

Rahab and the Triumph of Hospitality: Faith and Ethics in Response to Immigration

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## I. Immigration: Framing the Issue

The ELCA's message on immigration says the following concerning faith and ethics as they apply to immigration advocacy:

Immigration, refugee, and asylum policies express who we are as a nation, influence the nation's future character, and affect the lives of millions of people. We encourage our members, in light of our history and our ministry with newcomers, to join with other citizens in our democratic society to support just laws that serve the common good. Our advocacy needs to take into account the complexity of issues, the diversity of interests, and the partial or relative justice of laws at the same time that it counters appeals rooted in hostility, racism, prejudice, indifference, and simplistic solutions. We draw on the best of our nation's traditions as a refuge and haven for the persecuted and destitute when we affirm that "we support a generous policy of welcome for refugees and immigrants," and that we "will advocate for just immigration policies, including fairness in visa regulations and in admitting and protecting refugees. We will work for policies that cause neither undue repercussions within immigrant communities nor bias against them."<sup>1</sup>

This statement is representative of the way that religion and society interact for the sake of justice. Religion as a discipline is predisposed to engage questions of the human experience and the ethics that surround peace and justice. The religious sphere, and specifically the Christian sphere, brings to the conversation a focus on human rights, peace, hospitality, and stewardship, all influenced by the idea that all humans are created in the image of God and that our relationships are influenced by the theological imperative to love our neighbor.

Each year, nearly 675,000 immigrants enter the United States as legal permanent residents, most of them entering to meet family members or to work. In addition, the United States admits 120,000 refugees each year. Beyond this, it is estimated that 275,000 undocumented immigrants enter the United States annually,<sup>2</sup> either by entering the country

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.elca.org/socialstatements/immigration/>

<sup>2</sup> "The Immigration Dilemma," John B. Cobb, Jr., ed., *Progressive Christians Speak: A Different Voice of Faith and Politics*, (Louisville: Westminster, 2003), reprinted with permission at [http://www.progressivechristianwitness.org/pcw/pdf/PCU\\_TheImmigrationDilemma.pdf](http://www.progressivechristianwitness.org/pcw/pdf/PCU_TheImmigrationDilemma.pdf), January 2007, p.3.

illegally or (more commonly) by losing their legal documentation while in the country.

In the wake of 9/11, a new concern has arisen over the effects of immigration and the demands of immigration policy on the United States. Economics, race, culture, national security, poverty, housing, employment: these are some of the layers that comprise modern discussions about immigration, immigration policy, and immigrant rights. There is much concern and debate about the legal status of our country's immigrants, and while upholding the law is an important ethic upon which society functions, there also exist conditions under which the demands of justice and human rights might provoke in us an ethical imperative to rethink the way that we interact with the law. All immigrants struggle with transition – bridging the language barrier, finding affordable housing, securing jobs at a fair wage, affording and completing an education. How can we balance the needs of immigrants (regardless of legal status) with the need for reasonable measure of national security? How can we seek an ethical response to immigration that takes into account the laws and policies that keep order in our society and the authorities who create and enforce them, but that, at the same time, seeks justice and compassion for all those who are oppressed or in need?

Dana Wilbanks, in her book *Re-Creating America: The Ethics of U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective*, outlines what she believes to be the two prevailing strains of public opinion concerning migrants. The first of these perceptions is that migrants are “burdensome to the receiving society” – culturally, economically, and politically – and that one resulting “manifestation of this image is that migrants tend to be viewed as a nameless and faceless part of a horde of people seeking to cross the border. The lament that ‘we have lost

control of our borders" is a reflection of this perception."<sup>3</sup> This viewpoint encompasses those who disagree with immigration itself, but is perhaps more representative of those making arguments against illegal immigration.

On the other end of the spectrum is the alternative belief that migrants benefit the society that receives them:

They contribute their labor and pay taxes. They buy goods. They launch new economic enterprises and rear children with a zest for accomplishment. Migrants bring valued personality characteristics such as inventiveness and ambition, courage in the face of severe threats and massive obstacles, willingness to work, and boundless energy. In contrast with many jaded or disillusioned residents, migrants often believe in the "American dream," which renews hope in the American future.<sup>4</sup>

This viewpoint stands in stark contrast to the first. Those who support immigration itself might take on these sorts of arguments, and these arguments can take on a yet more radical connotation when used by those who advocate for the plight of illegal immigrants.

