

St. Stephen's University

M.A. in Theology and Culture

Hospitable Church:

The Challenges of Language, Space, and Ritual

for

Table Conversations About Race and Gender

Marisa J. Lapish

CUL 5172 Social Justice Issues for Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Dr. David Moore

L.A. Henry

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## Preamble

The first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value. This cannot be discovered in a vacuum or in a series of artificial or hypothetical relationships. It has to be in a real situation, natural, free.

The experience of the common worship of God is such a moment. It is in this connection that American Christianity has betrayed the religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption. Churches have been established for the underprivileged, for the weak, for the poor, on the theory that they prefer to be among themselves. Churches have been established for the Chinese, the Japanese, the Korean, the Mexican, the Filipino, the Italian, and the Negro, with the same theory in mind. The result is that in the one place in which normal, free contacts might be most naturally established—in which the relations of the individual to his God should take priority over conditions of class, race, power, status, wealth, or the like—this place is one of the chief instruments for guaranteeing barriers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press Books, 1976), 88.

## Introduction

In his seminal book written over 45 years ago, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman posed the question as to why Christianity seems powerless to radically deal with the issues of racial, ethnic, and religious injustice among marginalized people. Tragically, this impotency is most clearly evident within the walls of its own ineffective churches.<sup>2</sup> Two decades ago, feminist author, bell hooks, incriminated Western Christianity's inherent dualistic ideologies of right/wrong, good/bad as the "foundation of all forms of group oppression, sexism, [and] racism."<sup>3</sup> Womanist author Jacquelyn Grant asserted that black women's three dimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism calls for a liberating theology which brings dignity and humanity to marginalized people.<sup>4</sup> Despite these longstanding prophetic voices of dissent for justice in the Church, Elizabeth Edman decries that "some of our most visible denominations cling to regressive and oppressive theologies and practices—hostile to women, LGBTQ people, non-Christians, urban dwellers, and the list could go on and on—increasingly rejected by common sense and basic human compassion."<sup>5</sup>

Although the writings of Thurman, hooks, Grant, and Edman share hopeful vision for a peaceful, just, and liberating spirituality, change in the Church has been miniscule and painfully slow over this past half century.<sup>6</sup> Jesus disrupted injustice all the time by rupturing simplistic dualisms including: life/death, human/divine, sacred/profane, pure/impure, Jew/Greek,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., preface, xix.

<sup>3</sup> bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group, 2015), 106.

<sup>4</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 208-209.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2016), 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Thurman, *Disinherited*, 79-102; hooks, *Feminism*, 105-118; Grant, *White Women's Christ*, 209-222; Edman, *Queer Virtue*, 153-167.

slave/free, male/female.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the Church continues to be ineffective in following their Rabbi. Perhaps Thurman is correct in saying that the essence of justice is love birthed out of a “common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value” which is natural, free, and grounded in real life situations.<sup>8</sup> If that is so, what are the barriers in our church cultures which prevent them from fostering a transformative environment that will “let justice roll down like waters?”<sup>9</sup> How can our churches be more welcoming, hospitable spaces for conversations around the table about race and gender equity? This paper will discuss the challenges of language, space, and ritual as potential barriers for addressing social inequity in our churches for people of race, gender, and sexual minorities in order to facilitate awareness for a more welcoming, hospitable church culture for conversations intersecting spirituality and justice.

### Table Conversations

When considering how to host hospitable conversations about race and gender, a poem by Chuck Lathrop comes to mind which uses the metaphor of a “roundtable” church. One stanza repeats itself:

Round tabling means  
 No preferred seating,  
 No first and last,  
 No better, and no corners  
 For the “least of these”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Edman, *Queer Virtue*, 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and Disinherited*, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Amos 5:24, RSV

<sup>10</sup> Chuck Lathrop, “In Search of a Roundtable”, *In Search of a Round Table: Musings on Faith, Feminism, and the Church*, accessed January 11, 2021.

Such a round table denotes hospitality for all because “God has called a people, not ‘them and us’.”<sup>11</sup> All are welcome and “loved into roundness,”<sup>12</sup>. It is a symbol for gathering to share who we are and what we have, to connect and to converse together as a sign of the future unity for all humanity.<sup>13</sup>

### The Challenge of Language

Language is a challenge as we posture ourselves toward each other at an inclusive, round table. When a multiplicity of languages, vocabulary, semantics are all brought to the table, much can get lost in translation. This is true for both actual language groups (Spanish, French) and diverse cultural groups based on race, gender, and ethnicity; language meaning is anchored in the cultural experience of the group (Queer, Black, various indigenous cultures etc.). Additionally, when various religious backgrounds are at the table, some cultural- linguistic theorists claim that interreligious dialogue is untranslatable.<sup>14</sup> Certain vocabulary and concepts (peace, justice, restoration) carry different meaning for the various groups in dialogue based on their particular cultural identity and experiences, so that the presupposition of “common ground” might actually be a barrier for dialogue.<sup>15</sup> The underlying assumption is that “common language is necessary in order to arrive at mutual understanding.”<sup>16</sup>

However, Moyaert reminds that both linguistic and cultural diversity are created and blessed by God with no culture being privileged over another, and so “the blessing cannot consist in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>14</sup> George Lindbeck, “The Gospel’s Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability”, *Modern Theology* 13, (1997): 423-450.

