

## “Love bade me welcome” Hospitality in earth and in heaven

Paul Dyck

**L**etty Russell delivered Canadian Mennonite University’s annual J. J. Thiessen lectures in October 2001. Her topic was “Hospitality in an age of difference,” and she argued that hospitality should be the primary way the church understands who we are in the world and in relation to God. Even as our culture increasingly draws us into xenophobia, hospitality asks that we not only treat the other well (whether that other be across religious, cultural, racial, or gender lines), but that we delight in the host/guest relationship.

Soon after Russell’s lectures, I was teaching the poems of one of my favorite writers, George Herbert, the early seventeenth-century Anglican minister. As I came once again to “Love” (1633), I had occasion to rethink the poem and Russell’s lectures, each in light of the other. For all their differences, these two Christians speak the same language, not understanding hospitality as a duty of faith, but faith as hospitality. Herbert addresses here the spiritual core of our life in the world: our life in Christ. If we are to host, we can only do so because we have been, and continue to be, hosted. Herbert’s poem helps us think about how human hospitality should both imitate and not imitate divine hospitality.

*Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lack’d anything.*

*A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here:  
Love said, You shall be he.*

*I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?*

*Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.*

The poem works through two layers of metaphor. We first encounter Love as a host, and then realize that Love is in fact Christ. Within Herbert's historical context, the literal level of the poem describes an aristocratic lord, a noble house, and an unworthy guest, presumably of lower social status. In this context, hospitality functioned not only as an exercise in community, but also as an occasion of courtly power negotiation. By hosting, a powerful person would exercise generosity and also display his or her power to be generous and command loyalty. Attending guests themselves would bring gifts and return favor for favor. The entire event enacted a political economy in which, whether one was a host or a guest, one could advance in the world by giving and receiving. Herbert's poem alludes to and then stands in contrast to this cultural backdrop, for it is precisely not about giving and receiving. Rather, it presents divine hospitality as distinctly other than that of humans.

The host of "Love" differs from an earthly host almost immediately in the poem. While earthly hosts concern themselves with display, this host first bids the poem's speaker welcome and then observes, "quick-ey'd," the speaker's discomfort. The questions and responses that follow demonstrate the loving host: Love is graceful, never making the speaker feel out-of-place; Love is gentle and intimate and not afraid of touch, first drawing near, then taking the speaker's hand and guiding him to the table; Love is also persistent, growing neither impatient nor dismissive of the speaker's objections. Instead, those objections lead only to an ever greater unfolding of Love's depth, both in the words Love speaks

and in the way Love says them. Love combines our two meanings of the word *grace*: Love is both graceful and full of grace.

So, what do this poem and Russell's lectures combine to say to me, to us? It seems to me that we too easily fall into thinking that we understand grace and even deliver it without being very graceful. The church's hospitality in the world must be filled with a delight in the host/guest relationship; hospitality is not simply a duty, but is a joy-filled way of being.

At the same time that the poem demonstrates to us Christian hospitality, it also demonstrates a hospitality that is uniquely Christ's. Russell points out that Christian hospitality is not done solely on the host's terms, but is a two-way, open encounter. So, the church cannot simply choose to whom it will show hospitality,

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on what conditions, and to what ends, and then deliver that hospitality. Instead, living hospitality means being vulnerable to the stranger, and even finding Christ in that stranger. Such hospitality does more than offer reward points to the Christian; it becomes a mode of spiritual growth, a continual prodding and pulling ourselves out of ourselves and into real engagement with others, and through them, with God.

The difference between Christian hospitality and Christ's hospitality is that Christ does welcome us on his terms, rightly rejecting ours. When the speaker of "Love" finally runs out of reasons why he cannot

receive hospitality, when he finally offers to receive it, he proposes his own terms: "My dear, then I will serve." The speaker insists on helping. Why does Love reject the offer? At this feast, there is nothing for the human to do but receive, to "sit and eat." Within the courtly culture Herbert knew, giving was a way of getting, and the speaker here can hope to earn favor by serving. In the end, though, both the speaker's excuses of unworthiness and his offer to help stand in the way of fully encountering Love. They are exertions of autonomy when Christ requires that we let go.

What does the poem imply about human hospitality? We cannot host as Christ hosts, but we can host in light of how Christ

hosts. We can recognize that when we host, we are in fact inviting others to the table of Christ, into the presence of Love. In the presence of Love, we can delight in the other. Such delight resonates with Christ's persistent, tender grace, and not with the anxieties of display or fear, of giving to get. Our recognition that in Christ we are always guests should help us exercise a radically Christian hospitality.

### **About the author**

Paul Dyck is a professor of English at Canadian Mennonite University, and finds—as on the occasion of Letty Russell's lectures at CMU—that new ideas emerge in his engagement with other disciplines. His primary research subject is Renaissance devotional literature, and he is particularly interested in comparing the way Christians were in that time and place to the way we are now.