While Wilbanks sees these as the two sides of immigration opinion in the public sphere, I would rather think of them as ends of a sliding scale. Immigration as it refers to the whole of legal immigrants, illegal immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, is not so neatly divided up into two coherent and dissenting viewpoints. There are many critical issues at stake here. There are questions of border security and enforcement that cause us to ask questions about who we should let in and who we should keep out. There are economic questions of employment, unemployment, wages, and the plight of the American poor with regard to both legal and illegal immigration. There are social justice questions of human rights and the obligations that come with being a wealthy nation. There are appeals to remember our country as a nation of immigrants from its infancy. There are legal questions, environmental questions, and questions

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<sup>3</sup> Dana Wilbanks, *Re-Creating America: The Ethics of U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 95.

<sup>4</sup> Wilbanks, 96.

concerning the meaning “American dream” for our current generation. Viewpoints on these issues are not necessarily constrained by party line affiliations, political biases, or religious affiliation. What we need, then, especially within circles of faith that look to their common beliefs for moral guidance, is a common ground from which to discuss the complex cloud of issues that surround immigration. This paper will explore hospitality as one ethical response that can inform Judeo-Christian perspectives on immigration. An in-depth exegesis of the story of Rahab and the spies in Joshua 2 will serve as the starting point for a discussion of hospitality as one important way of understanding the demands of faith as it concerns the stranger in our midst.

## **II. Rahab and the Spies: Making the Case for Hospitality**

Joshua 2:1-21, not unlike the current face of immigration in the United States, is a story of messy ethics and complex characters. It is a story reminiscent of Israel’s continually messy history in covenant with Yahweh. It is a story in which we don’t know who we should be rooting for, but find ourselves nonetheless satisfied by the outcome. I propose that amidst the mess we can find the emergence of a particular set of moral obligations that stand in potential conflict with social or religious conventions. I further propose that hospitality is the central idea of the story; not just hospitality, but a radical faith-influenced hospitality that can even warrant disobedience in the face of conventional expectations of morality.

The story of Rahab and the spies takes place near the very beginning of the book of Joshua. Moses has died, Joshua has taken charge, and the God of Israel has given him go-ahead to conquer the promised land, saying “arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. Every place on which the sole of your foot

treads, I have given to you, just as I spoke to Moses.”<sup>5</sup> Joshua in faith relays this message to the Israelites, who respond by promising to him “all that you have commanded we will do, and wherever you will send us we will go,” and agreeing that “anyone who rebels against your command and does not obey your words in all that you command him shall be put to death.”<sup>6</sup> From the very beginning, the Israelites have promised their utmost loyalty to Yahweh’s command given through Joshua in preparation for overtaking the land.

This loyalty is quickly forgotten, however, at the very beginning of chapter two – the very beginning of the passage at hand. The spies are given the command to go view the land. They set forth from Shittim (the place where Israel had previously played the harlot with the women of Moab<sup>7</sup>), walk into the city of Jericho, and immediately find themselves in Rahab’s house. They neither view anything (except the inside of a brothel), nor do they pay any attention to the land. It appears as if they have immediately broken their loyalty to Joshua. On the one hand, it can be argued that “whatever their precise plan of action may be, they have chosen a natural place to begin their reconnaissance of the land. For the inn, or public house, or brothel, provides them both access and cover. It is a resting place for travelers and a gathering place for all sorts of persons seeking diversion and contacts; strangers will not be conspicuous here and motives will not be questioned.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, however, the spies have not only entered a place of indiscretion, but have also begun to commiserate with the very people that are to be destroyed in the taking of the land.

Textually, we are left wondering exactly what happened inside Rahab’s house. The only

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<sup>5</sup> Joshua 1:2-3

<sup>6</sup> Joshua 1:17, 18

<sup>7</sup> see Numbers 25

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Bird, “The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts,” *Semeia* 46 (1989): 128.

thing that is clear is that Rahab is a **hnz**, a harlot. The text tells us first that the spies entered the house of a woman, and then narrows its description to say that she was a harlot, and then furthers narrows the description to give us her name, Rahab. The definiteness of Rahab's profession causes us to wonder about the actions of the spies when they entered her house. There are two key words that are repeated throughout the entirety of Joshua 2 – **wowb**, to come, enter, or go into, and **bkv**, to lie down, to lodge, or to lie down with sexual implications.

