.

Unfortunately church people are constantly bombarded by the rhetoric of xenophobia in our societies and often (even unconsciously) try to “protect” the Church from those who are not like “us”, whom we fear because they threaten our identity and our sense of the way things need to be. In the midst of those fears it is especially important for us to hear Paul’s call to be ministers of reconciliation that will end hostility and become “an oasis in the inhospitable desert”<sup>2</sup> of society. I suggest that this needs to begin with replacing the worldly rhetoric and attitudes of xenophobia by those of philoxenia (“hospitality”).

Most church people will agree that hospitality is a good and positive thing. Many will even agree that, “if we love God and God meets us in a stranger, then we shall naturally (and even unconsciously) love the stranger”.<sup>3</sup> But it is not that easy in real life. First, our choice of people whom we include in our image of hospitality demonstrates a curious difference between modern and biblical understanding of hospitality. For most people today hospitality implies entertaining friends, family, acquaintances and sometimes even kind strangers who welcome us, but the Greek term “philoxenia”, actually means, “love for strangers”. This term challenges our too often impractical discourse about some “cozy” notion of hospitality and calls to find a deeper one in Scripture. I found the Gospel of John to be a great starting point where we find the story of God’s relationship to people as an image of hospitality that is deeper and more powerful than modern spirituality understands.

While the word “hospitality” is not present in the Gospel of John, its language of hospitality is plentiful and manifold. John uses widely a language of invitation and welcome. All the way through John speaks of God’s dealings in the world in terms of hospitality of God who comes as the Guest to dwell among us in the flesh but also graciously invites and receives us to Himself as the Host: “the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (6:37). Even the idea of faith or unbelief John presents in terms of hospitality – receiving or rejecting Jesus (5:43a) – as the word “*lambano*” (to receive) is used over thirty times.

This theme of hospitable reception is connected to the idea of “*coming*”. There is a constant “coming” and “going” of the Divine Community as the Father sends the Son and the Spirit is

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<sup>1</sup> Xenophobia comes from the Greek words for “xeno” (“alien”, “stranger”) and “phobia” (“fear”).

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 130.

<sup>3</sup> John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: partnership with strangers as promise and mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1985), 1.

sent by the Father in the name of the Son (14:26), but also from the Father by the Son (15:26). Coming entails a certain reaction, whether hospitable or hostile and both are in abundance in John. The Divine Community is in a constant unified movement reaching out to the world in the person of Jesus: “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (1:11), but when He came to Galilee (4:45a) and Samaria (4:40), they received Him and asked Him to stay with them. At the same time Jesus is inviting the people to come to him to receive spiritual food and drink (“I am the Bread of life. Whoever comes to me...”; “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me”) (6:35a, 7:37b). Jesus also invites his disciples to come and have breakfast with him (21:12) and comes to share a meal with them (21:22).

With great frequency we find in John’s Gospel words of “*giving*” reflecting the importance of “giving gifts” in ancient Mediterranean encounters. It is, first of all, true within the Divine Community: “the Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand” (3:35), among which the task of caring for the sheep, and in the same sentence (10:29) the Son is deferring back to the Father by saying that he is *greater than all*. But “giving” is not contained within the Divine Community. John constantly portrays God “giving” of himself to the world. He gives His Son (3:16) and the Spirit without measure (3:34), true bread out of heaven (6:32), which gives life to the world (6:33). Of course, the ultimate act of giving is seen in the act of crucifixion, when Jesus’ death (19:30) is described as “giving up his spirit”, denoting his willingness to die out of self-sacrificial love.

John goes even further and shows that hospitality is about deeper interpersonal relationships by using such notion as “*listening*” and “*hearing*”, which are figures of speech that imply a mutual relationship and availability.<sup>4</sup> It is so within the Trinity where the Father listens to the Son and the Son says only the things He hears from the Father. And it is true of people’s relationship with God, for if one is “not of God” he is not able to hear God (8:43, 47; 18:37). In the same way, those who are in a relationship of *love* and self-disposition to God are able to hear him (9:31, 8:47a), for one cannot love without listening. Love is, of course, the word that John uses “with magnificent monotony”<sup>5</sup> and not by chance often together with other hospitality terms. For John love is not just a feeling or affection (though it may include them) but has a more active element to it (the verb “to love” is used more than the noun “love”). Love is listening and doing. Love is always doing something that reveals one’s attachment: if people love the darkness, their deeds are evil, in contrast, God loves the world and thus “does not desire but gives”<sup>6</sup> (ultimately He gives His Son so that those who believe in Him will receive eternal life).

