

“Why We Gather: Active Welcome”
Luke 22:7-13

I recently learned about a special international dinner gathering that takes place in many cities. It is called Diner en Blanc which is an all-white, outdoor, fancy dinner party. Guests arrive from different locations throughout a city to one secret location-usually a landmark in that particular city. In 1988 a Frenchman named Francois Pasquier invited a group of his friends to an outdoor dinner party in Paris. The requirements were simple. Wear formal white attire, be able to enjoy good food and wine and even better company. Guests were expected to exhibit elegance and proper etiquette. He did not reveal the location of the event until the last minute and this tradition remains today. Since then, this annual dinner party has become an amazing experience for many people around the world. Here is a video about this event: <https://youtu.be/9D6Uv1Vcvus>.

The rules and details of the evening make it really special for those who attend. We normally associate social gatherings with etiquette which is about hidden and previous knowledge about what to wear and how to behave. But with the rules being specific of a gathering like Diner en Blanc, everyone becomes equal and no higher social status or upbringing is required. The atmosphere of such gatherings is that of intentional hospitality and inclusion with a clear focus on the purpose.

In our Bible story for today we see Jesus doing a similar thing in terms of his preparations for a special Passover meal with his disciples. Most likely Jesus had arranged ahead of time the location and details of this special celebration with his disciples. He knew this was most likely their last Passover celebration together. Celebrating the Passover was a very important part of the Jewish faith when the people of ancient Israel remembered God saving them from slavery in Egypt. They believed that for the last plague on Egypt, the angel of death passed over their homes and spared their children. The different elements of the meal were all symbolic of the different parts of the story. This was the way they retold the story of God's love for them and their liberation from oppression. Let's watch a video about the celebration of Passover: https://youtu.be/LzsuL9U1a_k.

Jesus took extra care about the preparations for this meal so that the power and symbolism of the ancient story would also connect to his story with them. Let's listen to how Jesus prepared for the feast.

Some interpretations of this story try to depict Jesus knowing about the man with the water jar supernaturally, but a more appropriate interpretation of Jesus preparing ahead of time fits better into how intentional Jesus was about his table fellowship, especially his last Passover meal with the disciples. One clue we get is that Jesus tells Peter and John to go and to find a man who would be carrying a water jar. This was a little unusual because women were the ones who normally carried water. To have a man be the one with the jar was a clear sign for John and Peter to know the man they were looking for. Jesus most likely needed to be discrete about where they were going to have their Passover meal. Even his disciples did not know the location of the meal until they got there.

This meal became one the most important symbols for the gathered community of disciples. Therefore, Jesus' careful preparation of the location and of the venue became the foundation for a sacred gathering to happen. He was a very active host to ensure that those who gathered experienced something that would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

We are invited in the same spirit to prepare for our gatherings and to be active in our hosting of and gathering at the table of Christ. This table has the power to transform our anxieties, fears, hatreds, and timid ways of being in the world. When we experience the hospitality of Christ, we know that we belong and that all of the human family belongs at the feast of God's love. Jesus left us an incredible gift of a gathering format to help us bring all of ourselves and all of our diversity to the grace of God. The invitation is for us to learn from the intentional hospitality of this table so that we may extend the same hospitality to others.

In her book, *The Art of Gathering*, Priya Parker has a chapter called, "Don't Be a Chill Host." She means that hosting a gathering takes intentional effort before and during the gathering. After one sets up the gathering, one has to be proactive about ensuring that the gathering is going well and that the guests are cared for.

I love this image because it reminds us of how God is proactive in being the host of our lives. Jesus showed us in human flesh what it means for God to be our caring host. We are never left on our own to fend for ourselves. We are never neglected or abandoned. Our belonging to the table of Christ is about his act of generosity and not about any of our efforts. We are always invited and welcomed at the table. When we truly experience the depth of our belonging and welcome by God, we are able to be free to invest the same energy of active welcome and acceptance of others. But only when we feel fully accepted are we able to extend the same grace to others. When we experience even a moment of God's incredible welcome of each of us, we are able to see the world from the divine perspective where all are included in God's love, even those who seem so unlovable. That is why we gather and practice communion on a regular basis. It is a table of memory and a table of presence. We remember the stories of God's love and we practice this kind of welcome so that we may get a glimpse or a foretaste of God's eternal realm where all things belong in perfect harmony. There is nothing more formative than this.

This is similar to a powerful scene in the 1984 movie, "Places in the Heart." Sally Fields won an Oscar for her role in this movie. The story takes place in a rural area of the South during the Great Depression. The opening scene is about the accidental shooting of the sheriff, Sally Fields' husband. He was killed by a Black teenager, who was drunk. The local Ku Klux Klan responds by lynching the young boy and brutalizing his body. Sally Fields, the widow, struggles to keep her farm going without her husband and his income. Through the help of a couple of other people who have also fallen on hard times, the widow is able to make it but the hate of the KKK was still active against the Black man who helped her. The movie shows how a widow, a blind man, and Black helper worked together against great odds and against the unfairness of the world. The ending of the

movie is the best part because it shows us God's grand, surprising, and active hospitality. The ending scene is that of a church communion service. At first, all looks normal: A small country church worship service where people are passing around the communion elements, but then something strange happens. We are then invited to see the invisible reality of God's welcome. We start seeing everyone being part of this meal: Enemies, friends, family, those who are departed, those who are struggling, those who are kind, and those who are hateful. The movie moves out of a sort of realism into a deeper kind of reality. There are places in the heart for each person: a husband and wife struggling with marriage, the black drifter, the blind boarder, the widow, the dead husband, and the dead drunk. There are places in the heart because at the communion table there is a place for each of us because Christ welcomes all. We have a place in God's heart. "Places in the Heart" scene: <https://youtu.be/lugyK8XZDDE>.

Consider today who is gathered here at this table, physically here or other places around the world; visibly in this realm or spiritually in the church triumphant, and those who feel that they belong and those who feel alone or rejected. Let's take a moment to imagine all the people who are with us in the great cloud of witnesses who have entered eternal life. As much as we miss them in the physical realm, we also know that they are with us in the spiritual realm. We give thanks to God for this great and powerful welcome where all things and beings belong in the heart of love. Amen.