This verb “to enter” appears in verses 1, 2, 3, 4, 18, all in reference to the spies' interaction with Rahab. This verb can, but does not necessarily, carry with it sexual overtones. In the context of this story, the meaning of the verb is left ambiguous. Given the circumstances, however, we cannot ignore the potential innuendo implied by the repeated use of the verb. Because it shows up so frequently, we can't help but wonder if the author had a double entendre in mind, implying that the spies literally “came to” (entered into) Rahab. The overwhelming presence of the verb within the story causes us to wonder exactly what transpired between the spies and Rahab.

The other verb, “to lie down,” appears many fewer times in the chapter, but is more heavily weighted with sexual connotation. Joshua 2:1 tells us that the spies went into the Rahab's house and lay or lodged there. We are given no real indication here as to whether **bkv** is simply stating that they chose to lodge at Rahab's house or if it is saying that they chose to lay with her in a sexual way. The king appears and leaves, and we then read in verse 8 that “before [the spies] lay down, [Rahab] came up to them on the roof.” Does this mean that she stopped up to speak with them before they had a chance to fall asleep, or does this mean that she wanted to quickly fill them in on the situation before proceeding with a more intimate encounter?

It is clear that we will never know exactly what took place between the spies and Rahab, or even what the true intentions of the spies were when they decided to make their first stop at Rahab's house. Regardless, L. David Hawk points out that

we are still left with the impression that Israel enters the land and immediately engages in forbidden activity with the very people who are to be destroyed without mercy. The narrator chooses not to elaborate what the spies do at the house of Rahab, preferring to tantalize the reader with hints of impropriety. The attempts of the interpreters to mitigate the suggestion of sexual activity demonstrates that the tactic is indeed effective in creating a disturbing and threatening atmosphere. The tone of the narrative is thus effectively set. Things have begun badly, and not at all according to the plot agenda to which the reader has been introduced.<sup>9</sup>

Thus we are immediately clued in to the fact that this story is messy. It begins with disobedience on the part of the spies (they never quite get around to seeing the land) who for whatever reason cross paths with Rahab, who as a harlot is a “woman of the night, who appears on the streets when honorable women are secluded at home....She lives in the shadow of the wall, on the outskirts of the city, where the refuse is dumped.”<sup>10</sup> This image of prostitution is symbolic of the cycle of Israel's faithfulness and unfaithfulness that runs throughout the Old Testament.

It is within this tension of faith and unfaith that Rahab stands out as an unlikely theological role model. After willingly taking the spies in, regardless of her motives or expectations for the evening, she does something absolutely unexpected: she defends them when the king knocks at her door. Whatever her motives, they must be profound, since “she did more than deceive [the king]; she also betrayed her people. Her act of concealment on the roof and dis-information at the door, together with her collaboration at the window constitute an act of treachery and high treason.”<sup>11</sup> We can only speculate as to her reasons for lying to the king as

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<sup>9</sup> L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contesting Plots in Joshua*, (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 62.

<sup>10</sup> Bird, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Hauch, *Text and Contexts: A Literary Reading of the Conquest Narrative (Joshua 1-11)* (Ann Arbor, UMI: 1991), 325.

to the whereabouts of the spies.

It seems likely that her deception is directly related to her own knowledge of Yahweh and the mission of the spies on Yahweh's behalf. Indeed, she begins her own confession of faith by stating "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you."<sup>12</sup> Here, for whatever reason, Rahab is familiar not only with the task set before the Israelites – conquering the promised land – but also with their guarantee of success. The ensuing confession of faith in verses ten and eleven affirms the power of Yahweh by citing the exodus and the defeat of the Ammonite kings Sihon and Og.

The words that Rahab uses to confess her faith are not new words. Joshua 2:11, in its description of the oneness of God, echos Deuteronomy 4:39, which says "Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other." Moreover, the entirety of Joshua 2:9-11 parallels Exodus 15:15-16, which says that "all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away," and that "terror and dread fall upon [the chiefs of Edom]." Here, the author (or possibly the redactor) is strategic in using familiar words from the Pentateuch in relaying Rahab's confession. These quotations "present [Rahab] as one who is familiar with Israel's beliefs and acquainted with their heritage; for this she deserves to belong with them and to be saved from the doom that befalls her Canaanite brethren."<sup>13</sup> Along with these Pentateuchal allusions, Rahab's confession of faith, from a literary and historical standpoint, is also carefully written so as to be consistent with the distinct features of Deuteronomic theology. This is a theology that not only emphasizes the oneness of Yahweh, but that also emphasizes the need for a response of obedience and commitment from the people of

