

BOOK REVIEW**JUST HOSPITALITY:****GOD'S WELCOME IN A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE**

BY: LETTY M. RUSSELL

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Letty Mandeville Russell (1929-2007), one of the world's foremost feminist theologians and longtime member of the Yale Divinity School faculty, started writing notes for her last book a few years before she died. Her partner, J. Shannon Clarkson, and former research assistant, Kate M. Ott, compiled and organized Russell's work into the volume *Just Hospitality*. In her final scholarly contribution to the academy and the church, Russell introduces an argument for moving from essentializing difference (stranger as permanent "other"), to partnering (stranger as connection with God) as opportunity for creating hospitable justice and healing a world in crisis.

Russell begins by asking the question, "Why hospitality?" Drawing on her personal narrative and biblical stories to illustrate her understanding of hospitality, Russell points to the mandate for the church to be in solidarity with strangers, particularly those who live permanently on the margins, and, further, to *love* the stranger (*philoxenia*). She also conveys this perspective through examples of her work with the World Council of Churches and her practice of hospitality with women around the globe.

The next two chapters critique normative understandings of hospitality through the lenses of postcolonial theology and feminist hermeneutics. In this section, Russell challenges the codified knowledge developed by dominant white, Western groups about "other" cultures, geography, and roles (24-26). Citing New Testament lecturer, Musa Dube, of the University of

Botswana, Russell agrees that imperialism imposes universal standards on the “other,” who is assumed to be a blank slate, and who is rendered dependent, colonized, on those who create and maintain said standards (27-28). Russell equates such assumptions and cooption to a misuse of the doctrine of election. To move forward with just hospitality, both scholars urge colonizers and colonized to sit at table together to examine the impact of colonialism and imperialism on human social locations and global interdependence. Russell focuses further on power quotients that are particularly ascribed against women of color and women of the global South. Her work with women’s experiences of familial slavery and/or HIV/AIDS throughout the world galvanized her focus on constructing tools to analyze, resist, and reconstruct how we share in God’s creation (50).

From initial analysis flows formative process. In the remainder of the book, Russell examines hospitality in biblical story and from story, reframes a theology of hospitality focused on justice. She focuses on the blessing of “riotous” difference created by God. Her contention is that in the beginning, God gave humanity the gift of difference and in time, the gift of understanding such difference at Pentecost. Often, our response to this gift is to try to limit diversity by pursuing sameness or essentializing difference, rendering it a weapon of destruction. For Russell, difference is a function of relationships in a group rather than a set of attributes, so forming coalitions across difference is the essence of God’s message. Appropriately, Russell calls for acknowledging violently inhospitable behavior of dominant groups against indigenous persons, and with Rebecca Todd Peters, challenges the imperialist use of the Great Commission (Matthew 28) to colonize peoples, as well as dominant groups’ own minds.

A theology of just hospitality requires reading the biblical text with understanding that “textual terror” is used easily against those who are already marginalized. Russell calls for a hermeneutic of suspicion that looks for varieties of meaning based on social location, with a

desire to confront patriarchy and a commitment to find God's safe space in the midst of the story. Russell sees Christ as the metaphor of God's welcome, creating safe space so that Christ's community, the church, can work for healing and justice. By challenging our own personal limits, social structural limits, and theological constructs that limit hospitality, we invite creation to flourish without requiring the "other" to become like us. Ultimately, Russell's goal for just hospitality includes actions of genuine solidarity modeled on God's welcome. "The sort of hospitality...that sees the struggle for justice as part and parcel of welcoming the stranger" (xv).

In her final work, Letty Russell interweaves personal experience with theological reflection. Some of the explanatory narrative is repetitive. However, Russell's passion for just hospitality leaps off the pages; this theological engagement is not an academic exercise alone for her. The editors enhance Russell's work by concluding each chapter with thought-questions to stimulate engagement with Russell's assertions, opening opportunity for partnering toward just hospitality in the classroom itself. I will likely adopt portions of this text for an advanced leadership class in womanist/feminist ethics of leadership because I find Russell's work compelling.

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