

A Theology of the Southeast White House Hospitable Meal

Driving down Pennsylvania Avenue, SE with the nation's capitol building in the rearview mirror, the scenery of Capitol Hill--the Starbucks coffee shop, Trover's Books and Gifts, Bank of America, the Bread and Chocolate Company, and well kept townhouses--changes eight blocks down to a McDonald's, used car yards, and homes protected by steel bars. Another ten blocks brings the Anacostia River, a convenient geographical barrier separating the most powerful section of the country from one of the most powerless, the "forgotten quadrant of the city"¹ in terms of public services offered and economic development. To an unaccustomed outsider, the sight of poverty, restlessness and decay is frightening. Abandoned shops, Checks Cashed Here stations, and liquor stores serve as welcome signs to this ghetto of sorts. Yet within another block the setting slightly alters once again. Large leyland cyprus and oak trees, symbols of life and beauty in the Randle Highlands neighborhood, line the avenue, obscuring the decrepit apartments and abandoned buildings permeating the side streets and alleys. While not technically being within its borders, this section of the city holds the stigma of notorious Anacostia. However, unlike Anacostia proper, it is socio-economically diverse within a one-mile radius, with pockets of poverty adjacent to tree-hidden ridges holding million dollar homes. The medium income of this working poor, African-American neighborhood, however, is \$17,000 per year per family, with three-fourths of the children living in single parent homes, and over one-third of the families qualifying for public assistance.²

Directly off the avenue, upon a hill, stands the enigmatic inner-city community ministry, the Southeast White House,³ a historic turn of the century manor home dubbed

by the neighbors the “Little White House”⁴ because of its similar architecture and placement on the other Pennsylvania Avenue. The house sits amidst a pocket of poverty and is a beacon--a “house on the hill for all people.”⁵ Echoing this notion, a poster from the “Anacostia: Place of Spirit Art Show” hanging on the wall directly opposite the front door reads, “A city on a hill cannot be hidden (Matthew 5:14).” It is 12:30 pm; neighbors from the community and also individuals from the Northern Virginia or Maryland suburbs as well as from the working sector of the city--Capitol Hill and Northwest--cross through this entryway. The point of the biweekly gathering is a lunch, on Mondays deemed the Reconciliation Luncheon and Wednesdays called the Family Luncheon, identical to each other in form and content. The guests, some here for the first time and others regular attendees, mingle in the parlor, kitchen, or living room. When lunch is served they abandon the off-white outer rooms for the brightly colored dining room: turquoise paint-sponged walls, a flowery tablecloth and striped, cushy dining room chairs. The table is set for a feast: fine china, lit candles, fresh flowers, and cloth napkins. Introductions and answers to an innocuous get-to-know-you question weave around the table following the prayer. The three-course meal has begun.

Dissimilarity and the Banquet

...But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

In Works of Love, Soren Kierkegaard inquires how to love the neighbor amidst the “dissimilarity”⁶ of earthly life. In other words, within the framework of hospitality, how does the rich man love the poor man? Or, more specific to our concern, how does the Southeast White House--which is characteristically middle-class in appearance, held values, influence, and relational networks--love its surrounding impoverished neighbors?

Kierkegaard requests the reader to “imagine a person who prepared a banquet and invited as his guests the lame, the blind, the cripples, and the beggars.”⁷ The host’s peer might say, “It is a strange use of language to call that kind of a gathering a banquet—a banquet...where it is not a question of the excellence of the wine [or] the selectness of the company.”⁸ A banquet connotes honor and elaborate excess, yet those individuals that the host has invited lack qualities worthy of worldly recognition. Kierkegaard further explains that, particularly because of the nature of the guests,

the friend would think that a meal such as that could be called an act of *charity* but not a *banquet*. However good the food had been that they received, even if it had not merely been ‘substantial and edible’ like poorhouse food, but actually choice and costly, yes, even if there had been ten kinds of wine—the company itself, the arrangement of the whole affair, a certain lack...would prevent [the host’s friend from] calling such a thing a banquet; it runs contrary to language use, which makes distinctions.”⁹

And the host, convinced that the rhetoric of the banquet is apposite, could refer to

Christ’s words in Luke 14:12-14:

When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you 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 shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

In fact, in this passage Jesus does not use the word *banquet* until he mentions the poor.

Christ seems to suggest that welcoming the poor and the world’s lowly is not merely dutiful, but festive, and hence worthy of the cognomen *banquet*.

Common usage of the term would imply that friends and wealthy neighbors primarily would be present at such a meal. “But so scrupulous is Christian equality and its use of language that it requires not only that you feed the poor; it requires that you call it a banquet.”¹⁰ Furthermore, the one who feeds the poor but does not deem it necessary

to name the meal a banquet views the poor and lowly as precisely that—poor, lowly and hence insignificant, perhaps even socially invisible. The one who provides the banquet sees the neighbor in the poor and lowly and, in this regard, extends pure *agape* love.