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<sup>12</sup> Joshua 2:9

<sup>13</sup> Elie Assis, "The Choice to Serve God and Assist His People: Rahab and Yael" *Biblica* 85 no 1 (2004), 88.

faith.<sup>14</sup>

Rahab confesses the oneness of Yahweh by acknowledging him as God both in heaven above and on earth below. She reveals her knowledge of the imminent conquest of the land, this conquest presumably being a reward for the Israelites' obedient faith. It is clear that she has heard of the devastating power of Yahweh, which could be one driving reason behind her protecting the spies. She knows that Yahweh – the true God – has given the Israelites this land, and she knows that Yahweh is powerful enough to take it. Being convinced of this power, Rahab finds faith and thus stands up against the powers in her society that would try to thwart Yahweh's plans.

At the same time, however, if Yahweh is truly this powerful, and seeing as Yahweh has already promised this land to the Israelites (despite whatever meddling the king may have done), we have to wonder if there isn't another reason for Rahab's treason. She wraps up her confession by turning it into a deal. Having now saved the lives of these spies, she uses that as collateral against her life and the lives of her family. Since she has dealt kindly with these strangers, she asks that they, in return, deal kindly with her family.

In evaluating her request, it is important to remember the conditions under which Israel was to fight Yahweh's wars. Albert H. Baylis, in *On the Way to Jesus*, lays out three key aspects of Israelite holy wars:

1. The priest initiated any war by reminding the Israelites that Yahweh fights for them.

This clearly shows the war's sacred character (Deuteronomy 20:2-4) -- that is, this is God's war. He fights through His people.

2. Cities outside the land of Palestine do not need to be entirely destroyed, but attacks on

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<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Nolan, "A Narrative-Critical Exegesis of Joshua 2: Rahab, A Paradigm of Faith (Or: A Woman Shows the Way)," (<http://www.wsrt.com.au>), 2.

cities inside the land require destruction of all life (Deuteronomy 20:10-18). This practice is known as the "ban" or *herem*. To put a city under the ban was to devote its occupants to Yahweh for destruction. It is often translated "completely destroyed" or "devoted" (Deuteronomy 20:17, 2:34, 7:2; Joshua 6:17, 8:26).

3. They are specifically to show no pity to inhabitants of the land (Deuteronomy 7:1-2). That this needed to be commanded by Moses shows that these wars cannot be explained as cases where man's sinful violence is used by God to accomplish His purpose. God believes they will not want to fully carry out His directions, so He warns the Israelites against pity.<sup>15</sup>

Under these conditions, it would seem that Rahab's plea should be futile. The Israelite spies, according to the guidelines for holy war, should view Jericho as completely under the ban, and thus any pity shown toward Rahab would be completely unwarranted. But the spies accept her plea nonetheless, though they swear her to secrecy.

At this point, we have an interesting interplay of disobediences. Rahab has acted treasonously by hiding the spies and sending the king's messengers away from the city in false pursuit of the Israelite invaders. She has chosen to disobey (and thus betray) her government, her society, and her neighbors for the sake of the Yahweh-fearing stranger. The spies have committed one disobedience after another – failing to seek out the land, entering into a promiscuous situation, consorting with the enemy, and then promising to release this enemy from the ban. If we remember back to chapter one, anyone who acts disloyally against Joshua and Yahweh should be punished by death.

This intertwining of disobediences gives rise to an ironic reversal of heroes. The book of

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<sup>15</sup> Albert H. Baylis, *On the Way to Jesus* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 1986), excerpted with permission at <http://www.new-life.net/joshua.htm>

Joshua wants to set us up to see the Israelites as heroes who go forth to conquer the land with the help and blessing of Yahweh. We are set up to assume that the Israelites should be the models of faith, for it is *by* faith that they can acquire the land in the first place. But in this story, it is the Israelites who find themselves at the mercy of someone more faithful, and certainly more cunning, than they are.

