

The Firmament of Grace: Hospitality in Interfaith Dialogue

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My work as a prison chaplain in a secular, pluralistic institution frequently throws social questions into sharper relief. For example, I have a mandate to maintain the institutional chapel not just as a “faith-neutral space” but as a sacred precinct that is hospitable to those of all faiths and of none. This understanding reflects a larger trend in at least some forms of secularism that views the public forum as an opportunity for all to have a “seat at the table” and to engage in discourse and dialogue on respectful terms. This vision is challenging for some. In its traditional form, Christianity asserts that it alone is the fullest expression of reality and truth. It also affirms the imperative to promote and spread that reality and truth to others. Like the servants in Jesus’s parable, we are commanded to “compel” others to come to the feast of the kingdom (Luke 14:15–24). How are adherents of traditional forms of Christianity to fulfill this imperative for compulsion when the public space—whether in a prison context or in the broader society—is understood as a “level playing field” from which coercion is excluded?

It may be helpful here to make a distinction between coercion and compulsion. While coercion involves persuading people by using an external force against them, compulsion suggests that they are persuaded by an

internal impulse, because they find something attractive. In the parable of the king’s feast, the servants are called to compel those in the highways and hedges to come to the feast not by applying brute force, but by offering them a level of hospitality so attractive (one assumes a kingly banquet in a palatial setting) that they can hardly resist it. Thus, hospitality is the first and most important way to fulfill Christianity’s imperative to “compel” (rather than coerce) others to join the feast of the Kingdom of God.

In the world of chaplaincy, hospitality is a commitment to welcoming all who reach out, in whatever condition (spiritually blind, lame, maimed, poor, or homeless) they may be. Further, hospitality is a commitment to make no demands on others to conform to our beliefs, or to any belief at all. We make every effort not to coerce them in any way, striving to enable them to practice their own beliefs as unrestrictedly as is possible, even if those beliefs are opposed or even hostile to our own. In chaplaincy terms, hospitality means welcoming and serving others without demanding anything of them at all. In theological terms, hospitality is a self-emptying act of establishing and preserving a “firmament of grace” in which others can incarnate their otherness in non-coercive freedom.

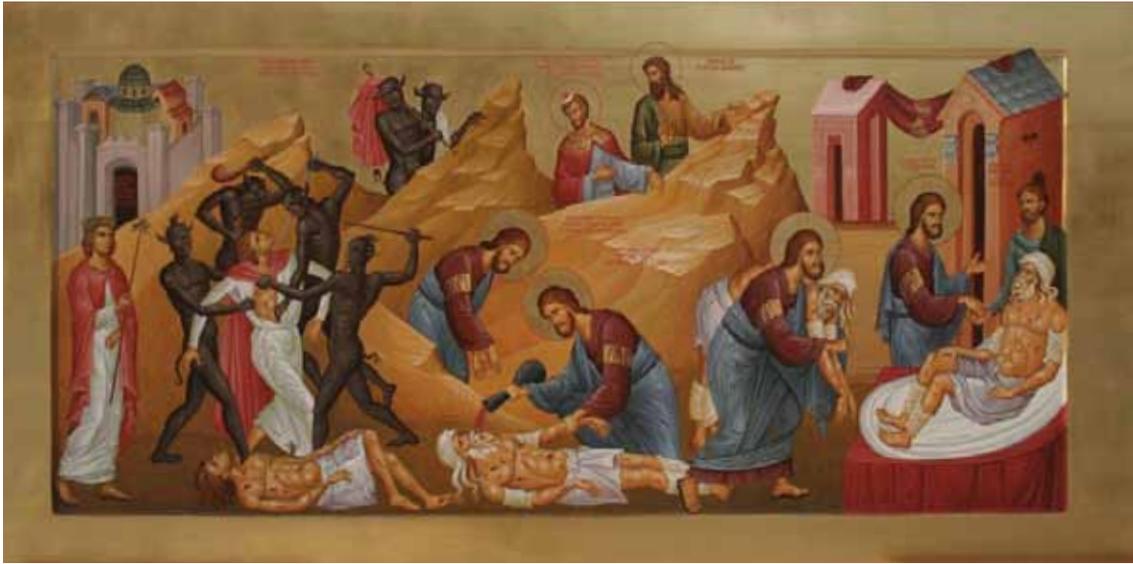
In creating the cosmos, God establishes “firmaments” (Gen. 1:6–8) within which each of his creatures can multiply and live freely “according to its kind” (Gen. 1:11–12, 21, 25), that is, in accordance with its unique nature. When human beings disobey God, he temporarily permits a breach in those firmaments (Gen. 7:11) but then heals the breach, making a covenant to maintain the integrity of his creation, even when his creatures behave in ways contrary to his intentions (Gen. 8:2–21). In breaching the firmaments, God eradicates sin (at least temporarily), but also deprives human beings of the ability to choose to love him freely in accordance with our nature. We exist in a coerced state and as such, we are not truly other, but merely extensions of God. Since God’s love can only be perfected if its objects are truly other, the integrity of the firmaments is an integral part of the perfection of his love for us.

Of course, the love of God expressed in this model must be understood in the light of the Incarnation, wherein God’s love culminates in the perfect depths of his self-emptying service and death for his creatures (Phil. 2:7), even as it is made absolute and perfect by his absolute otherness from humanity, his equality with God, whose ways are as far above ours as the heavens are from the earth (Isa. 55:9). In this light, the firmaments of creation may be understood as a type of the “line of unconfusion” between the divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. The firmaments described in the book of Genesis are fulfilled in the firmament of grace: God’s self-constraint in allowing for the full humanity of Christ, and by extension allowing all human beings to exercise their wills and choose him freely, without coercion.



This has concrete implications for Christian life. Just as Jesus Christ epitomizes God’s love by the inseparable but unconfused union of his two natures, we, in our entirely human nature, are committed to expressing the reality of Jesus’s dual nature through our relationships with other human persons. Our relationships with others must be “inseparable,” insofar as we are committed by our very identification as Christians to a familial bond with those whom we might consider “others,” outsiders, and even those alien to us—theologically, ideologically, socially, culturally, ethnically, or sexually. At the same time, these relationships must also remain “unconfused,” as we allow others to be wholly “other” from us without

Icon of the Hospitality of Abraham (the Holy Trinity). Novgorod, 16th century.



Icon of Christ as the Good Samaritan.

coercion, even if they make choices that we view as dehumanizing or immoral. Only when we allow genuine otherness can there be the potential for the other to make the opposite choice, and become more, rather than less, human. Only under the firmament of grace—our self-constraint in relating to others that allows for both repentance and rejection—is real repentance meaningful.

Giving others a space to exercise their freedom in no way implies that we must be “neutral” about their choices, thus compromising the integrity of our beliefs. Our commitment to an unconfused union with others is simply

allowing them the freedom to choose what we view as error—and “taking the form of a servant” even so—in the hope that they might see our love and choose just as freely the truth we proclaim. This allowance—this firmament of grace that is inherent to the Christian vocation—is the heart of hospitality, which is essential in making the Christian faith inviting and compelling to outsiders. When we receive each human being as wholly other, we epitomize the love that inseparably unites the unapproachable God to human life. That divine love itself is what will finally compel our brothers and sisters to join us in the feast of the Kingdom. ✱

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