Kierkegaard's banquet exemplifies how to remove dissimilarity so that the Christian's penultimate goal of loving the neighbor¹¹ may be realized. However, it is uncertain whether Kierkegaard's abolition of distinctions refers only to an eternal reality or whether it holds temporal and material consequence. Kierkegaard makes clear that agapic love for the neighbor has the "perfections of eternity."¹² Indeed, it is the most perfect of human loves. While the *object* of beloved or friend defines *eros* and *philos* love, "only love for the neighbor is defined by love" itself and not by the object, since unconditionally every human being is the neighbor.¹³ In other words, the neighbor as object of love is similar to any other neighbor as such. Hence, neighbor love lacks preferentiality. With metaphorical "closed eyes" (as opposed to sensate eyes) the Christian conceals the neighbor's dissimilarities from himself, acknowledging that every human being is "the first, the best."¹⁴ Love for the neighbor makes the Christian blind in the most admirable sense of the word: she loves each human being as the lover blindly loves the beloved. "Christianity has placed every human being that high."¹⁵

Because for God there is no preference in love, one's love for friend or beloved does not reflect Him as well as one's love for the neighbor. The Christian mirrors God when she loves the neighbor, precisely because distinctions lose their power when preference is denied. The very act of equalizing defines such love as *agape*. In other words, equality fills the cavity left by preference. "Equality appears in love's humbly turning outward, embracing everyone, and yet loving each one individually but no one

exceptionally.”¹⁶ Or as Kierkegaard further defines, the neighbor is the “utterly unrecognizable dissimilarity between persons” or the “eternal equality before God.”¹⁷ The *imago dei* stamped on every individual, as well as Christ’s redemptive act that unconditionally offers everyone the grace to become a new eternal creation, is the foundation of the ontological equality of human creatures before God.

Worldly similarity (which is impossible) is not the same as Christian equality, according to Kierkegaard. Christianity does not take away particularities such as social position, economic circumstance, and educational opportunity in this earthly life. Kierkegaard boldly claims that “Christianity is too earnest to romanticize” about apportioning equally the conditions of the temporal, material realm.¹⁸ Christian faith is not a “fairy tale” that reduces earthly dissimilarity.¹⁹ Rather, the reality of eternal equality is more glorious than a fairy tale ever could be. Therefore, Christianity does not place value on the situational character of one person’s life against another’s, whether the individual is elite or lowly, nor does it strive for a monolithic temporal condition. Comparing difference--one person’s level of imprisonment in existence with another individual’s--“does not preoccupy Christianity at all, not in the least—such a...concern is...nothing but wordliness,” says Kierkegaard.²⁰ Therefore, Christianity allows earthly differences to endure but teaches eternal equality.²¹ Wordly similarity summons the powerful to descend from his exalted place and the lowly to climb up. Hence, an ideal of solidarity with the poor is implicit within the goal of wordly similarity and its relationship to hospitality. Christian equality, however, sanctifies, calling the prince to lift himself above the distinctions of loftiness and the pauper to do the same above the “difference of lowliness.”²² Within this context, the banquet goal is not to remove earthly differences

nor is the goal of Christian hospitality necessarily, then, to be in solidarity with the poor; rather, the banquet represents and witnesses to human being's gracious eminence and equality before God.

It would be to our disadvantage, however, if we progressed from here believing that Kierkegaard holds an immoral otherworldliness; for, an ethic deprived of this-worldly concern is useless.²³ So before examining the banquet's meaning within the discussion of dissimilarity, let us attempt to understand the complexity of Kierkegaard's dismissal of externals. Indeed, a consistent criticism of Kierkegaard's work is its seemingly spiritualized or dualistic nature, in which material concerns are not taken seriously enough.²⁴ Although some of his bold statements seem to propose otherwise, in a broader context they do not encourage apathy towards other people's temporal conditions.²⁵

Kierkegaard condemns the escapism of abstract love that has no relevance to reality.²⁶ Earlier in Works of Love, he cites the Good Samaritan as an example of loving the neighbor. The Samaritan did not offer spiritual direction to the wounded traveler, nor did he even mention God. Instead he attended to his physical and material needs.²⁷ In doing so, the Samaritan models himself after the Incarnate God who relieved earthly needs as well as spiritual. Kierkegaard also understands that the point of the narrative of the King's judgment in Matthew 25:34-45 is that the individuals whom one feeds, shelters, clothes, etc. are literally Christ himself, and he would dare not neglect his Lord.²⁸ Moreover, Kierkegaard's audience is his nineteenth-century Danish society that is obsessed with reputation and social influence.²⁹ Given this context, his warning to be indifferent to material distinctions does not necessitate apathy to the betterment of social and economic conditions. Certainly, Kierkegaard's thoughts about the Christian's social

action towards the poor contain a significant amount of ambiguity. Yet what he is trying to make manifest is that Christian equality, being eternal in nature, is something wholly ulterior, of far greater consequence than and not at all dependant upon the conditions of this life.

