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In Christian Scripture, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the ethical responsibility of extending hospitality to the stranger is a key requirement of faithfulness. Who is the neighbor whom we are to love? Among those frequently named in the Bible is the stranger. We could say, therefore, that right at the center of Christian ethics is the challenge and the opportunity to love the stranger as ourselves, to love the stranger as God loves the stranger, to love the stranger as one with whom Jesus explicitly identifies.

Now I think it is important to acknowledge that this teaching doesn't tell us precisely what U.S. immigration policy today ought to be. But it does require us to ask what it means for Christian churches to be bearers of this tradition of hospitality in our own contexts, specifically today the challenges of immigration.

I want to suggest three elements of this hospitality ethic: to practice mercy; to establish justice; and to seek transforming relationships.

**First, to practice mercy.** The stranger is often characterized by the condition of vulnerability. The stranger, by definition, is an outsider. As such, she or he may be excluded from the networks which insiders rely on for the satisfaction of their daily needs. Christian teaching about hospitality, however, insists that strangers be treated the same as insiders. Indeed the outsiders become our neighbors. They are created in the image of God. They are valued by God no less than others of us. As such they have certain basic rights that they do not have to earn. They have these rights by virtue of their

humanness.

Some of the immigration legislation that is proposed at both the federal and state levels would deny basic services to undocumented workers, indeed would make it a crime to provide such assistance. Many Christians have responded with outrage at these proposals. They fly in the face of elementary decency much less the mercifulness of hospitality. A good society will ensure that the basic needs of all people living within its borders will be met, documented or not. For Christians the vulnerability of strangers reminds us of the dependence all of us have on the generosity of God. Hospitality to strangers means responding to their vulnerability with mercifulness.

**Second, to establish justice.** The stranger is often treated unjustly. In many cases, the stranger does not have structures for addressing injustices. Certainly this is the case with undocumented workers. They are an underground work force who must seek to remain invisible in order to keep working. The injustice is compounded when these workers are blamed for a whole host of problems in the U.S. The bitter irony is that they are doing work employers need. They are providing goods and services that others of us rely on. They are contributing members of their communities. Yet instead of recognizing and appreciating their work, there are many who would deny them a path to legalization and citizenship.

Hospitality to strangers, therefore, requires the establishment of justice. Particularly, given the vulnerability of undocumented workers, the public advocacy of churches on behalf of justice for them is crucial. We believe God calls us to be particularly attentive to the ways the voiceless and defenseless are treated unjustly. Justice means that those who are engaged in work the community values should be given

opportunities for full membership in these communities.

**Third, to seek transforming relationships.** One way to view the stranger in the biblical tradition is as a “herald.” The stranger, the sojourner, brings news. If we don’t grant hospitality, we don’t get the news. We miss something that we need to know. In the book of Hebrews, the writer says in giving hospitality to the stranger you may be welcoming an angel without knowing it. In the stranger God is calling us to new horizons of opportunity and responsibility, beyond what we are able to generate out of our more narrow environments. In this understanding hospitality to the stranger is necessary for the church’s faithfulness to God.

What is morally significant about the stranger? Often we emphasize that human beings are basically alike. In some respects this is certainly true. But it also true that human beings are different. Immigrants are often regarded as “strangers” in this sense. They are different from “us.” Difference becomes a justification for keeping them out of our communities or treating them harshly if they are already here.

In Christian teaching, to welcome the stranger, the immigrant, is to receive gratefully the gifts of the “other.” We need the stranger to open us to possibilities of transformation God has in store beyond what we might have previously recognized. In the history of the U.S. there is no question that immigration changes both residents and immigrants. We are mutually transformed. While facing squarely the challenges of immigration, the ethics of hospitality leads Christian churches to emphasize, not the threats, but rather the gifts and the possibilities for a creative multicultural community which immigrants bring to us.