

If you suddenly found out that Jesus was coming to your place for dinner this afternoon, what would you be doing right now? This was the question I posed to a group of friends many years ago just for fun, so we could see what everyone thought Jesus would expect from us and why we thought that. I was just a baby deacon back then and had no idea what would happen next. It took a different turn than what I'd expected. Let me tell you about it.

Right off the bat, there was a flurry of comments about deciding what to serve; whether lamb or fish would be more appropriate; what kind of bread he might prefer; red wine or white wine or maybe just have lots of water on hand and let him make whatever he wanted. Some insisted that the place needed to be super clean. "Cleanliness is next to godliness," our friend Cindy said, insisting that salvation was not possible for slobs. Murmurs of approval arose in the group.

As the conversation continued, one of the ladies complained that whenever they had major company, she usually ended up spending all her time in the kitchen and never getting to talk in depth with anyone. The rest of us agreed that yes, that tends to happen at big parties, even when they're catered. More often than not, everyone concurred, there's a ton of work, we can't ever seem to get all the help we need to do it all, and we never get to spend enough time with our guests.

After going on like this for a little bit we began to relax and admitted to each other that Jesus would most likely not have a rigid set of requirements, although some disagreed with that. As we were wondering aloud about what Jesus would probably expect from us, Cindy's teenage daughter Fran came in. After listening to us for a little bit she quietly suggested to her mom that we were missing the point. Her mom got our attention and we invited Fran to speak.

“Who invited who, anyway?” Fran asked us. “When God shows up it’s not because he’s hungry. Not for food, anyway. And it’s probably not about how neat we are – God created dirt, too, after all. I think something else is going on.”

I knew in that moment Fran was right. When it was my turn to speak again, I paraphrased Psalm 50, where God shows up and says in so many words: “I find no fault with your sacrifices, but that’s not what I really want. Do you think I eat the flesh of goats and drink the blood of bulls? If I were hungry, I wouldn’t tell you, for I own all the birds of the air, the beasts of the field and everything in the sea. A sacrifice of thanksgiving honors me.”

The room got quiet and we all realized that it’s always Jesus who’s inviting us, not the other way around. Martha and Mary had been invited to join Jesus, not the other way around. Like right here, right now, you and I are at a dinner Jesus has invited us to attend, not the other way around.

We thanked Fran for her insight and then, since we saw that it was us who had been invited, we switched to discussing what we should bring. Everyone agreed that you generally don’t show up empty-handed. Most of us would bring a bottle of wine, a special hors d’oeuvre or dessert, or perhaps something else we know the host and hostess would like. What might Jesus expect, we wondered.

Fran interrupted us again. “Why were you invited in the first place?”

Fran’s mom sensed what her daughter was saying to us and glowed with pride at her daughter’s wisdom. I looked at Fran and suggested she tell us.

“You were invited because the people who invited you wanted to see you,” Fran said. “It’s really that simple. You’re there because they love you and want you around.”

Indeed, Fran was right. How simple indeed. It's like that right here, right now, too. You and I are here because God invited us to share in the Eucharist together, right now. The word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving, and God has told us that's what God really wants from us. We're invited simply because God loves us and wants us to be with him, recognize the presence of love and respond with thanks.

To go deep for a moment, the reason any of us is around anywhere, let alone right here right now, is that God loves us beyond description and wants to be with us - right here, right now - whether we think we've got everything in order or not. All we ever need to bring to the party is a heart open to loving and being loved, and gratitude for the staggering gift of God's love.

Mary got that. Martha was more like me and the rest of my friends until Fran helped us see differently. Regardless of what's for dinner or whether the place is clean enough, simply to be with our friends in the circle of God's love is always the better part, and pretty much all that Jesus would expect of us.