

Article

“You Shall Love the Alien as Yourself”: Hope, Hospitality, and Love of the Stranger in the Teachings of Jesus”

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Abstract: The Trump administration’s controversial immigration policy has provoked significant opposition, including against a 35-day partial shutdown of the federal government over Trump’s insistence on a “wall,” but the most outrage was generated by the “zero-tolerance policy” for refugees and asylum seekers that resulted in the forced separation of thousands of children from their parents. This essay evaluates the current U.S. policy in light of the life and teachings of Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament Gospels, beginning with the flight into Egypt (Matthew 2:13–15; cf. Deuteronomy 10:19–20) but focusing primarily on Jesus’s teachings on hospitality—including the love of neighbor and the stranger—for those people with their “backs against the wall,” in the words of Howard Thurman. Key passages include the parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:26–37), the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31–46), and the Great Dinner (Luke 14:15–24).

Keywords: hospitality; Howard Thurman; parables; Sheep and Goats; Good Samaritan; Jesus; immigration; Trump administration; zero-tolerance policy; neighbor

1. Introduction: With the Trump Administration Immigration Policy, “the Cruelty Is the Point”

“[T]his administration chooses to cage children and tear families apart. Compassionate treatment at the border is not the same as open borders.”—Stacey Abrams, Democratic Response to the State of the Union Address, 5 February 2019.

If majority-culture Christians do embrace the immigrant—whether documented or undocumented—this stance could mark them in a particular way as foreigners and strangers in that they would be going against the current of a good portion of public opinion. To take that stand on the basis of biblical convictions may lead to opposition from the broader majority culture. According to 1 Peter, to suffer for doing good is a privilege and part of the pilgrimage of faith. (Carroll 2013, pp. 118–19)

The family escaped in the dead of night. Like countless other immigrants who were refugees, they lived in a country oppressed by a ruthless tyrant, and they feared for the safety of their young child. They fled under cover of darkness and traveled hundreds of miles to a distant land where they hoped they would be safe.¹

¹ Sections of this essay have appeared but are now significantly expanded from the following works of public scholarship: “Would the Trump Administration separate Jesus from Mary and Joseph?” (Gowler 2018c); “White evangelical Christians need Jesus—not Donald Trump—if their movement is going to survive” (Gowler 2018e); “The overlooked heroes of the civil rights movement: Remembering Howard Thurman and other forgotten activists” (Gowler 2018d); “The Four Horsemen of Evangelical Hypocrisy: How They whitewashed Donald Trump” (Gowler 2018b).

This family, the story goes, was fortunate. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus escaped the murderous rampage of Herod the Great and found refuge in Egypt, although, the Gospel of Matthew reports, “all the children in and around Bethlehem” were killed on Herod’s orders (Matt. 2:13–18).

Matthew’s story of the flight into Egypt gives no details about how the family was received, where they stayed, or how they supported themselves. Apparently, they were able to live in peace as resident aliens until they could safely return—albeit to Nazareth, not Bethlehem.²

Two thousand years later, refugees are still fleeing nations plagued by war, gangs, political oppression, or civil unrest, and they seek asylum in countries far from their homes but where, they hope, they will be safe and able to rebuild their lives. Most of them do not receive the same welcome or the same freedom to live their lives in peace. In the United States, for example, such refugees and asylum seekers have become the targets of an administration that demonizes these human beings to gain what it believes is a political advantage over its opponents.

The duplicity of the Trump administration concerning undocumented immigration is mind-numbing, as even a factcheck of just one of Trump’s speeches demonstrates—such as the one from the Oval Office on 8 January 2019. There is no “security crisis at the southern border,” contrary to Trump’s claims, although there is a growing humanitarian crisis.³ When Trump spoke, a larger number of undocumented immigrants stemmed from people overstaying their visas than from those crossing the southern border. According to figures from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) from fiscal year 2017, approximately 700,000 visitors to the U.S. overstayed their visas and more than 600,000 of them remained in the U.S. by the end of the fiscal year (30 September 2017). In contrast, only 300,000 people were apprehended crossing to the U.S. from Mexico, the lowest number since 1971.

Included in the Trump administration’s changes to immigration policy are the illegal closing of ports of entry for asylum seekers, the “metering” of asylum seekers—radically limiting the number of people who can apply for asylum each day (including unaccompanied children)—and numerous other unnecessary cruelties inflicted on immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. As Adam Serwer has convincingly argued, however, the cruelty is the point. Trump and his supporters thrive on cruelty against those “outsiders” who, in their eyes, “deserve it.” This cruelty binds Trump and his supporters—especially conservative white evangelical Christians in the United States—into a community, an “in-group” of “real Americans” that celebrates Trump’s mockery of others and the punitive actions he takes against various people and groups—the “others” or “out-groups”—as part of his mantra to “Make America Great Again.”

In addition, Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric stokes fear, anger, hatred, and division. As even the president knows, incendiary rhetoric not only begets more incendiary rhetoric; it also can lead to violent actions. Hate crimes have spiked over the past two years in the United States, including a 57% increase in anti-Semitic incidents, and studies have documented an increase in “teasing and bullying” of students of color since the 2016 presidential election, especially in “localities favoring the Republican candidate.”