As previously shown, Kierkegaard's hospitable meal is festive and hence a banquet because it celebrates equality and dismisses dissimilarity. Contrary to his hypothetical friend's analysis, Kierkegaard rejects the meal as charity precisely because charity (the voluntary giving, helping or relieving of those in need) implies a distinction between the giver and the receiver. The debate over the use of the word *banquet* is truly a dispute about what it means to love the neighbor. Emmanuel Levinas defines love of the neighbor as *charity* or *responsibility*.³⁰ But Kierkegaard's banquet precisely transcends mere duty. Duty feeds the poor. *Agape* throws the neighbor a banquet. At issue is *how* the work of love is enacted and with what attitude. Acts of charity can lack love if done for self-enhancement or with an elitist posture. Within the construct of charity stands an ultimately false hierarchy. Worldly dissimilarity is like an actor's garment discarded in a Shakespearean comedy; it is a disguise. When the final curtain falls on the stage, the one who plays the king and the one who plays the beggar will be the same—simply actors, according to Kierkegaard. Eternity is not a stage, however. In eternity, the beggar's "wretched outer garments" will no longer conceal his inner glorious equality.³¹ The banquet host understands this truth of which the one offering charity ignores or is ignorant. Again, Kierkegaard assumes that the Christian has a responsibility to alleviate the poor. Still, "the giving is not itself a work of love but must be done in a spirit of love."³² The banquet manifests that spirit.

To the individual with Christian sensibilities, the validity of Kierkegaard's banquet model of hospitality is obvious enough in regard to Christian equality and human dignity. Indeed, imagining the extravagance of a meal bestowed to people who perhaps have never known such luxury is a beautiful foreshadowing of the wedding festival in the eschaton where individuals, regardless of merit, participate in the eternal wedding supper of the Lamb.³³ The eternal reality of the banquet bears serious theological weight. However, complexities arise when it is applied to contemporary lived experience. In a faith tradition where spirituality often resides in the mundane, where the Kingdom of God is both a *not yet* and an *already* reality in this world, a model of hospitality becomes the most theologically valid when both the eternal and the temporal realms affirm it. The SEWH shares some significant resemblance to Kierkegaard's banquet. Still, the reader need not unquestionably accept his model to find it useful in understanding this particular ministry's theological character.

Ironically, however, the SEWH diverges from the Christian hospitality tradition aimed at the poor throughout the centuries as well as from contemporary examples precisely because of its affinities with the banquet scene. Most hospitable meals throughout Christian tradition lack Kierkegaard's banquet quality. Early church leaders such as John Chrysostom and Jerome emphasized hospitality's ability to counteract the social stratification of the broader society, but they did so with a modest table, as opposed to what they would lay out before the powerful.³⁴ Likewise, the fourth- and fifth-century monastics renounced their wealth and status; their example was the impetus behind the Roman matron, Fabiola, replacing her great riches with lower social status, simple dress, and the ascetic life. Other women of wealth and status, such as Olympias, a deaconess in

the Constantinople church, who worked with Chrysostom, combined hospitality with charity.³⁵

Some have argued that early fifteenth-century England completely lost the practice of Christian hospitality. Even bishops and laity distinguished between the powerful, wealthy guests and the powerless poor. When a cross section of members from differing social classes were welcomed in one household, those of a lower status sat at a separate table and ate coarser food off of different linens. In fact, most provisions for the extremely destitute were made at the gate of the household. Sixteenth-century Protestant reformers renewed the practice of hospitality to its broader biblical roots emphasizing equality and dignity but underscored frugality.³⁶ John Wesley and other eighteenth-century Methodists continued in the Christian hospitality tradition and also emphasized simplicity in food and setting.³⁷ Within contemporary models of hospitality extended towards the poor, such as the Catholic Worker's Houses of Hospitality founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1938 or Annunciation House founded in 1978, volunteers serve thousands of meals yet do so in a state of voluntary poverty.³⁸ Volunteers are in solidarity with the poor by living out of the same resources, such as food, space, and donated clothes.³⁹

The Christian hospitality tradition consistently affirms both Christian equality and a certain solidarity based on the host's voluntary or involuntary marginality. It seems, however, that no such solidarity or marginality exists within the banquet scene. In anticipation of the eschaton, Kierkegaard's eternal equality places everyone at the center, leaving no one on the boundary. In contrast, the history of Christian hospitality operates within humanity's existential situation in which the bearer of hospitality travels to the

boundaries of society, because it is there that the poor dwell. Does Kierkegaard's lack of emphasis on the empirical cause the banquet to be a theologically inauthentic and impractical Christian hospitable practice? We shall see. Regardless, Kierkegaard asks his readers to imagine a banquet. And the Southeast White House provides one such lived image.