Rahab's character undergoes something of a transformation from the beginning to the end of the passage. When we first meet her, through the eyes of the Israelites, she is "the epitome of the outsider. She is a woman, a prostitute, and the foreigner. As a prostitute she is marginal even in her own culture, and her marginality is symbolized by her dwelling in the city wall,, in the very boundary between the inside and the outside."<sup>16</sup> She takes in the spies because it is her livelihood to do so. And yet she reveals her true character in her betrayal of the king. She quickly becomes the "pagan confessor" who is "bold in rejecting an unrighteous command."<sup>17</sup> And by the end of the story, we not only come to view her as boldly faithful to Yahweh – especially against the backdrop of two Israelite spies who barely even reference their faith – but also as a symbol for the unexpected grace of God. The truth of the matter is that Rahab should be destroyed in the ban along with her city, and the spies should be put to death for their disobedience. But the truth of the story is that hospitality reigns supreme, and life is granted to those who do not deserve it.

Hospitality emerges in this story as an important caveat to power. The fate of both parties depends upon the hospitality of the other – the other who also possesses the absolute power to destroy. This is the true power of the encounter with the other who offers "on the one

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<sup>16</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell, "Joshua," *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe, Eds., (Louisville: Westminster, 1992), 66.

<sup>17</sup> Bird, 131.

hand, the primal opportunities of my being: identity as an individual self, feelings of self-worth, the summons to responsibility, the solicitation to charity, a sense of the meaningfulness of existence which enables me to accept and embrace my finitude, my inescapable vulnerability and frailty, even my sin....But the ‘others’ who offer me life and worth are, on the other hand, and precisely by virtue of their power to bestow life, also the most serious threats to my being, more serious than the most overpowering terrors of the ‘natural’ world.”<sup>18</sup> (107-8) It is easy to see that both the spies and Rahab have ample opportunity to take life from the other. The Israelites had no need to promise Rahab immunity from the ban. Rahab had no obligation to protect the spies from the king. But in extreme acts of hospitality, every walks away from the story with their lives. Rahab, especially, exhibits a radical hospitality, being moved enough by her faith in Yahweh not only to protect the strangers in her midst, but also to have the confidence to ask that she, too, be shown generosity. The true scarlet cord that binds Rahab and the Israelite spies is faith. It is not perfection, nor is it obedience, but faith – and a faith exhibited by generously reaching out to the other.

This is a story about imperfect motives and sketchy decision-making. But it is also a story that lauds triumphs of faith amidst the mess. The spies enter a hostile land as they were commanded to do, even if they make some dubious decision once they get there. Rahab takes them in hospitably, if not honorably. Rahab stands up to her country in a bold and faithful act of disobedience – treason! – even if she ends up using the situation as bargaining power.

There are no purely innocent players in this story, and yet we still finish the story feeling as if we have been given a lesson in morality. This story begs us to protect the stranger and offer him/her hospitality, whether or not the stranger has come to us completely honorably, since we,

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas w. Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 107-8.

too, are not without our own shortcomings. The characters in this story all have their own mix of honorable and dishonorable intentions, but hospitality still prevails as the most important element of the narrative. In the same way, as we continue to grapple with both the particular problem of illegal immigration and the consequences of a broken immigration system in need of reform, we can yet manage the messiness if we, like Rahab, are willing to take the risk of acting charitably and hospitably toward the strangers in our midst.

### **III. Reflections on Hospitality**

When we consider an ethic of hospitality as one ethical response to immigration, it is important to remember that hospitality has long been a part of the Judeo-Christian worldview. In ancient Israel, hospitality was closely tied to the plight of the stranger, and there are passages all throughout the Hebrew Bible that indicate this. In the book of Exodus, for example, when the newly liberated Israelites set up their community, one of its imperatives was that "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, when the law itself was formulated, special care was designated for those of lower stature, the stranger included: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress that 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 aliens in Egypt."<sup>20</sup> In Deuteronomy we find a passage that connects the Lord of justice to both human justice and hospitality: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the

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<sup>19</sup> Exodus 22:21

<sup>20</sup> Leviticus 19:33-34

stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”<sup>21</sup> Or take the following passage from Jeremiah: “Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.”<sup>22</sup>

From these passages we discover that part of the moral and even legal responsibilities of the Israelites was to protect those who could not protect themselves. The above verses set social justice in the larger framework of God’s goodness. Because God is good, they are obligated to care for one another. Since God protects the stranger, so also should they. The above passages set the stage for hospitality as a way of life, where hospitality is an obligation of faith in and relationship with God.

The life and teaching of Jesus further support an ethic of faith-based hospitality toward those in low position. Take, for example, the banquet discussion and parable in Luke 14. First, Jesus implores his listeners, when they give a banquet, to “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.”<sup>23</sup> This imperative is followed by a parable that describes a banquet where the only guests end up being the “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.”<sup>24</sup> Here, hospitality takes the form of giving much to those who have little, even – or especially – when those who have much have rejected the offer.