<sup>15</sup> Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (New York: Brill Rodopi, 2011), 146.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 205.

there being *no linguistic barriers* in communication.”<sup>17</sup> This barrier does not end dialogue, but births creative language and sensitivity to conversation for nuanced meaning where room is made for transcending otherness<sup>18</sup>. This gives rise to a plurality of language communities existing *alongside* rather than *between* one another. Ricoeur states, “It is always possible to say the same thing another way.”<sup>19</sup> This means allowing formational space to hold the “strange”—explaining, clarifying, and elucidating for understanding between strange and familiar language, stories, concepts, and experience.<sup>20</sup> For the “translator” this tension is risky, uncomfortable, awkward, and fragile, requiring trust.<sup>21</sup>

John Paul Lederach, veteran peacemaker/builder, explains the type of interior posture, often communicated nonverbally, required to hold space for dialogue. A relationship-centric orientation focusing on people and the reality of their histories and perceptions is necessary over time. Lederach suggests a pace of presence with others, of “alongsidedness”, with a long-term commitment of *decades*—not merely months—for authentic community transformation.<sup>22</sup> Fitch envisions a church beyond enemies which breaks down barriers in small groups of diverse people living side by side.<sup>23</sup> An interior posture of humility, vulnerability, empathy, compassion, hopeful realism, respect, openness, and interdependence is necessary in connection to the local context and the building of relationships with a commitment to process together over time.<sup>24</sup>

Lederach continues with the table analogy: “To accompany is to sit and share bread with

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 220.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 229-230.

<sup>22</sup> John Paul Lederach, “Cultivating Peace: A Practitioner’s View of Deadly Conflict and Negotiation.” In *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Violence, and Peace Processes*, edited by John Darby and Roger MacGinty, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 30-37.

<sup>23</sup> David E. Fitch, *The Church of Us vs. Them: Freedom from a Faith that Feeds on Making Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: BrazosPress, 2019), 147.

<sup>24</sup> Lederach, “Cultivating Peace”, 30-37.

another...First, sharing a table provides a sense of intimacy, of being inside a shared space of humanity with another.”<sup>25</sup>

### The Challenge of Space

In her book on the recovery of hospitality in Christianity, Christine Pohl explains how hospitality to strangers was a foundational expression of the gospel in early Christian practice.<sup>26</sup> “Early Christian writers claimed that transcending social and ethnic differences by sharing meals, homes, and worship with persons of different backgrounds was a proof of the truth of the Christian faith.”<sup>27</sup> In early Christianity, the church was a household-based fellowship where worship and meals alike were shared freely together in homes without gender, socio-economic or racial/ethnic barriers, reminding followers that they were all guests of Jesus, the divine host, and that Jesus also was present as stranger-Guest. The locational space for Christian hospitality changed from household faith to bishop’s household, and gradually hospitality was entirely separated from centralized Church worship.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, the most hospitable periods in church history were when the hosts themselves were marginalized people, such as in the early centuries of persecution or when marginality was deliberately created when Christians relinquished personal wealth as in the monastic movement, or early Methodism. These conditions of liminality in community, when Christians were more intentional about equality resulted in the fluid movement of property, resources, status, and rank, and a relational ambiguity which allowed them to “slip through the

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<sup>25</sup> Lederach, “Cultivating Peace”, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 114.

network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.”<sup>29</sup>

According to Turner, community transformation through hospitality occurs most readily when hosts are liminal, marginal, and have lower socio-economic status. These hosts become cultural bridges in liminal space, thresholds for transformation. Pohl adds that marginal status can be voluntarily chosen by relinquishing wealth or status for fostering hospitable space for communities to facilitate social transformation.<sup>30</sup> Roles of host and guest in these communities are fluid, complex, and relationally “present”, bringing hopeful openness for healing.<sup>31</sup> Gittins relates,

Unless the person who sometimes *extends* hospitality is also able sometimes to be a gracious recipient, and unless the one who receives *the other* as stranger is also able to *become* the stranger received by another, then, far from “relationships,” we are merely creating unidirectional lines of power flow, however unintended this may be. And that is quite antithetical to mission in the spirit of Jesus.<sup>32</sup>

Spaces which maintain unidirectional lines of power restrict fluidity of movement for marginalized people. Willie James Jennings calls these “carceral spaces” which imprison people.<sup>33</sup> These would be considered spaces where people of color, women, or gender non-conforming people find it difficult to enter, where they feel gated in, controlled, or confined—

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<sup>29</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 95.