The Southeast White House and the Banquet

Denise Speed, whose apartment is located a quarter of a mile from the Southeast White House and who has lived in the neighborhood for the past fourteen years, first learned that the SEWH was present for the sake of the community when she was on her way to the bus stop and heard swing music coming from the top of the hill. The house was hosting a wedding reception. "They were partying," Denise says, "and curiosity got the best of me."⁴⁰ She was instantly invited to join the celebration, but declined only to return for a luncheon where she received the same festive welcome. She candidly depicts the now regular experience:

Coming from the background I have—and it wasn't a bad background--but I have had some misfortunes, I've had to eat in some situations where I was around some people who were questionable, because I stayed in a shelter one time. There it is communal style and everybody eats together. I was around some questionable people like folks that have drug problems and alcohol problems and mental problems. My situation was purely economic. I was trying to save some money to get an apartment. But never in a million years did I think that I would eat in a place like this. You know most places give you paper plates, some plastic utensils and paper napkins. They take your plate and tell you to hit the road--beat it--just like that. But here you actually get to sit down at a decent tablecloth, candles no less, decent china—not plastic plates, not paper plates, not styrofoam—but china with silver edges, fresh flowers on the table cut by Wilma, napkins that are cloth and laundered every day, nice silverware. And the menu—food that I know in an average restaurant you are going to pay some serious money to eat. I've never experienced that before in my life. I think that I have the pounds to show for it! I eat very well here, thank you; yes I do, gourmet meals, thank you. I eat better

here than I have ever eaten, even if I went and paid for it. Yes, the meals here are legendary. Everybody in the neighborhood knows it. They treat their guests, in the neighborhood or not, the same, no matter who. Everybody's the same. Nobody's ostracized or told they are eating too much of this, or 'put that back.' I've experienced that too. And they always serve you coffee, tea, and some dessert. I get my daily four food groups when I come up here—four food groups and then some. Some days I feel like tipping the folks here. That's how it is.⁴¹

While Denise appreciates the quality of the food and the setting, what she highlights most about the mealtime is the sense of equality around the table. She enjoys the “togetherness aspect of it”⁴² where she meets and interacts with people to whom she has not previously been exposed. The house is unique in that it brings individuals within the community together as well as uniting those from outside with the neighborhood. Moreover, those at the luncheon lack pretense, according to Denise. Being accepted as she is produces an interior peace and comfort. However, the luncheon does not only foster individual dignity, it also bolsters that of the community. When guests from outside of the neighborhood--Congressmen and their wives, influential businessmen and women, dignitaries of other countries, professional athletes, even the average suburbanite--come to the Southeast White House for a meal, they raise the neighborhood's status in the eyes of the broader society. Denise says:

If these people can come through here than it must not be that bad after all. If they can be here, it must be a community worth socially being around and accepting. Where else can you find on this side of town the caliber of people that come through here? Prior to them taking over the residence of the house five years ago, those kind of people didn't come through this neighborhood, at least never for anything positive.⁴³

Furthermore, she adds that in a neighborhood isolated from the rest of society, it is helpful to meet and converse with people of influence who can then change the community for the better.

Other neighbors share Denise's excitement about the luncheon. Although Lionel Gaskin or "Junior" moved away from Southeast, where he was born and raised, to a different quadrant of the city three months ago, he still makes it a priority to come by the house and enjoy a meal when his schedule permits. Like Denise, Junior appreciates the elegance of the meal and the decorum. He also emphasizes both the diversity of the individuals at the table--people of different cultures, backgrounds, races, ages, and socioeconomic levels--and also the consequent fellowship established. He, too, speaks of a sense of equality and states that the respect given by everyone around the table as well as by those serving is the central most important factor about the meal.

The equality of which Denise and Junior speak refers to that which transcends socioeconomic status, but also, perhaps more fundamentally, has to do with racial realities in America. Understanding socioeconomic and race conflicts is a complex undertaking. Racial tension is sometimes misinterpreted as class tension and visa versa. They are also often an interrelated phenomenon. The Washington D.C. metropolitan area seems segregated according to race and class. It appears that the impoverished African - Americans live in the city, while the wealthy, powerful white population abides in the Virginia and Maryland suburbs, or on Capitol Hill, or in the posh sector of Northwest among the embassies. While this is a demographic generalization, it certainly is a common perception. The SEWH staff is approximately composed of half Caucasians and half African-Americans, while the majority of volunteers travel from the Virginia suburbs or Capitol Hill. Amidst such worldly dissimilarity a neighbor's language of equality and dignity holds immense significance. What is communicated to a neighbor who comes to this upper middle class setting and encounters the only white faces that are present in the

Randle Highlands neighborhood? Junior says that “the people here greet you with open arms; its not a race thing.”⁴⁴ In other words, he does not feel race or class tensions at the SEWH. With the busy schedule of working two jobs, living and often eating alone, he simply misses leisurely meals and enjoys the company. “If you want to sit down and talk to someone, there is always a listening ear around the table and that means a whole lot to a lot of people,” he concludes.⁴⁵

A sense of isolation and marginality affect Iesha Hannibal, who, like Junior, finds solace in the company of individuals at the SEWH. As a young adult out of high school and living in a nearby neighborhood with her mother, Iesha expresses gratitude about having a different environment in which to rest from the chaos and clamor of the streets. Her apartment building’s halls and thin walls force her to bear involuntary witness to continual arguments even as she tries to keep to herself at home. There are a lot of “ins and outs,” people that are causing trouble, that are being chased by the police, strangers that knock on her door searching for their friends, interrupting her attempt at respite.⁴⁶ When she comes to the SEWH, Iesha avoids the unnecessary “drama” and she “feels right” within its shelter.⁴⁷ Not only does her time at the house replace isolation with fellowship, it also broadens her horizons beyond the entrapments of the ghetto. Eating novel and gourmet foods while conversing with new people from all over the nation and world lifts Iesha out of her otherwise definitive marginality. She neither overtly speaks of, nor seems to be conscious of, the luncheon’s message that she is equal to all others before God. But she enjoys dialoguing with guests about her life; perhaps she understands through such interaction that she is an interesting person worth knowing. Yet, the SEWH banquet is more to her than mere symbol, as Kierkegaard seems to

suggest. One would assume that on some level the banquet message subtly penetrates her being in hopefully transforming ways. Still, what Iesha receives from the luncheons is relief from actual, temporal circumstance.