Listening also entails knowing. We tend to perceive “*knowing*” as having information concerning the circumstances of one’s life but for John it goes much further as he alludes to biblical images of the people in covenant relationship with God, because for a Hebrew to know God is to be in an intimate relationship with him, to experience God’s dealings with people in life, to listen and to obey his commands.<sup>7</sup> This kind of knowledge creates trust and

<sup>4</sup> Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ethelbert Stauffer, “Agapanw, αγαπη, αγαπητωw” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: 1967): I, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Stauffer, “Agapanw, I, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 242.

the possibility of receiving another continuously and being with another, being in relationship, which continually arises from personal encounter. This is why John explains mutual indwelling in terms of “knowing” and recapitulates in 1:10–12b “the age-old story of the relentless yearning of Wisdom to be “known” and to find a home among humankind.”<sup>8</sup>

Another integral part of hospitality is sharing one’s space, one’s being with another person which John expresses through a concept of “abiding” unique to him. Over forty times John uses the word “*meno*” which in Christian texts often refers “to either the stranger’s acceptance of or continuation in a context of hospitality”.<sup>9</sup> John, however, seems to think of it wider in a sense of loyal, deep attachment to another and of hospitable invitation to be with another. For him it is primarily an expression of the hospitable relation between the persons of the Trinity who abide in one another: the Spirit remains on the Son (1:33), the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father (expressed through a Greek preposition “*en*” in 10:38, 14:10,11; 17:21, 23). John also talks about a “dwelling place” (“*moneh*”) as he paints the picture of the hospitable God who prepares a place in his house for those who accept the Son, who expects them as a generous Host, a loving Father ready to bring his children home to be with him forever.

It is also notable that while multiple meal-fellowship accounts of Jesus present in the Synoptics are virtually absent in John, he makes an extended use of the meal events as well as food and drink images as part of his hospitality language (“the Bread of Life”, “the Living water” etc). We need to take note of that because even today people use food and drink not only as nourishment but also as an important method of communication: “a meal to which others are invited sends important social messages exchanged between the persons(s) issuing invitations and those actually invited, those who should/might have been invited but were not, and those who decline the invitation.”<sup>10</sup>

So, John combines his few descriptions of meals fellowships with his multiple images of bread and water and portrays hospitality (both divine and human) as something more than simple physical reality. Christine Pohl notes multiple levels on which the language of welcome and hospitality permeates the Gospel of John: “Jesus is portrayed as guest, host, meal, and dwelling”, and that “as the incarnate word of God, he came into the world and received a mixed welcome.”<sup>11</sup>

Even these very few selected examples reveal that, “God as Trinity means that whatever is Sacred is relational, never self-absorbed; always moving beyond itself to meet the new, the other, the different, never set in its ways or stuck on itself as the only way.”<sup>12</sup> We also see that hospitality is much more than our common understanding of just sharing a meal with

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<sup>8</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, *Wisdom’s Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 71.

<sup>11</sup> Christine Pohl, *Welcoming Strangers: A Socioethical Study of Hospitality in Selected Expression of the Christian Tradition* (Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University, 1993), 80.

<sup>12</sup> Carter Heyward, “Called to Embody the Image of God” in *Living Pulpit*, 8 no 2 (Ap-Je, 1999), 21.

someone you like but is sharing one's whole life, being available to one another in hospitable service, and all the more, "welcoming of the other in his or her otherness."<sup>13</sup>

The Gospel of John seems to make two things very clear in this regard. First, hospitality, or shared life expressed in "dynamic love, an economy of giving and receiving,"<sup>14</sup> is basic to the very nature of God. Second, John's ecclesiology is wrapped in the fabric of Trinitarian language, that is, the Church is called to hospitality not in order to emulate some ancient (and thus irrelevant) culture but to reflect the nature of the Triune God, the Divine Community in which distinct Persons are unified by such phenomena as reciprocal love, communication (listening and speaking), mutual knowledge, giving and indwelling as well sharing their common will and work. Already in the prologue John introduces a beautiful picture of the hospitable nature of the Triune God and "the saga of God's yearning for a home among humankind."<sup>15</sup> And then beyond the prologue clearly points that those who receive divine hospitality and welcome "God-become-flesh" to be at home with them become the core of the "new community" that has its life in (5:40; 17:21) and derives its character from (13:14, 34) the triune God himself. John's Gospel makes "a profound connection between who God is and what it means to be a member of the people of God."<sup>16</sup> Having been welcomed into the community of divine love, the church is also drawn into the unity and mission of Father, Son and Spirit ("as the Father has sent Me, I also send you", 20:21).