Another important episode in Jesus’ ministry that speaks to hospitality is his encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. Upon her begging for him to heal her daughter, Jesus gives her an inexplicably harsh answer: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to

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<sup>21</sup> Deuteronomy 10:17-19

<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 22:3

<sup>23</sup> Luke 14:13-14

<sup>24</sup> Luke 14:21

the dogs.”<sup>25</sup> She counters this by reminding him that “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table,”<sup>26</sup> to which Jesus heralds her as a woman of great faith.

These examples relate hospitality to both generosity and stewardship. When we look at our current situation, we have to expand our definition of stewardship to include not only resources but also opportunity. Hospitality thus encourages us to find ways of thinking about being generous toward immigrants in matters of employment or education in addition to basic needs such as food or clothing. This is a radical departure from a conception of immigration that limits its focus to delineating who is in and who is out. Stewardship and generosity encourage us to evaluate immigration policy on different grounds than “keeping the peace” at the border.

Stanley Hauerwas, in his book *The Peaceable Kingdom*, relates hospitality to a radical new conceptualization of peace ushered in by the Jesus who promised to his disciples a peace *not* as the world gives,<sup>27</sup> but rather a peace “that renews the peace of the beginning, where humans and animals do not depend on one another’s destruction for their own survival.”<sup>28</sup> Here, peace is not merely the opposite of fear, or the opposite of war, but peace itself is an ultimate manifestation of love. Hauerwas goes on to say that

The kingdom of peace initiated by Jesus is also the kingdom of love which is most clearly embodied in the Christian obligation to be hospitable. We are community on principle standing ready to share our meal with the stranger. Moreover we must be a people who have hospitable selves – we must be ready to be stretched by what we know not. Friendship becomes our way of life as we learn to rejoice in the presence of others. Thus Jesus’ kingdom is one that requires commitment to friends, for without them the journey that is the kingdom is impossible. We can only know where we walk as we walk with others.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the relationship between Jesus and hospitality is one of peace and love in action. If we are

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew 15:26

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 15:27

<sup>27</sup> John 14:27

<sup>28</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 87.

<sup>29</sup> Hauerwas, 91.

serious about establishing a faith-based ethic of hospitality from which to evaluate immigration issues, then we need to remember that establishing peace has more to do with building relationships with our neighbors as we reach out to one another in love, and less to do with giving in to an otherwise crippling culture of fear of the stranger.

Following the time of Jesus, the early Christian church further grappled with the implications and limits of hospitality. The *Didache*<sup>30</sup> offers Christians an exhortation to hospitality similar to those found in the ancient Israelite law and the life and ministry of Jesus. But the *Didache* makes an important move that has special relevance to our current situation: it takes into account that the offer of hospitality can be abused, and that there may exist necessary limits on hospitality in order for it to remain viable. One scholar, however, reminds us that “the very existence of documents that attempt to address the problem of the abuse of hospitality points to how, in the early church at least, hospitality was considered a normative and necessary practice.”<sup>31</sup> Debates on immigration – especially on illegal immigration – reveal the existence of differing viewpoints on the limits of hospitality. These differing viewpoints often depend upon the specific needs and challenges of the different migrant groups that enter the United States.

Documented immigrants are those persons who have all of the proper papers to be in the country legally. Included in this category are lawful permanent residents who are “non-citizens who have received authorization to live permanently in the United States. They receive a ‘green card’ to prove their status.”<sup>32</sup> Immigrants struggle with the years-long waiting period between application for immigration and reception of a visa number. Applications are prioritized based

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<sup>30</sup> The *Didache*, also known as “The Teachings of the Twelve Disciples,” is an apocryphal document that deals with ritual, ethics, and reflection upon the eschaton during the time of the early church.

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9030361/Didache>

<sup>31</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 139.

<sup>32</sup> “Message on Immigration.”

on a preference system that gives top priority to immediate relatives of United States citizens. Immigration carries with it the challenges of transition: bridging the language barrier, finding affordable housing, securing employment, and affording and completing an education..