Although Kierkegaard would not concern himself with her existential imprisonment, the SEWH luncheon satisfies Iesha's desire for rest from the very situation of isolation. We would be foolish to dismiss such moments of wordly similarity as theologically void. The message of Christian equality is not just symbolized by the grandeur of the meal; rather, the very physicality, or Kierkegaard's "worldliness," (including the presence of diverse people at the SEWH meal) contains theological import here. Kierkegaard's sharp dichotomy between Christian equality and worldly similarity crashes under the weight of lived reality, leaving among its ruins the role of the aesthetic. The materiality of the hospitable meal, the very objects themselves, adorned in beauty and elegance, create sacred space for the neighbors. The sacred encounter emerges from the banquet participant's interaction with the objects comprising the meal. As the SEWH meal exemplifies, Christian equality—which is the theological construct of the banquet—is not what allowed the banquet to be. Rather, the particular foods, table setting, and room fashion the meal as a banquet. Therefore, the SEWH's bourgeois fiber embodies profound theological substance, since the objects are not a secondary manifestation of the theological.⁴⁸

While Denise, Junior, and Iesha were drawn to the SEWH by their own curiosity, some guests from the neighborhood come with a specific purpose. The basement level contains the People's House, a database containing information on over thirty-five hundred social service agencies within the Washington metropolitan area. Jennifer

Lowery directs the database, serving the working poor and homeless individuals who either call a toll free number or walk in with a spectrum of needs, such as shelter or rehab programs. Recall that charity defined as helping or relieving the needy makes distinctions and operates in a hierarchy, falsifying ultimate reality, says Kierkegaard, and is not, therefore, a work of love. The SEWH feast transforms what is potentially hierarchal charity at the People's House to Christian equality. (Notice the potentially problematic term *client*). If a "client" comes to the People's House during the lunch hours, Jennifer invites them upstairs to share in the meal.⁴⁹ Acting as a social worker, she also makes relationship building between herself and her client a priority. Many People's House visitors are nervous at first because they are often unfamiliar with the formal setting. What transforms anxiety to comfort is first Jennifer's compassion and concern for them and then the sincerity and love from the people around the table. Almost all of her visitors come again to participate in future luncheons; many also seek volunteer opportunities around the house as a means towards reciprocity; and her clients often return after their initial needs have been met for Jennifer's wise counsel and prayer. Jennifer stresses that the luncheons provide sacred space for establishing unity and equality whether one is "black or white, male or female, prince or pauper."⁵⁰ Furthermore, the meals have a utilitarian purpose. Often her clients have "divinely ordained encounters" with other guests; for example, a client in need of a job will end up sitting next to someone who works for the Department of Employment.⁵¹ Again, against Kierkegaard's conception, these new relationships forged between princes and paupers are not only a foretaste or symbol of a fundamentally eternal reality where the disguise of earthly dissimilarity vanishes, nor are they even mere secular progress. The meal,

according to Jennifer, is multifaceted: “Clients are able to network and to hear about Jesus Christ.”⁵² In other words, paupers befriend princes and also hear about the King.

Holding to an inverted theological perspective on the banquet, Sherman Hill accentuates that the King was more like a pauper than a prince. Sherman, a full time mentor to elementary school aged boys in the neighborhood and a community builder through the SEWH, differs in perspective from the rest of the staff about the luncheons.

His understanding of Jesus’ interaction with the poor shapes his view:

Jesus didn’t ride up in a big car when he dealt with the people in the city. When he approached somebody, it wasn’t from his palace. He just came off as an ordinary man, and he always came down to their level. Look at the well; you wouldn’t expect to go to a well and find a rich man, but Jesus was there. He didn’t walk around with a crown--even though he was the King.⁵³

By “[coming] down to their level” Sherman believes that the SEWH could, and perhaps should, serve the meals on paper plates, in a manner to which the neighbors are accustomed. Here Sherman diametrically opposes Kierkegaard, who prohibits “the powerful person [from] climbing down from his loftiness.”⁵⁴ That is “not equable at all” according to Kierkegaard, and it certainly is not Christian equality.⁵⁵ Sherman cites as examples two next-door neighbors, Tonya and Edith,⁵⁶ who are uncomfortable in the house. Participating in the luncheons would lessen their financial burden, but they would rather sit in the kitchen than in the dining room. They are intimidated by other guests who use a sophisticated vocabulary and who mention during the introductions what university they attended and where they are currently working. Sherman says, “They don’t want to say, ‘I live next door; I’m on welfare; I have three kids and my husband isn’t with us.’”⁵⁷ How would Kierkegaard suggest relieving this dehumanizing situation? Should the highly educated speak in the vernacular? Should mention of wordly

particularity wholly be avoided? Kierkegaard discourages obscuring temporal particularities; rather, he encourages transcending such wordliness.