In today’s contentious, toxic, and increasingly violent environment, perhaps the action that has generated the most public outrage—and one often conjuring the image of the holy family’s sojourn in Egypt—is the Trump administration’s heartless “zero-tolerance policy” of separating refugee children as young as four months-old from their asylum-seeking parents.

² Readers should not expect such details in this story since, for Matthew, the primary reason for including this legend of the flight to Egypt is to demonstrate parallels between the stories of Moses and Jesus, such as the ruler’s plan to kill (male) children, an exile that includes God’s protection, and a return from exile after the tyrant’s death (Exodus 1–2; Matthew 2:13–23). Other later apocryphal legends provide details about the family’s travels in Egypt—churches mark locations where they allegedly stayed or visited, and tours of their route are popular. See, for example, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which includes stories about dragons, lions, and leopards worshipping Jesus during the family’s travels around Egypt (see Hennecke 1959, pp. 410–13).

³ Less than two months after Trump spoke, the number of Central American parents arriving at the border with their children began to increase significantly.

The responsibility for this immoral policy begins with Donald Trump himself, whose (racist) views about immigration were clear from the beginning, including in the announcement of his candidacy for president. This hostile approach to immigration has repeatedly been justified by many members of the administration, such as former chief of staff John Kelly who lamented the ability of these “overwhelmingly rural people” to “assimilate”: “They don’t speak English. They don’t integrate well, they don’t have skills.” Kelly reiterated his support for the policy separating children from their parents as a “tough deterrent” and, in a remark that reflects the callousness of many members of the Trump administration, infamously declared: “The children will be taken care of—put into foster care or whatever.”

Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions led the Trump Administration’s initial march against immigration. In April, 2017, he issued a memorandum prioritizing the prosecution of certain immigration offences, and in April, 2018, instituted the zero-tolerance policy. He officially announced this new policy in a speech in San Diego, California, on 7 May 2018: “If you cross the southwest border unlawfully, then we will prosecute you . . . If you are smuggling a child, then we will prosecute you and that child will be separated from you as required by law. If you don’t like that, then don’t smuggle children over our border.”

The policy to separate children from their parents was so odious that even members of the Trump administration sometimes denied its existence. Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, for example, tweeted on 17 June 2018: “We do not have a policy of separating families at the border. Period.”). Yet a memo from 23 April 2018 was soon discovered that revealed that Nielsen had known and had signed off on the family separation policy that she later denied even existed.

The latest report, in January 2019, by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Inspector General (or HHS-OIG) clearly stated how this policy was implemented:

- In the spring of 2018, the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) implemented a “zero-tolerance policy.” As a result, DHS separated large numbers of families, with adults being held in Federal detention while their children were transferred to the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).
- In the summer of 2017, prior to the formal announcement of the zero-tolerance policy, the Office of Refugee Resettlement Care (ORR) observed a steep increase in the number of children separated from their parents or guardians by DHS. Officials estimated that ORR received and released thousands of separated children prior to a 26 June 2018 court order in *Ms. L v. ICE* that required ORR to identify and reunify certain separated children in its care as of that date.
- The total number of children separated from their families by immigration authorities is unknown. After a June 2018 Federal District Court order, which directed the Federal Government to identify and reunify separated families that met certain criteria, HHS has to date identified 2737 children in its care at that time who were separated from their parents. However, thousands of children may have been separated during an influx that began in 2017, before the accounting required by the Court, and HHS has faced challenges in identifying separated children.

The zero-tolerance policy that included separating children from their parents was flawed from the very beginning both in principle and in practice. According to the HHS-OIG’s 27 September 2018 report, “Special Review—Initial Observations Regarding Family Separation Issues Under the Zero Tolerance Policy,” the numerous mistakes included: “Border Patrol agents do not appear to take measures to ensure that preverbal children separated from their parents can be correctly identified” (e.g., not providing pre-verbal children with wrist bracelets or other means of identification, fingerprinting, or even photographing most children during processing to make sure children could be linked to their paperwork and thus their families). In addition, the report stated that some children were unnecessarily separated from their families by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). In one

case, this unnecessary separation of children from parents was *intentional and done to avoid doing some additional paperwork*. For example, in McAllen, Texas:

Many adults prosecuted under the Zero Tolerance Policy were sentenced to time served and promptly returned to CBP custody. Several officers at CBP's Central Processing Center in McAllen stated that if these individuals' children were still at the facility when they returned from court, CBP would cancel the child's transfer to HHS and reunite the family. However, CBP officials later arranged to have adults transferred directly from court to ICE custody, rather than readmitting them where they might be reunited with their children. According to a senior official who was involved with this decision, CBP made this change in order to avoid doing the additional paperwork required to readmit the adults.

This unnecessary, additional punishment of immigrants and refugees seeking asylum is part of the Trump administration's plan to inflict as much suffering as possible upon these human beings as a means to deter others from seeking to (im)migrate to the U.S. Only when public outrage becomes too great or the courts intervene does the Trump administration (apparently) back down. The abysmal treatment of these people, as many have detailed, is a humanitarian crisis, one riddled with abuse and neglect, and one that includes a private, for-profit immigration detention system, \$800 million of which was underwritten by taxpayers, that according to immigration advocates "resembles slave labor."