Undocumented immigrants are those persons who do not have proper documentation to be living in the country. Some are migrants who entered the country illegally, but over half of the undocumented immigrants currently in the country entered legally – with legal documentation – but for one reason or another lost their documented status. Overstaying a temporary visa is the most common example of how an immigrant can enter the country legally but now be undocumented. Undocumented immigrants cannot get food stamps and cannot legally find a job, even though there are many employers who still hire them for low-wage work. They are ineligible to receive a number of public services, cannot receive a driver’s license, and are at risk of being taken advantage of by employers or landlords. The plight of undocumented immigrants is further complicated when children are born in the United States, thus creating “mixed” families of citizens and non-citizens.

Refugees are persons who seek to enter the United States as a matter of escaping volatile and violent situations in their home countries. According to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (formerly INS),

Every year millions of people around the world are displaced by war, famine, and civil and political unrest. Others are forced to flee their countries in order to escape the risk of death and torture at the hands of persecutors. The United States works with other governmental, international, and private organizations to provide food, health care, and shelter to millions of refugees throughout the world. In addition, the United States considers persons for resettlement to the U.S. as refugees. Those admitted must be of special humanitarian concern and demonstrate that they were persecuted, or have a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> United States Citizenship and Immigration Services: <http://uscis.gov/graphics/services/refugees/>; Internet; Accessed 12 Jan 2006

Refugees apply for protection while still outside the United States. They then enter the country under a sponsor, begin the process of becoming permanent residents, and have the possibility of getting a job.

Asylum seekers are those persons “who have fled their country because of a personal danger, who arrive in the United States without legal protection, and who must prove a ‘credible fear of persecution’ to receive an opportunity to seek legal protective status or asylum.”<sup>34</sup>

Similar to refugees, asylum seekers are leaving their country because they perceive that their lives are in danger, but unlike refugees, they come to the United States first, and then apply for protection. They have to go through the court system in order to determine whether their claims are legitimate, and they are often held in detention centers until their court cases go through.

While people of faith may agree that hospitality is an important starting point for discussing immigration issues, it is important to remember that there can and do exist a multiplicity of conclusions drawn concerning our hospitable obligations toward immigrants. Is upholding the law a moral imperative that limits the bounds of hospitality? Does hospitality extend only so far as helping to provide food and clothing to those who are new to the country and lacking resources? Does hospitality extend so far as to knowingly employ undocumented immigrants? Does hospitality encompass efforts to advocate for fair housing, fair wages, fair health care, or fair education for immigrants, regardless of status? People of faith can, with integrity, represent a number of diverse positions, and can still cite hospitality as the basis for their beliefs. This point of our current discussion is not to advocate for one position over another, but rather to remember that amidst our diversity of opinions,

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<sup>34</sup> “Message on Immigration.”

there is much on which we agree. We can agree that our immigration policies should express love for the people of the countries from which immigrants come, for those already in this country, especially the poor, and for immigrants and would-be immigrants themselves. We can agree that we should work toward a world in which no one is forced to emigrate because of political injustice, economic desperation, or ecological degradation. This means that we cannot be complacent about the enormous disruptions all around the world—political, economic and ecological—which threaten only to become greater in this new century and which force tens of millions of people to leave their homelands and seek resettlement in other countries that are ill-equipped to provide for them. Nor can we be complacent about the harshness with which refugees and immigrants are often treated in the lands into which they move, including our own.<sup>35</sup>

As we look to our faith history, we find that we are grounded in a tradition that seeks to provide for those in need, to act charitably toward our neighbor, to assist the stranger in our midst, to reach out with generosity, to exercise hospitality rather than power, and to reflect critically upon both the demands and limits of that hospitality. If nothing else, hospitality asks us all to get our feet wet in order to test the waters of human experience that differs from our own.

#### **IV. Epilogue: Fostering Narratives of Hospitality and Hope**

A personal story: In the spring of 2006, I attended an immigration rally in Trenton, NJ whose premise was to bring immigrants – documented and undocumented – from their schools and places of employment at noon to gather in front of the capital building. They were rallying for their rights and rallying against legislation that would apply strict regulations on immigrants and that would seek to criminalize a wider population of immigrants as well as those who assist them.

I had never attended a rally of any sort ever before. I honestly expected to find only a small crowd of people, not enough to warrant any sort of police presence. I expected that I would be able to wander the crowd and speak to people about their experiences as immigrants,

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<sup>35</sup> “The Immigration Dilemma,” 16.

and that there might be a few newspaper reporters hanging around that I would try to avoid.