<sup>30</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, 106-107.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony J. Gittins, “Beyond Hospitality? The Missionary Status and Role Revisited,” *International Review of Mission* 83/330 (July 1994): 399.

<sup>33</sup> Willie James Jennings, “How to Draw Circles: The Christian Art of Building Life Together” (lecture presented at Pittsburgh Theological Institute at the Philip Schaff Lectures, May 3, 2017), accessed January 12, 2021.

prison-like. These spaces contrast with those spaces of fluidity which feel safe, free, secure, spaces that seem free of physical or emotional violence.<sup>34</sup>

### The Challenge of Rituals

Religious rituals are symbolic acts which hold significant sacred meaning in liminal space, to create a sense of unity, relationship, connection, and belonging, joining people together while joining the divine. Rituals can be instrumental for relational change and restoration, creating constructive paths for healing identities and transforming conflict. The central sacred ritual among Christians, the Lord's Table, or Eucharist, refers to the symbolic act of drinking wine and eating bread in remembrance of Jesus. This sacred hospitable ritual of the eucharist, its theological meaning and practice, presents both challenges and opportunities for reconciliation.<sup>35</sup>

Brian McLaren defines the eucharist as ritual in the following way:

One line of meaning presents the eucharist as a celebration of hospitality, a table of fellowship and welcome, a means of amazing grace, releasing us from bondage to hostility and reconnecting us through the bonds of human-kindness. It emphasizes the table as a place of meeting, of reconciliation, of filial affection, of companionship...the place where God and all of humanity "at table are sat down".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lisa Schirch, "Ritual, Religion, and Peacebuilding", in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. R. Scott Appleby, Atalia Omer, and David Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 516-533.

<sup>36</sup> Brian McLaren, *Why did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World* (New York: Jericho Books, 2012), 209.

In this sense, the ritual of eucharist invites us all into a table of reconciliation with God and one another, the good news of peace and justice, the kingdom of God, proclaimed by and incarnated in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

However, McLaren points out, another interpretation of this ritual places where the focal point is on a sacrificial *altar* in contrast with a *table*. The altar represents a place where God's wrath toward sinners is appeased by the sacrifice of Jesus' body and blood. From this perspective, the ritual bonds to another gospel of penal substitution whereby God forgives human sin which is damnable to hell for eternity by the shedding of Jesus' body and blood, represented by bread and wine, as a substitution for the punishment of humanity. In this view, "God tortured and killed Jesus on the cross so as to be able to vent divine wrath upon a single divine-human representative or substitute rather than all of us."<sup>37</sup>

The contrast of these two meanings bonded to the eucharistic ritual reveals divergent views of both humanity and God. Framed as an altar, the eucharist presents a God who is wrathful toward human beings because of their sinfulness wherein Christ's substitutionary sacrifice enables only Christians exemption from God's hostility. The identity of non-Christian human beings is deserving of eternal conscious torment; the identity of Christians is acceptable and pleasing to God. It is easy to see through the symbolism of the eucharistic *altar* how the bonding of God with "us" separates the "other" as "them". Likewise, it does not take much imagination to see how this perspective would activate in present societal and past historical contexts as the world being seen as a battleground of "us" fighting against "them".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 212, 215.

On the other hand, the ritual of eucharistic *table* reveals Jesus as one who sits as a guest at the table identifying with a humanity who need healing; at the same time it reveals God as self-giving divine host of compassion, grace, kindness, and reconciliation. At the eucharistic table, humanity takes as food that which was separated at Christ's self-giving death on the cross, his body and blood; bread and wine become one in us to nourish us and we are resurrected together as a continual incarnation of the Body of Christ to respond as Jesus did in self-giving reconciliatory love and life to the world. McLaren states:

In the eucharist we bond to the good news that life is a table, a feast, a banquet, and we are a family, a circle of friends, being nourished together by God's bounty, the fruit of the vine and the grain of the field, all in a spirit of love, mutual service, and unity.<sup>39</sup>

Theological frameworks give meaning and influence which bond to the eucharist ritual to communicate views of God and humanity which may establish inclusivity or exclusivity, who is *in* and who is *out*.