Although Trump officially ended the zero-tolerance policy in June, 2018, separations of children from their parents still do occur—such as when the adults accompanying children are thought to be involved in criminal or gang activity. So, the plight of immigrant children continues to make headlines in the U.S. and around the world, including the continuing detention of almost 15,000 migrant children. In addition, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services documents, thousands of immigrant children reported that they were sexually abused in U.S. detention centers, not to mention being subjected to other harassing or abusive treatment.

This abuse of children and their parents who are seeking asylum in the United States is unconscionable, and it adds to the suffering that many of them have already experienced. In ways reminiscent of the flight of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to escape the danger posed by Herod, many undocumented migrants coming from Latin America to the United States face dangerous, life-threatening situations in their home countries. It is in those contexts that many of them decide to make the long and perilous journey northward, in spite of the obstacles and dangers they encounter along the way (Hagan 2008). Most people seeking asylum in the United States come from Guatemala, El Salvador, or Honduras, countries that suffer from violence from such places as gangs (which often seek to recruit minor children), drug cartels, and police. In 2016, for example, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, El Salvador had the highest murder rate of any country in the world—82.8 "intentional homicide victims" per 100,000 people in the population; even some police are fleeing the country due to gang murders—and Honduras was second, with 56.52 murders per 100,000 people (Venezuela was third, with 56.33 per 100,000, and Guatemala had 27.26 per 100,000). It is thus unsurprising that nine out of ten asylum seekers pass what is called the credible fear test. Such asylum seekers, however, have to pass this test during a one-hour interview, and they have to demonstrate that if they are deported home, they will face persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.⁴

Many asylum seekers have experiences similar to Francis Gusman. She has a bullet lodged in her spine, because she was hit by a stray bullet when rival gangs in her home town of Yoro in Honduras started shooting at one another. Then, in February 2018, gang members murdered her sister, so she

⁴ Even when people demonstrated that they fled because their lives were in danger from gangs or drug cartels, judges have denied them asylum in the United States because the issue is "generalized violence." Between 2012 and 2017, for example, judges denied asylum applications for 79 percent of El Salvadorans and 78 percent of Hondurans (cf. 20 percent of asylum seekers from China).

decided to make the dangerous journey north along with her husband, their twelve year-old son, and her sister's orphaned thirteen year-old daughter. Currently they are applying for refugee status in Mexico.

What could make these stories even worse? For the United States to contribute to the misery of these human beings, in part because the United States played a role in helping to create the human rights nightmare in places such as Honduras and because of the hostile ways in which the United States treats these refugees. The United States, in other words, is in a contest of cruelty with such forces as street gangs and drug cartels to see if it can make the desperate lives of these refugees so horrific that it will deter other would-be refugees from even trying to escape to the United States.

This cruelty takes many forms, as a 16 February 2019 article in *The New York Times* points out. In addition to new procedures such as the much smaller number of people allowed to apply for asylum each day and the increase in the "proof" needed to qualify, is "the extension of a rule that certain asylum seekers must wait in Mexico for the full duration of their legal cases, which can take years":

Pushed beyond their limits by prolonged waits in dangerous and squalid conditions in parts of Northern Mexico, thousands of caravan members who had been waiting to seek asylum in the United States appear to have given up, Mexican officials said, dealing President Trump an apparent win after a humbling week for his immigration agenda.

"Dealing Trump an apparent win," says *The New York Times*. What a perverse way to describe a "win" that comes at the expense of some of the most poor and desperate people in the Western hemisphere.

In addition, less than four weeks later, on 5 March 2019, *The New York Times* reported that Trump's cruelty was not an "apparent win"; it had backfired, because the number of migrant families crossing the southwest border "has broken records" in four of the last five months:

Diverted by new restrictions at many of the leading ports of entry, migrant families, mainly from Central America, continue to arrive in ever-larger groups in remote parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. At least 70 such groups of 100 or more people have turned themselves in at Border Patrol stations that typically are staffed by only a handful of agents, often hours away from civilization. By comparison, only 13 such groups arrived in the last fiscal year, and two in the year before.

In December, 2018, the deaths of two children who fled Guatemala with their fathers to seek asylum in the United States once again riveted the world's attention on the plight of asylum seekers on the U.S. southern border.⁵

Jakelin Caal Maquin, who had just turned seven, died on December 8 while in the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials. She and her father had crossed the border illegally so they could turn themselves in and seek asylum in the U.S. Felipe Gomez Alonso, an eight-year old boy who, like Jakelin, fled Guatemala with his father, died on Christmas Eve while in United States custody. Adding to the outrage of the deaths of these two children is the grim statistic that more than 260 human beings died last year (2018) as they sought asylum or attempted to immigrate to the U.S. At least 50 of these deaths were "water-related." U.S. border patrol agents, for example, routinely pour out containers of water humanitarian groups leave for migrants crossing the desert in an attempt to deter people from crossing the border illegally. And instead of remorse, an apology, and a change in policy, the Trump administration instead blamed the deaths of seven year-old Jakelin and eight year-old Felipe on their families, telling migrants and asylum seekers not to "put themselves or their children at risk attempting to enter illegally."

Again, as Adam Serwer noted, the cruelty is the point.