In another sense, however, the circumstance of which Sherman speaks endorses Kierkegaard's precise message—a work of love necessarily abolishes distinctions. Sherman continues, “No one wants to be the person who is different. They don't want to be the people who everyone is always having to give something to. They want to be one of the crowd, but they don't feel that way in this house.”⁵⁸ The debate revolves around the how. Sherman believes that the solution to making someone like Tonya or Edith feel more comfortable is outreach. He believes that the SEWH staff does not proactively invite the neighbors to the luncheons with enough intensity. Through outreach and continual invitations, “you can eventually even wear Tonya and Edith down,” he says with a laugh.⁵⁹ However, persistent outreach would not change the nature and the beauty of the house nor its luncheons. There is another factor influencing Sherman's perspective. He says:

Some folks think that only white Republicans socialize at the house, and they don't think that they will be welcome because of their circumstances and who they are. But they accept me because I am of the same race. We're both black so there is a consciousness of kind. And I can talk the street lingo with them.⁶⁰

Here Sherman digresses again from Kierkegaard's emphatic call to uphold Christian equality over wordly similarity, in this case, solidarity according to skin color. Sherman along with Tonya and Edith want the distinctions to go unnoticed. In one sense, his solidarity through race with these two women is positive in that it leads to trust and to Sherman acting as an advocate. It is problematic, however, when fixing one's gaze on differences obscures the very message of Christian equality and the consequent abolition of distinctions.

Summer Dye, another full-time mentor and presence in the neighborhood, understands the reality of worldly dissimilarity and the consequent feelings of inferiority that can be produced by both exterior and interior factors. She says:

When you have a situation where there is a socio-economic distinction between people, the individual coming from a lower socio-economic level may be accustomed to the government helping financially and, therefore, that person gets used to being viewed as a project. Now, the SEWH is wonderful because the separation and distinctions between individuals isn't felt as much. Here we don't look down on people as much as a lot of places. It is important that we constantly throw our elitist attitude out the window. I have come a long way and so have a lot of people who work and volunteer here. I want to see people how God sees them—as always equal. We want to embrace everyone as equal and exude love, not judgment. I constantly have to remind myself that if it wasn't for God's grace, I would be in the same position. I am no different. That's where we need to be—constantly at God's mercy.⁶¹

Summer highlights human similarity. Kierkegaard says, “When someone goes with God...he is compelled to see and to see in a unique way. When you go with God you need to see only one single miserable person and you will be unable to escape what Christianity wants you to understand—human similarity.”⁶² What unites human creatures is their common poverty before God. Human similarity is the compliment to Christian equality.

Not only does hospitality demand humble recognition of one's dependant creaturehood, it also fashions an environment of equality when it allows reciprocity. At the SEWH meal, distinctions between giver and receiver cease. The luncheon has only two variables, according to Summer. An individual is either cooking and serving or sitting and eating. “We have done a good job of having most people (especially those who come repeatedly) be each. Sometimes God blesses you to be a giver and server, and sometimes He blesses you to be a receiver.”⁶³ Offering the neighbors an opportunity to serve fosters dignity by creating a medium to express gratitude and practice love. By

serving, the neighbors become host or hostess, and hence a part of the SEWH family. In fact, the staff jokes that the first time an individual comes, she is a guest; every subsequent time, she is a part of the family. Summer continues:

God teaches you something in either role you play here. Just being a part of something that is Christ-centered brings individuals a sense of worth that is sorely needed in many of the underprivileged. Whether they are serving or being served they are given the chance to know love—a love that they so need, that all of us so need.⁶⁴

Hierarchal charity shatters under the SEWH banquet's equalizing reciprocity.

With a staff that explicitly distances themselves from bureaucratic organization, including job titles and descriptions, wishing instead daily to be led by God's Spirit, Wilma Mpelo's job title *hostess* holds certain significance. Wilma views hospitality as *the* mission of the house. Because she voluntarily abides at the SEWH, when Wilma invites the neighbors to a luncheon, she literally invites them to her home. Although technically a 501-c3 non-profit, the SEWH does not refer to itself as an organization, but rather as a place of residence. Wilma defines hospitality as welcoming others into her home as well as providing space for neighbors to get to know each other on a more personable level. Neighbors may pass by each other for years and be cordial or comment on the weather, but in her home, they sit around the table and begin to talk and share stories about their experiences. The opening luncheon questions that Wilma most enjoys asking are favorite childhood memories or a favorite gift given, questions that are not too threatening but that speak of something valued or precious. She says, "If I tell you that my favorite memory is of my mother and I baking Christmas cookies and you remember that being one of your favorites, you might say, 'Did your mom ever do such and such,' and then we are talking about something more than the weather."⁶⁵