### Concluding Reflections Toward Facilitating a Hospitable Church Culture

Jennings echoes the words of Thurman about the human tendency to segregate according to likeness and the tragedy of that reality in our churches where it has been easier to imagine "loss of difference through assimilation or its control through conquest, or resistance to that loss through active segregation"<sup>40</sup> than to imagine actually living life together with people different in race, gender, or ability from ourselves. He asserts that the greatest challenge for Christ-followers is to imagine and live out a life together that "interpenetrates, weaves together, and joins"<sup>41</sup> so

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>40</sup> Jennings, "Draw Circles".

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

that it flows from *within* the nuances of people's differences in language, story, space, and practice together. No doubt the challenges of language, space, and ritual presented in this paper bring only a few of those potential differences to the surface as a starting point for facilitating discussions of race and gender in the Church. As a spiritual director interfacing with various churches and leaders in my local community, I believe my role is one of facilitating these reflective table conversations and modeling these ideals for hospitable space for transformation in the contemplative services I provide in my local community.

The challenging barriers of language and translation of the "strange" and unfamiliar move us toward imagining a round table where discussions are in the context of developing honor in diverse relationships where deep listening is reflective, clarifications are constant, curiosity is piqued, and commitment to each other is long term. Vulnerability, risk, openness and patience allow for the permeability of human story to enter another's story with care over time with compassion because identities are fragile, and dialogue is awkward, and all need healing. Jennings reiterates,

It's not the point that I remember my story and tell my story.

It's that *you* know my story and that *you* tell my story. You make my story your own...I make your story my own...That's what Christians do. We don't do separate-but-equal storytelling."<sup>42</sup>

Likewise, the type and quality of space for these conversations is important for fluidity of movement as guest and host take turns in round table space. The space must feel free from control, safe, secure, and unthreatening for all storytellers. Perceived lines of power must be discerned with care and dealt with to ensure that people who are marginalized are encouraged as

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

the optimal hosts of liminal space as bridges for social transformation. The theological meaning to which our rituals are bonded must be closely examined to notice who is included and who is excluded at the table. These rituals convey meaning about identity, God's and humanity's, and require honest introspection about what is being conveyed to and about those who are not currently seated at our table. Noticing these deficits in the gatherings I host, I am becoming more intentional to invite the diverse voices of people who compose our local community as respected and instructive participants in the peace theology and social justice classes and Discovery Bible Studies I facilitate in public space and in my home. Our perspectives are being transformed together as we listen deeply to each other's stories with curiosity, honor, and compassion and as we take turns being guests and hosts of relational space.

Jesus is our model for transformative language, space, and ritual, and the gospel story on the Emmaus Road demonstrates his facility for creating hospitable presence with followers for conversations intersecting spirituality and cruciform justice.<sup>43</sup> He simply joins the two disciples on their walk, alongside them, listening to their discussion, and then joined it for the liminal distance to their village. Curiosity piqued, he asked them about what they were discussing with downcast faces. He listened to their version of *his* story as they perceived it. Then patiently, he explained his own story from the scriptures they both held in common and honored. As hosts, the two disciples invited Jesus as stranger-guest to the intimate hospitable space of their home for the evening. As they shared a meal together, Jesus fluidly transformed from guest into host as he gave thanks and broke bread. In that ritual around the table, the two disciples recognized Jesus, now cognizant with the memory of their "burning hearts" as sacred words were explained alongside them on the road through the One who lived the experience about which the words told

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<sup>43</sup> Luke 24: 13-32 NIV

the story. The response of the two disciples was belief in the liberating story of life and resulted in reaching out to other disciples to whom Jesus started with greeting of “Peace be with you”.<sup>44</sup>

An awareness of the quality of language, space, and ritual in church cultures is key for creating and facilitating a hospitable round table where all are welcome to contribute and glean from stories and experiences for conversations intersecting spirituality and justice. The current segregated state of our churches and the public perception from experiences with Christians shouts for the need for change. Perhaps we can begin by asking some simple introspective questions as a starting point. Whose languages are spoken in our church and whose are not? Who experiences our church as safe and who does not? Who do our rituals include and who do they exclude? Whose faces are missing from our table that Jesus included? I can imagine extending a welcoming invitation with a different guest list in my church to develop new friendships, to learn new languages together, and to share safe, homey space overflowing with abundant bread and wine—a feast at a round table! I await with hopeful anticipation for a reciprocal invitation as guest in a home I have never visited before and lingering there over a meal rich with vibrant conversation, learning about places and people I have never walked alongside before. Just imagine the transformation of our burning hearts together as we recognize Jesus sitting in our midst at tables hospitably set in the Church.

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<sup>44</sup> Luke 24:33-36

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