⁵ Other examples could be cited, such as a 24-year-old Honduran woman giving birth to a stillborn baby boy while in ICE custody in February 2019.

2. In Contrast: Love of Neighbor and the Stranger in the Teachings of Jesus

So this man is some poor wanderer who's just come here. We must look after him, for every stranger, every beggar, comes from Zeus, and any gift, even something small, is to be cherished. (Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book Six)

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, 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." (Luke 14:12–14)

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." (Matt. 25:44–45)

Hospitality, from the Greek *xenia* or *philoxenia*, has at its root the word for "stranger" or "foreigner" (*xenos*), and it includes the ancient virtue of welcoming, hosting, and assisting strangers or travelers, something that became so valued that, as in the quotes above, connections were made between extending hospitality to the stranger and the divine. For example, Abraham, whose generous hospitality was seen as a paradigm to emulate, served as an exceptional host to three divine guests in Genesis 18:1–16.

The biblical emphasis on hospitality illuminates how the God portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament expects human beings to treat one another. Although some scholars argue that "hospitality" in its strictest sense revolves "around the practice of welcoming strangers or travelers into one's home while promising to provide them with provisions and protection" (Arterbury 2005, pp. 131–32), other scholars extend it to include other relationships, such as longer-term sojourners and resident aliens, "strangers" who were offered provision and protection in Jewish law (Pohl 1999, pp. 3–15).

Jewish Scriptures also include such "strangers" as one of the three groups that are often afforded special treatment: widows, orphans, and strangers/resident aliens (e.g., Deut. 10:17–19; 16:11, 14; 24:17–21; 26:12–13; 27:15; Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Ezek. 22:7; Psalm 94:6; 146:9; Mal. 3:5).⁶ Each of these groups had a diminished, disadvantaged, and precarious status in society. The God of the Hebrew Bible warns against mistreating them, promises to care for them, and, in fact, gives them some special privileges because of their vulnerable, marginalized status (e.g., Deut. 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19–21; 26:12–13; all of these verses concern providing the widow, orphan, and resident alien food to eat, such as providing gleaned rights and a tithe of produce every third year).

As with many elements connected to the formation of the Israelites, their religion, and their Scriptures, the importance of hospitality and the concern for the oppressed are often based on their experiences and understanding of the importance of the Exodus from Egypt:

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 stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10:17–19)

Concern and provision for the widow, orphan, and resident alien are thus part of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. As the stories in the Torah illustrate, God loves Israel, cares

⁶ Such concerns are also found in Egyptian, Akkadian, and Ugaritic texts (see Lundbom 2013, p. 48).

about Israel, and is active on Israel's behalf, most dramatically in the liberation of bondage from Egypt. As a response of gratitude and love, the people of Israel are to follow God's commands; part of this covenant is to treat other human beings as God had treated them, with love, compassion, and actively working for their well-being. God extends protection and provision to the needy, commands the Israelites to do the same (Biddle 2003, pp. 182–83), and provides the ultimate example for how to act: God loves the strangers and provides them with food and clothing (Deut. 10:18).

Leviticus 19, one of the most crucial chapters of Leviticus, concerns both ritual and moral holiness, and it appropriately demands social ethics on account of that holiness: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). God commands God's people to love all human beings and gives a wide range of illustrations (cf. Exodus 20:1–17; Lev. 19:1–18), including commands to deal ethically with one's neighbor (e.g., 19:13, 15–17), such as helping to provide for the poor (19:10) and the resident alien (19:10, 33–34).

Toward the end of the chapter is a verse in which God commands that resident aliens be treated the same as Israelites:

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 the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:34; cf. Deut. 16:12)

This verse recapitulates, in part, God's command in Leviticus 19:17–18, what has been called the "culmination of this climactic chapter in Leviticus" (Kaiser 1994, p. 1133). Note, however, that Leviticus 19:34 makes one key change in wording from Leviticus 19:18:

you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord (19:18b)

you shall love the alien as yourself ... I am the Lord your God. (19:34b–c)

The recognition of being strangers in the land of Egypt is fundamental to Israel's identity, and thus a concern for the resident alien is central to the Torah in general, to the Book of Deuteronomy in particular, and should be central, as Deanna Thompson argues, to the community of faith today:

In other words, the strangers are treated like integral members of the community. This ongoing and dogged concern with the welfare of the stranger is a hallmark of Israel's history. And God's people reflect God's concerns. We see that partiality [to the needy] is endemic to God's nature, and it is an inherent value for Israel's communal structure. At a time of national ferment over "the alien" (connoted by the term "illegal aliens" to reference immigrants) in our own society, Deuteronomy's powerful vision of inclusion of those at the edges of society should give us pause. (Thompson 2014, p. 14)

The Jewish Scriptures are, of course, foundational to the teachings of Jesus. These scriptures were his scriptures, and the New Testament records that Jesus cited Leviticus 19:18 as one of the two greatest commandments on which all the Jewish law and prophets depend (along with part of the Shema, to love God with all one's heart, soul, and might; Deut. 6:4, Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:29).