Wilma acknowledges that there is a definite message in how and what the SEWH serves at a meal. She remembers a neighbor commenting after a large gathering, “All these dishes. Why don’t you just use paper plates? They make really pretty paper plates.”⁶⁶ However, Wilma insists that her company is treated with dignity. She stresses that coming to a meal at the SEWH may be the only time a neighbor eats beef burgundy marinated in *real* burgundy wine. “The other thing,” Wilma adds, “is the meal sends a message that you are worth it because you are not going to be treated differently than anyone else.”⁶⁷ It broadens the neighbors’ scope of experience beyond familiar fast food. “If they can transcend their own circle then they can start wanting, expecting, and believing that they can have other things,” she says.⁶⁸ Her proposition directly connects equality with material uplift. Using Kierkegaard’s terms, she marries banquet equality with an effort to decrease worldly dissimilarity. However, Kierkegaard insists that the lowly’s longing for material similarity is erroneous: “for if the lowly...merely long enviously for the advantages denied them in earthly life instead of humbly longing for the blessed equality of the essentially Christian, this...damages their souls.”⁶⁹

Even in its fledgling stages, the SEWH encouraged both neighbor participation in the beautification of its property and cultivating a sense of ownership over it, obviating any temptation towards envy. Co-founders Sammie Morrison and Scott Dimock emphasize that the SEWH is a gift from God entrusted to them and bestowed to the community. Sammie says, “It is a house on the hill for all people. It is here for the community and their leadership. We don’t covet this place. We freely give it away.”⁷⁰ When the SEWH was first purchased, it was the most decrepit building in the neighborhood, and there was no financial base from which to draw for restoration,

necessitating that the staff wait for resources. Volunteer church groups from all over the nation came for work projects, sharing home repair skills and supplies. The neighbors quickly recognized that the SEWH lacked wealth; rather, they “lived by faith,” or by unpredictable month to month donations.⁷¹ All that the house contains—including the luncheon food--as well as the means for its restoration, are gifts from individuals nationwide who want to serve the poor in the nation’s capitol and who believe in the SEWH’s mission. Sammie clarifies:

At the beginning of making improvements, we had made friends with some of the neighbors who would come over regularly and eat with us. In one instance, the gentleman said, ‘I am sure glad that you waited to get to know the neighborhood before you started improving this place beyond what we have and embarrassing the whole rest of the community, and that you have included me in what you are doing. I feel really good about the house, and I know the rest of the neighborhood feels the same.’ So because we didn’t have the money and the Lord is wiser than us, we were forced to wait on the improvements. That was pleasing to the community. Now that we have received more help and are making more and more improvements, we remember that lesson of inclusion. Just as important is that we give away our resources. Because of the manner in which this house has unfolded, there is no animosity about it.⁷²

The SEWH staff seeks to make its location exemplary while simultaneously giving away resources to help the community become a “model kind of neighborhood.”⁷³ Instead of aligning itself with the Christian hospitality tradition of marginality, the SEWH constructively becomes a “gateway for people to come into this community,” in turn, expanding the center of society towards the margins.⁷⁴ The SEWH’s welcoming call to those at the center creates the potential for the core of social life and progression to permeate this once completely isolated community.

In further pursuit of lessening ghetto status and of opening the community up to the wider society, Wilma’s strives for the children and adults alike to learn proper dinner etiquette. She hopes that her overt instructions to the children will impact the adults as

well without shaming or embarrassing them. She fondly remembers a neighborhood boy, Trey, instructing a group of volunteers from a suburban church on the details of how to serve: “You serve from the left and you serve the ladies first—the older ladies first. And if they are talking, you get their attention, and, if their napkin is in the way, you ask them if they wouldn’t mind removing it.”⁷⁵ What is especially significant to Wilma is that a ten year old black child from the neighborhood was teaching a group of college-educated white middle class young adults from all over the country how to serve and clear a table. Teaching the children “servant leadership” skills is her primary objective.⁷⁶ While Wilma’s dominant bourgeois mentality determines the context in which they learn and, according to Kierkegaard’s interpretation, glorifies the world’s distinctions, as previously stated, Kierkegaard’s weakening dualism of the material and the spiritual does not adequately represent the theological complexity of the SEWH meal. Art forms--such as cooking, serving, and creating a pleasant setting--have orchestrations. The aesthetic performance of the meal in all its materiality alters Kierkegaard’s helpful theater analogy. Whereas Kierkegaard sees this life as a stage where individuals are mere actors in disguise, the performance of the meal brings eternity down into the temporal realm, intermixing the spiritual with the material in a more intricate and profound manner. As Kierkegaard would have it, both Trey and the young adult volunteers are lifted up above distinctions of race and social class, finding equality in the common experience of creating sacred space through ritual (the rules of table setting and serving) and beautiful objects.

