

Look Who's Coming to Easter Dinner: An Immersive Study of the Book of Philemon

DESCRIPTION: *Join us for a special Easter Celebration Gathering where we meet around the table as an early church family remembering the resurrection. Philemon and his family are celebrating Easter and eagerly anticipating reading a letter from their friend the Apostle, Paul. Are they ready to put the message of Jesus into action? Enter the story from a different perspective during this potluck improvisational enactment.*

SCRIPTURE: The book of Philemon in the New Testament.

SETTING: *(Tables on floor, cushions, rugs, various Mediterranean, Middle Eastern décor - this is a surreal then/then/now scenario.)* As congregation members arrive for this themed potluck dinner, they find themselves in house church of Philemon, Apphia and Archippus. These families have gathered together for their weekly meal and worship gathering. This week is special because it the celebration of the Easter feast - a remembrance of the death and resurrection of Christ. They are enjoying a large meal, fellowship, a recounting of the Easter story and communion. The highlight of this gathering is the much anticipated reading of the newest letter from their dear friend the Apostle Paul.

What they aren't anticipating is that the contents of the letter will challenge them all to re-examine the message of Christ in their own lives. And perhaps it will do the same for us.

CAST: Congregation members have been asked ahead of time to take on the roles of Onesimus, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the Narrator. All other participants are invited to be family members in this house church. They are encouraged to make up their own character and/or just watch. All of the dialogue was improvised in the moment within a very simple structure provided by the Narrator.

SCENE 1: People are invited to find a seat and wait for the service to begin. Then, the Pastor taking on the role of narrator, welcomes everyone to the service and explains our play within a play within a play, the context of the book of Philemon, house churches and slavery.

Onesimus was sent by Philemon to serve Paul in prison and didn't return for a long time. He has returned tonight carrying the letter from Paul. No one has noticed he is here and no one knows what the letter contains...

SCENE 2: The narrator then invites Philemon to welcome everyone, recount the Easter story, break bread and bless the communion elements. He then invites everyone to get food and eat and fellowship.

SCENE 3: 15 or so minutes into eating dinner, the narrator gets everyone's attention and asks how they have celebrated Easter so far and what was meaningful about it. Then, the narrator directs the group's attention back to the story by pointing out that Easter is about the sacrificial offering of Christ - whether it is atonement, kenosis (pouring himself out in his life) or incarnation - it is a sacrificial act of giving all of himself for the forgiveness of sin - for the reconciliation between God and man. A canceling of all debt and a making of us children of God, and sisters and brothers, co-heirs with Christ rather than subjects or slaves.

Returning to Philemon, the narrator announces that it is time for the much anticipated reading of the letter from Paul.

Onesimus stands to deliver the letter which shocks everyone especially Philemon who had not seen him up until this point. Some people at the dinner understand why, others are confused. The letter is handed to the narrator to read and it all becomes clear.

SCENE 3:

The Narrator reads the letter.

Then the Narrator asks the congregation to make a freize with gestures and facial expressions that indicate what they are thinking and feeling. The narrator then asks them a series of questions:

- Ask the congregation what they heard from Paul's letter. What is he asking Philemon to do?
- Ask Philemon how he feels about receiving this on Easter. What are his questions or concerns?
- Ask Onesimus how he feels about this situation.
- Ask Apphia and Archippus for their thoughts and feelings.
- Ask the rest of the crowd what they think Philemon should do.
- Ask Philemon again what he *will* do.

Finally, invite the community into a time of prayer for reconciliation. First ask for a volunteer to pray aloud for reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. Then, lead the group in a silent prayer of reflection, asking everyone to consider if there is anything they have done that needs to be forgiven or someone they need to forgive. Then, invite the congregation to consider whether or not they are accepting the forgiveness of Christ or if they would like to accept the invitation to let God be the God of their life. Finally, read an affirmation of forgiveness.

Scene 4: At this time, the communion bread is broken and passed around to the tables. Wine/juice is already present. The narrator leads communion and gives a closing prayer. (Another option might be to have Philemon lead communion.)

The offering plate is placed near the door.

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