The citation of Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:4 in the exchange between Jesus and an expert in Jewish law found in Luke's Gospel (Luke 10:25–28) is especially intriguing, because the lawyer both asks the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and, after Jesus responds by asking him what he had read in the law, supplies the answer about loving God and one's neighbor. Jesus then responds, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." Note that this honor and shame contest begins with the lawyer wanting to "test" Jesus—the same Greek word used in Luke 4:2, where the devil "tests" Jesus—and when his efforts fail due to Jesus's response, he tries to "justify himself" by asking Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

In this famous story, an unidentified man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho is stripped, beaten, and left half-dead by robbers. A priest and then a Levite see the man and pass by on the other side

of the road. A Samaritan, however, sees the man and has compassion on him. He treats the man's wounds, brings him to an inn, takes care of him, and then pays the innkeeper to take care of the man in his absence, promising to pay any additional costs when he returned.

This Lukan parable of a despised Samaritan demonstrating what it means to love one's neighbor reinforces what Jesus had said earlier in Luke, in the "Sermon on the Plain," namely, to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (6:27). In effect, this parable eliminates the lines demarcating friend and enemy in how we treat our fellow human beings: "being a neighbor knows no boundaries" (Green 1997, p. 426).

In doing so, however, the parable also demolishes the distinction between neighbor and alien/immigrant in a way that honors the juxtaposition of "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18)—quoted by the lawyer and affirmed by Jesus (Luke 10:27)—and the "you shall love the alien as yourself" (Lev. 19:34). In all cases, these actions are commanded, whether stated or unstated, because of the nature of God (cf. Levine 2014, p. 85; Snodgrass 2007, p. 351).

Note how the Lukan context of the parable emphasizes action: "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" (10:25), asks the lawyer; after he responds to Jesus's query about the law by citing Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 6, Jesus responds by saying, "*Do* this, and you will live" (10:28); and, finally, after describing in detail the compassionate and likely foolhardy actions of the Samaritan in the parable—and after the lawyer avoided saying directly that the despised "other," the Samaritan, was the one who acted like a neighbor—Jesus concludes by commanding the lawyer to "Go and *do* likewise" (10:37), thus shifting the focus from the lawyer's question, "who is my neighbor?" to Jesus's concern, "who acted like a neighbor?" This type of "protective hospitality" illustrates the sacrifices and risks involved with caring for someone in need—the Samaritan took a great risk to stop and help on this dangerous road, since an ambush and robbery was a likely outcome of his stopping to help this unknown stranger (who might have been a decoy; cf. Reaves 2016, p. 86).

Another relevant cultural context for the love of God and neighbor in the teaching of Jesus is that of hospitality, important aspects of which can be found in the scenes in the Gospels where Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners, as well as when he dines in the homes of Pharisees.⁷

As Julian Pitt-Rivers noted over fifty years ago, hospitality is founded on ambivalence.⁸ When a person outside a community is invited to feast or lodge with a host, that person temporarily undergoes a transition from a "stranger"—an unknown and possibly dangerous outsider—to a guest. In that context, the first invitation to a guest, although it extends hospitality, often involves the mutual testing of the "worth" of the host and guest (e.g., note the Pharisees "watching" Jesus when he dines in a Pharisee's home in Luke 14:1–24). Any potential conflict is supposed to be suppressed, and the rules of hospitality prohibit its expression. Guests are expected to abide by the cultural rules of the hosts and to avoid any sign of disrespect.⁹ Hosts (and their community) evaluate guests by the extent to which their behavior conforms to the expectations of the host/guest relationship.

The resolution of this time of testing—which reflects the ambivalence that underlies the rules of hospitality—may end in one of two ways: it may lead to the incorporation of the guest as an accepted friend or to the rejection of the guest as an enemy of the host (Pitt-Rivers 1968, pp. 29–30).¹⁰

⁷ Although providing a meal (and often lodging) to a traveler is one of the most common aspect of what scholars understand as Mediterranean hospitality, not every example of table-fellowship is hospitality (Arterbury 2). Arterbury considers "hospitality" as revolving "around the practice of welcoming strangers or travelers into one's home while promising to provide them with provisions and protection" (Arterbury 2005, pp. 131–32).

⁸ The following is summarized from (Pitt-Rivers 1968; Gowler 1991, 1993).

⁹ Cf. Plutarch's account of Julius Caesar's behavior as a guest at a meal: "When the host who was entertaining him served up asparagus dressed with myrrh instead of olive oil, Caesar ate of it without ado, and rebuked his friends when they showed displeasure 'Surely,' said he, 'it were enough not to eat what you don't like, but he who finds fault with ill-breeding like this is ill-bred himself'" (Plutarch, *Caesar* 17 9–10).

¹⁰ Hospitality exists in many varied forms, and it could be temporary ("simple hospitality") or it could result in ongoing relationships such as long-term, reciprocal friendships or "guest-friendships" (Arterbury 2005, p. 17; Donlan 1999, p. 272).

In the three meal scenes when Jesus dines in the house of a Pharisee in Luke's Gospel (7:36–50; 11:37–54; 14:1–24), disagreements always arise. In the latter two meals, in fact, Jesus ends up berating his hosts and other guests, which nullifies any possible positive ramifications of Jesus sitting down to dine together with them. The infringement of the hospitality code destroys the social roles of host and guest, incorporation into a positive relationship such as from guest to friend does not occur, and Jesus and the Pharisees (sometimes including lawyers) revert to a hostile relationship (cf. [Pitt-Rivers 1968](#), pp. 27–30).