Wilma sees herself not only as hostess of a grand house but she, like Sherman, views herself in solidarity with the neighborhood because of her race. She says:

In spite of my fair skin color, in the black community if you're black, you're black. And I think that it is easier on the neighbors that I am a black and not a white hostess. Maybe the downside of the SEWH is that there are not enough blacks working here. When they come in and see so many white faces from outside the community, I think that they feel uncomfortable.⁷⁷

Wilma also speaks “street lingo” with neighbors that are uneasy with the elegance: “Girl, if you don’t come in and sit yourself down at this table—I cooked all this food and you’re gonna hurt my feelings like that...” she jokes.⁷⁸ Curiously, the neighbors such as Denise, Junior, and Iesha, who participate in the meals, are not offended or uncomfortable by a Caucasian presence in the SEWH. In fact, diversity is not only what they each highlight as benefits of the luncheons but also is what makes the sense of Christian equality so profound. Still, Wilma worries that a dominant white presence could make the SEWH’s service to the community look like a hand-out, or Kierkegaard’s charity. She believes that the same formal meal and setting would send an opposing message if hosted only by Caucasians. For Wilma, then, within the SEWH context, the hue of skin is one determining factor separating a banquet from charity. She does not want the community to construe the house as composed of “a bunch of bleeding heart, do-good whites that are coming in to save us from ourselves.”⁷⁹ Anyone who comes with the attitude, “I’m going *down* to the inner-city to help out those poor people,” does not need to be at the house, she insists.⁸⁰ Still, she admits that she, too, struggles at certain times with an “air of implied superiority,” of which she then repents.⁸¹ “Every blessing comes from God and every possession belongs to Him. If *I* am giving *my* gifts to help *you* then I set up a hierarchy. If God bestows certain people with gifts to share with others, then the focus rightly returns to God”--and to equality as opposed to charity.⁸²

The neighbors come to the SEWH banquet “unequal in what they know, unequal in what they have, but equal in all occasions under the eyes of the Lord.”⁸³ With additions and alterations to Kierkegaard’s banquet mentality, the SEWH understands that actually living out theological conceptions necessitates merging the spiritual with the material. Sometimes works of love involve the removal of earthly difference. Indeed, in this way, both the eternal and the earthly realms affirm the theological validity and profundity of the SEWH meal. As does Kierkegaard’s model, the SEWH hospitable luncheon exemplifies the centrality of eternal equality to its Christian witness. Sammie concludes, “ We try to make everyone who comes here feel important, because they are. They are children of God. And it is important that we put on our best. If not, who are we saving it for?”⁸⁴

Works Cited and Interviews

Dimock, Scott. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2001.

Dye, Summer. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2001.

Ferreira, M. Jamie. Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Gaskin, Lionel. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2001.

Hannibal, Iesha. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2001.

Hill, Sherman. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2001.

Kierkegaard, Soren. Works of Love. Trans. and Ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Lowery, Jennifer. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2001.

Morrison, Sammie. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2001.

Mpelo, Wilma. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2001.

Pohl, Christine D. Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999.

Speed, Denise. Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2001.

-
- ¹ From a one-page information sheet on the Southeast White House, printed by the house for interested visitors.
- ² Statistics kept by the SEWH.
- ³ Abbreviated “SEWH.”
- ⁴ Sammie Morrison, interview with the author.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ *Dissimilarity* is Kierkegaard’s term which he uses continuously throughout “II C: You Shall Love Your Neighbor,” in Works of Love.
- ⁷ Kierkegaard, 81.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid., 81-82.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 82.
- ¹¹ The term *neighbor* as used in the second greatest commandment applies universally to every human being.
- ¹² Kierkegaard, 65.
- ¹³ Ibid., 66.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 68.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 70.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 67.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 68.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 70.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 71.
- ²¹ Kierkegaard echoes the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 7:17-24. If an opportunity arises where a slave can become free (or a poor individual can alleviate his poverty) of course he should take advantage of it. Still, such circumstantial change is not Paul’s ultimate concern.
- ²² Ibid., 72.
- ²³ Ferreira, 85.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 34.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 9.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 62.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 34.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 80.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 61.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 48.
- ³¹ Kierkegaard, 89.
- ³² Kierkegaard, 87.
- ³³ Revelation 19:9.
- ³⁴ Pohl, 69.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 108-109.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 51-51.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 76.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 191, 189.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 115.
- ⁴⁰ Denise Speed, interview with the author.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Lionel Gaskin, interview with the author.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Iesha Hannibal, interview with the author.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ A vital conversation with Vanessa Ochs on November 28, 2001 helped me understand and articulate the connection between materiality and the theological message, or, stated differently, how materiality plays a theological role.

⁴⁹ Jennifer Lowery, interview with the author.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Sherman Hill, interview with the author.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, 72.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Names changed.

⁵⁷ Sherman Hill, interview with the author.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Summer Dye, interview with the author.

⁶² Kierkegaard, 77.

⁶³ Summer Dye, interview with the author.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Wilma Mpelo, interview with the author.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Kierkegaard, 70.

⁷⁰ Sammie Morrison, interview with the author.

⁷¹ Scott Dimock, interview with the author.

⁷² Sammie Morrison, interview with the author.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Wilma Mpelo, interview with the author.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Sammie Morrison, interview with the author.

⁸⁴ Ibid.