I showed up at noon, and there were about forty people gathered in front of the state house. As I approached it, I had to pass three different police officers who all seemed to look at me as just another member of the crowd that they hoped wouldn't cause too much of a ruckus. I remember feeling as if I wanted to go talk to them and explain myself: that I was working for an advocacy group and doing a project on immigration, and that they could be assured that I personally wouldn't cause them any trouble. After I passed the police, I passed some of the organizers of the rally, who were asking everyone to sign in, presumably so that they could later present their legislators a list of the participants, showing just how many people chose to come out and fight for the cause. I signed but felt as if I had no idea what I was doing. I felt nervous and awkward, and very alone. As I approached the crowd, I looked back to find school bus after school bus full of people unloading along the street, everyone carrying flags from their home country and chanting "Si Se Puede," which means "Yes We Can!" Yes we can procure equal rights for immigrants, they were implying. I don't know any Spanish, but I knew that I could chant those three words over and over again in the crowd.

I felt very young, white, and out of place as I stood at the bottom of a set of stairs, surrounded by a church group from Puerto Rico. It was as if people were looking at me as the stranger – an ironic twist. In a country that so often sees immigrants – Latino immigrants especially – as alien and other, it was an interesting reversal to be in a situation where I was the minority, where I was the other. I kept hoping that someone would come up to me and welcome me, or volunteer to translate for me, since all of the speakers at the rally chose to speak Spanish and not English. I kept hoping that someone would perceive how out-of-place I felt and try to make me feel more comfortable. I felt vulnerable because I couldn't do anything for myself or

for anyone else, except to be present and stand in solidarity with the people around me.

We each come to the topic of immigration with our own histories and our own interpretations of the narrative of faith that has been transmitted to us through the witness of scripture, the discipline of theology, and the experience of personal faith. And yet our individual narratives are not static; neither are the ethics that emerge from them. When we reach out to a neighbor who is vulnerable, we must remember that

Christian hospitality is often not simply a question of entertaining a stranger. To entertain a stranger implies the life of the host is relatively unaffected by the encounter. However, to accommodate (in the sense of adapt to and make space and time for) or host (in the sense of sacrificially offer oneself for) the stranger carries the implication that making room for the stranger requires the host to change their pattern of life. An emphasis on the readiness to change one's life in order that the vulnerable stranger may be accommodated is a constant theme in the tradition.<sup>36</sup>

It is through making space for the stranger that we find ourselves changed by the encounter.

Immigration is not merely an issue, but rather it carries with it a human face. Hospitality demands that we value the experience of the immigrant rather than reducing immigration to a faceless bundle of issues. Embedded in the stories of immigrants are perhaps memories and experiences of grief and pain. These are the voices of families who have been torn apart by the lag in our immigration system or by deportations. These are the voices of immigrant workers who are being exploited by their employers, working for less than minimum wage and without benefits. These are the voices of parents who cannot sign field trip forms for their children because schools don't offer documents translated out of English. These are the voices of children who are victims of racism, the voices of parents who cannot afford decent housing for their families, the voices of those who know what it feels like to be the struggling stranger.

Hospitality asks us to be models of hope, and in this way we are called to be prophets.

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<sup>36</sup> Bretherton, 140.

According to Walter Brueggemann, in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, in order to bring a *realization* of hope to the people, the prophet must use the *tools* of hope – the recounting of memories close to the heart of the community and the use of symbols that are specific to its particular history – and the prophet must also bring the promise of God into the terms and language of the current, real world. Overall, “the task of the prophetic imagination and ministry is to bring to public expression those very hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there.”<sup>37</sup> Through our acts of hospitality, we create new narratives both for ourselves and for others – narratives that enact the promise and hope we have been given in faith.

Jesus said: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to

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<sup>37</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 65.

one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”<sup>38</sup>

Rahab did what her faith demanded of her: she opened her home and heart to the stranger in her midst. She protected the people who needed protecting. She stood up for the people who had no one else to stand up for them. She bucked social convention in order to act faithfully to her God. She willingly took on the risk of hospitality.

This is what we are called to do: love our neighbor, protect the stranger, serve Christ by serving the other. Just as God has shown grace to us and offered us life despite our own shortcomings, so also should we reach out with grace and hospitality to those around us in need, offering what we can to sustain and support the life of all of God’s people in faith and peace. We are all messy. There is no way around it. But in the body of Christ we are made one, and in the work of Christ we are all redeemed. This is our call: to be the Rahabs of the world, being willing to let our faith lead us to lives of service and justice in order to show God’s radical love to the world.

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<sup>38</sup> Matthew 25:31-40

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