These disruptions of the host-guest relationship, however, provide opportunities for the Lukan Jesus to explain what true hospitality should entail. In Luke 7:36–50, for example, Jesus illustrates that a true prophet extends God's forgiveness to notable "sinners." In the second meal scene, Jesus confronts his opponents as being "full of greed" (11:39; cf. "lovers of money," Luke 16:14) and demands a radical shift in their perspective. No longer are they to operate in a mode of exchange that involves negative reciprocity, a self-interested arrangement in which they attempt to receive more than they give. For example, Jesus requires them to participate in almsgiving (Luke 11:41), a form of generalized reciprocity, an open sharing founded on altruism that focuses on the needs of others ([Moxnes 1988](#), pp. 127–38). Jesus also makes this point in the third and final meal scene, where he advises his opponents not to engage merely in balanced reciprocity (14:12–14), a relationship in which (relative) equals receive equal benefits (e.g., since they invite friends, brothers, kinsmen, and rich neighbors to their feasts, all of whom would repay any gift in kind). Instead, Jesus again argues that they must operate in generalized reciprocity, in this context a redistribution from the advantaged to disadvantaged without expecting anything in return, by inviting the poor, maimed, lame, and blind, as the following parable of the Great Dinner illustrates (especially Luke 14:21–23), where they are to extend hospitality to those in need: "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (Luke 14:21). Since God showers human beings with generalized reciprocity, humankind should follow God's lead in their relationships with each other ([Neyrey 1991](#), p. 385). The parable again illustrates that Jesus envisions such hospitality as having eternal consequences (14:11, 14); it is a requirement to participate in the hospitality of God at the messianic banquet at the end times.

The most common recipients of the hospitality that Jesus extends are the poor and the oppressed, including social outcasts such as tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, in fact, was also poor, marginalized, and oppressed, and during his itinerant ministry, with nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:58), he received hospitality from people who were open to his message (cf. Luke 8:3). Likewise, the 12 apostles and 70 disciples Jesus sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God depended on hospitality from the communities they visited (e.g., Matt. 10:5–22; Mark 7:7–11; Luke 9:1–6; 10:1–18).

Among the most striking elements of Jesus's ministry are his repeated meals with tax collectors and sinners, people who were either viewed as apostates outside the community of Israel (e.g., who in effect behaved as "Gentiles") or as Jews who did not follow the law as completely as others expected. Such ongoing table fellowship defines a group, establishing boundaries between insiders from outsiders, and here Jesus breaks down social barriers to include outsiders as insiders. In addition to being a social act of friendship or other positive relationships, table fellowship also is a religious act of fellowship with God. This high degree of intimacy invokes the sacred and involves an exchange of honor ([Pitt-Rivers 1968](#), pp. 12–30). Yet even though Jesus is accused of being a "friend to tax collectors and sinners" (e.g., Luke 7:34), in the New Testament Gospels, these repeated instances of table fellowship with such outcasts do not establish Jesus as a "social equal" or "friend." Instead, Jesus is portrayed as the eschatological prophet who calls for repentance, who announces and mediates the blessings of the inbreaking kingdom of God, and who therefore acts as the broker of the ultimate patron, God, in this patron-broker-client relationship (patron = God; broker = Jesus; clients = Jesus's followers). For example, the meal with "tax collectors and sinners" in Levi's house in Luke 5:27–32 comes after Levi positively responded to Jesus's call to "follow" him, and, after Pharisees and scribes object to this table fellowship, Jesus compares his relationship to Levi to a physician treating the sick (cf. [Robbins \[1984\] 1992](#), p. 109).

Jesus's demand for acts of hospitality to those in need, including the stranger, is powerfully illustrated by the parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31–46). This parable explains the criteria by which the "Son of Man" will judge human beings at the final judgment (see [Gowler 2017](#), p. 266). The Son of Man, who sits on his throne of glory as all the nations gather before him, separates people into "sheep" and "goats." The "king" (the Son of Man) welcomes the sheep into his kingdom, since they fed the king when he was hungry, provided drink for him when he was thirsty, welcomed him when he was a stranger [*xenos*], clothed him when he was naked, took care of him when he was sick, and visited him when he was in prison. These righteous sheep respond by asking the Lord when they did all these things for him, and he responds by saying: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). In contrast, the king condemns the goats to an eternal fire, because they did not do any of those things for him (feed him, give him a drink, welcome him [as *xenos*], clothe him, tend him while he was sick, or visit him in prison). The unrighteous goats respond by asking the Lord when they failed to do all these things for him, and he answers, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (25:45). The righteous sheep inherit eternal life, but the unrighteous goats depart into eternal punishment. They are punished not for what they did, but for the common acts of mercy and hospitality they left undone.

Although this parable includes only one explicit element of hospitality—welcoming the *xenos*—four of the other commendable actions in the parable can be included in such acts of hospitality: providing food and drink, and supplying clothing for guests who need it and/or caring for guests if they are sick ([Arterbury 2005](#), p. 110). The six actions listed in the parable do not require supernatural powers to fulfill; instead, they are mundane, human actions that arise out of love and compassion and that mirror the love, compassion, and care shown by God. Such acts of hospitality are called "deeds of lovingkindness" in Jewish rabbinical traditions, and they are among the virtues in classical philosophy.