God, by inviting people into His new community, changes their status from strangers into "His own" (13:1) and into "His children" (1:12). Note how diverse this new community is from the start: it includes Jews (8:31; cf. 3:1) and Gentiles (10:16), Samaritans (4:42) and Galileans (4:45), men (3:1) and women (4:7), those ignorant of the law (7:49) and the 'rulers' (12:42), the sick (9:1-2), the excluded (5:5-7) and the prominent (19:38) alike, all those who have accepted the generous invitation of the Divine Community to come home. It is in such context (irreconcilable by the cultural and religious norms of that day) that Jesus prays for their diversity to "be expressed in the unity that exists in the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity."<sup>17</sup>

Now, having become "His own", we are expected to extend the same welcome, the same grace, "to transform life where we are, so that the world may become a home and other strangers may also come to be at-home."<sup>18</sup> Yet, looking at the church today, we often see "not even a pale reflection of the relational, triune God's intention," something "little more than buildings where organizational meeting are held and public speeches with a religious twist are made."<sup>19</sup> Many of us, of course, do more than that, we've heard the call to hospitality and

<sup>13</sup> Pohl, *Welcoming Strangers*, 71.

<sup>14</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: a theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>15</sup> Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen C. Barton, "Christian Community in the Light of the Gospel of John." In *Christology, Controversy & Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole*, eds. David G. Horrell and Christopher M. Tuckett (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1999), 293.

<sup>17</sup> Kent Brower, *Holiness in the Gospels* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2005), 74.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 299.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Walker Butin, *The Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001), 93

have shared food, money and even shelter, yet, the distance remained and the people we've helped have not "come home". Could it be because we missed the opportunity to recognize strangers as persons worth loving and caring for; we missed that it is all about inviting people into our lives and going beyond physical needs to such notions as love and friendship, dignity and respect?<sup>20</sup>

Being a holiness church we also struggle with the desire to preserve our identity and the attendant fear of anything different. On the contrary, God's "holiness...is nothing other than the fulfillment of His being for the world, his being for his own."<sup>21</sup> For John holiness is not a physical separation from the world (17:15) but a separation from the world's values<sup>22</sup> (e.g. xenophobia) while remaining in the world and resembling the Divine Community of love, which does not shun, but hospitably reaches out to, the lost and needy world. Hospitality involves creating a relationship of friendship, which "challenges the notion of an enclosed identity in which the aim is to protect our identity by insulating us from what is different and other."<sup>23</sup>

It is often heard today that offering hospitality in the modern world is a dangerous business. It is said to have been much easier for our grandparents or even great-grandparents because the world was different then and it was set for such practice. There is some truth to this perspective. The extension of the world, great distances and the size of the cities can present us with challenges that might not have been there at the time of our ancestors, not to mention at the time of John's writing, and make hospitality a difficult task, the completion of which requires grace and wisdom. But we need to begin with transforming our church's mentality, challenging our people to realize that they are a community that has been welcomed into the family of God and is to be a caring community of hospitality which celebrates life and allows space for sharing disappointments as well as joys. It is difficult because most of us today are very busy and overwhelmed by great need and pain around us, so we need to rethink and reshape our priorities, to allow space for uncertainty, contingency and human tragedy and also to move from "our abstract commitments to loving the neighbor, stranger, and enemy" to "practical and personal expressions of respect and care for actual neighbors, strangers, and enemies."<sup>24</sup> Our vague fears of strangers (often based on generalizations or negative experience) will not be overcome by our theoretical fuzzy claims of welcoming the other, but can be overcome by intentional and "hard work of actually welcoming a human being into a real place"<sup>25</sup> through listening to their stories and getting to know them, through going to them and letting them come to us, through mutual giving and sharing of space, and of our very lives.

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<sup>20</sup> Gregory Jones, "Eucharistic hospitality: welcoming the stranger into the household of God." *The Reformed Journal* 39 (March, 1989): 16.

<sup>21</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel According to John: a Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 510-1.

<sup>22</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1060-1.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Vosloo, "Identity, Otherness and the Triune God: theological groundwork for a Christian ethic of hospitality" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 119 (July 2004), 69.

<sup>24</sup> Christine Dorothy Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 75.

<sup>25</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, 75.