This Matthean parable again brings to mind the sojourn of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in Egypt earlier in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 2:13–18) by declaring that giving hospitality to those in need, such as strangers/immigrants, is the same as giving hospitality to Jesus himself. God will judge human beings on their hospitality, how they treat the "least of these," the hungry, thirsty, stranger/immigrant, sick, ill-clothed, and imprisoned.

Although some scholars argue that the reference to "the least of these who are members of my family" (25:40) refers only to acts of compassion toward Christians, instead of all humanity (e.g., [Gray 1989](#), pp. 358–59; [Arterbury 2005](#), p. 111), it seems much more likely that the parable refers to all human beings in need. Not only can "members of my family" be used in a more general sense in Matthew ([Davies and Allison 1997](#), pp. 428–29), the setting of the gathering of "all the nations" (cf. Daniel 7:13–14) makes clear that the parable illustrates the final judgment and that all people are judged on the basis of how they treat the needy among all humanity (cf. the critical importance of these acts of hospitality found throughout the teachings of Jesus, such as extending hospitality to "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind"; Luke 14:21–23).

As John Koenig notes, true hospitality in the New Testament involves the establishment of committed relationships between hosts and guests, a covenantal relationship with "strangers" that initiates new forms of reciprocity. These alliances include establishing permanent relationships with outsiders, foreigners, and even "enemies" in the *koinōnia*—a communion, fellowship, or partnership that includes generosity—that Jesus demonstrated in his proclamation of the inbreaking kingdom of God ([Koenig 1985](#), pp. 8–9).

The questions raised by the parable of the Sheep and Goats are ones that deserve to be answered in our contexts, including with respect to current immigration policies concerning refugees. As Fleur Houston notes:

Has the judgment on the nations any bearing today on the UK? Or on the US or Australia? Will the World Judge in any way demand an accounting of these countries' policies toward refugees and the ways in which these are implemented? ([Houston 2015](#), p. 145)

3. Politics, Immigration, and U.S. “Christianity”

Perhaps more than ever before, the reactions of white evangelical Christian “leaders” to the words and actions of the Trump administration expose the moral bankruptcy of much of what passes for Christianity in the United States today. In case one wonders whether Donald Trump could do anything to lose the support of these “evangelical leaders,” Jerry Falwell, Jr, answered that question in a 1 January 2019, interview with *The Washington Post*. His one-word answer was “no.”

As one thinks of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, it strains credulity that 55% of white evangelical Christians, including White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders, believe that God made Donald Trump president of the United States, because Trump stands opposed to virtually everything Jesus of Nazareth taught.

The support of Trump by white evangelical Christians extends to his administration’s anti-immigration policies, including Trump’s fanciful and unnecessary “wall” across the entire southern U.S. border—to be paid for by Mexico, of course—that Trump claimed is absolutely essential for “border security.” For example, in a 13 February 2019 appearance on Fox News, Robert Jeffress, the Southern Baptist pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, argued that Trump’s insistence on building a wall across the border was part of Trump’s “God-ordained task to maintain order” and to “protect citizens from evil.” Jeffress also cited the biblical story of Nehemiah rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem to illustrate God’s “support” for walls.

First, one wonders what “evil” exists in destitute refugees who often rely on their own Christian faith to leave their homes because of violence and to make the treacherous journey to seek asylum (Hagan 2008). Second, Jeffress cites a story about rebuilding a wall to stave off armies, not refugees—although the previous wall did not prevent the Babylonians from conquering Jerusalem in 587/6 BCE—and Jeffress ignores the hundreds of biblical verses dealing with hospitality, including the care and provision for the “stranger/alien.”

The positions of these white evangelical Christian leaders in support of Trump are the polar opposite of the religion of Jesus, a religion that emerged from and stood in solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, and, in the words of Howard Thurman, the disinherited.

Thurman saw the danger of Christianity being corrupted by political power and money in his classic work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, where he wrote that much of modern Christianity was a betrayal of Jesus and his teachings (Thurman [1949] 1996, p. 19), and, in particular, “American Christianity has betrayed the religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption” (Thurman [1949] 1996, p. 88). Among the evidence that Thurman cited in that volume was the role of modern Christianity, in contrast to the teachings of Jesus, in supporting and working with governments of the elite, wealthy, and powerful to oppress the poor, defenseless, and weak:

... it reveals to what extent a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by the ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples. (Thurman [1949] 1996, p. 2)

... too often the weight of the Christian movement has been on the side of the strong and the powerful and against the weak and oppressed—this despite the gospel. (Thurman [1949] 1996, p. 20)

Thurman thus urges Christians to understand that the teachings of Jesus, this first-century Jewish teacher who suffered under the oppression of the Roman Empire, offer a “technique of survival for the oppressed,” but in the intervening centuries, it was corrupted, becoming a religion of the powerful and dominant (Thurman [1949] 1996, p. 18).

Thurman also argued that the nature of erecting walls/barriers between people was anathema to the teachings of Jesus but had happened even within the Christian church itself:

The result is that in the one place [the Christian church] in which normal, free contacts might be most naturally established—in which the relations of the individual to . . . 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. (Thurman [1949] 1996, p. 88)

In a time when the Trump administration shut down the government for 35 days for billions of dollars to build a “wall” between people in an attempt to keep out refugees and asylum seekers, and, when failing that, declared a “national emergency” about an issue in which the only real emergency is the abuse of human beings by the Trump administration’s policies, once again to try to build a “wall,” Thurman reminds us that Jesus of Nazareth was, spoke to, and was primarily concerned about those with their “backs against the wall,” the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed, such as those human beings fleeing their countries and seeking asylum.

Jesus was a member of an oppressed group, a “disinherited” person speaking to other disinherited people who, as Jesus did, had their “backs against the wall.” Jesus’s life and teachings sought to empower the disinherited and help them gain a sense of community (the kingdom of God), and an essential element of Jesus’s message was speaking prophetic words against the oppressors of his people (Thurman [1949] 1996, pp. 8–18; see also Smith 1992, pp. 108–9). Jesus’s words thus speak to “the disinherited in every age” (Thurman [1949] 1996, p. 12).

When Thurman wrote *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the major problem was racism.

It still is.

In the case of white evangelical Christians, racism—specifically a reaction against school integration—is one of the founding principles of modern white conservative evangelicals, a movement Randall Balmer argues is “based in racism.”

As Thurman’s ministry at the groundbreaking The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples demonstrates, he strove to obliterate such human-erected walls/barriers/boundaries between people and the construction of “in-groups” and “out-groups,” but he started first and foremost with the transformation of individual human beings and the community that arose from that transformation.

Thurman contended that an existential encounter with the teachings of Jesus must lead to concrete action in the world, including a profound moral obligation to reflect, decide and act accordingly, whether by working for civil and human rights, promoting justice in the midst of oppression, offering sanctuary to refugees fleeing oppression, seeking peace among those who advocate for war or, in the words of Jesus, proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, liberation of the oppressed, and loving the “stranger” (see Gowler 2018a, p. 451; Gowler 2018d; Thurman 2018).

4. Conclusion: Hope, Hospitality, and Love of the Stranger

There He was, homeless. Would a church take Him in today—feed Him, clothe Him, offer Him a bed? I hope I ask myself that question on the last day of my life. I once prayed and prayed to God that He never, ever let me forget to ask that question. (Dorothy Day; see Pohl 1999, p. 22)

Before the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, there was some evidence that U.S. evangelicals were rejecting xenophobic reactions against immigrants. Note, for example, the “Resolution on Immigration” published by the National Association of Evangelicals in 2006 which said, in part:

While we recognize the rights of nations to regulate their borders, we believe this responsibility should be exercised with a concern for the entire human family in a spirit of generosity and compassion (Deut. 10:19; Lev. 19:34). As evangelicals responsible to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39), we are called to show personal and corporate hospitality to those who seek a new life in our nation.

Just three years later, however, the same organization published a less supportive statement, and since Trump’s election in 2016, his support from white evangelical Protestants has also extended to

his administration's radical approach to immigration. A 2018 Pew Research Center poll, for example, indicated that only 26% of Republicans (and Republican-leaning independents)—and only 25% of white evangelical Protestants—believe that the United States has a responsibility to accept refugees. In contrast, almost three times as many Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (74%) believe that the U.S. has such a responsibility.

Even a cursory review of relevant texts from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (e.g., see above) reveals that welcoming the stranger is a central message if not “at the heart” of the biblical message (Jipp 2017, p. 142).

To date, however, there is little evidence that white evangelical supporters of Donald Trump in the U.S. can be persuaded to change their minds by any appeal to the teachings of Jesus. They apparently do not have ears to hear Jesus's teachings, and, in fact, many of their leaders always were hypocrites. In part it is because of this hypocrisy that conservative white evangelical Christian leaders are continuing to lose both their influence and their relevance, and white evangelical membership keeps shrinking: In the past ten years, the percentage of evangelical Christians in the total population of the United States has declined from about 21% to about 15%.

A number of Christians, however, including some evangelical Christian leaders, are challenging other Christians to consider what Jesus actually said and did before reaching any political conclusions: “Because ‘how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ,’ Christians must oppose ‘attacks on immigrants and refugees’ and ‘cutting services and programs for the poor’ accompanied by tax cuts ‘for the rich.’” This biblical perspective is also represented in current statements by various denominations such as the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ, many times by envisioning, in the spirit of the parables of the Great Dinner, the Good Samaritan, and the Sheep and Goats, how we would welcome Jesus if he were at the border.

These Christians seek to answer the question, “And who is my neighbor?” (cf. Luke 10:29), in their current context. They want to understand, in our place and time, who are the people comparable to the half-dead man on the side of the road, as well as the priest, the Levite, and the despised Samaritan, the latter being the one who demonstrated compassion in concrete ways and “took care of” the wounded man, the one in need, the stranger (10:34):

[Jesus asked,] “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” [The expert in the law] said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise”. (Luke 10:36–37)

If people respond to that command as the historical Jesus intended, it can provide some hope in these dark times.

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