

# Welcome to the Party



## **A Desert Spring UMC Community Group Guide Lent 2019**

**Groups meet the weeks of March 10th through April 14<sup>th</sup>.**

**Sermon series ends on Easter Sunday, April 21st.**

## Introduction

### *Welcome to the Party*

Lent is a time of preparation and personal reflection leading up to the celebration of Easter. Parties are about celebration and Christians have a lot to celebrate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Have you ever noticed how many parties are found in the Bible? Parties are taking place all the time. Jesus uses parties as an analogy to help us understand the Kingdom of God. And, we hear about God throwing parties for us! Parties are intentional moments of celebration, where we stop in the midst of the busyness and circumstances of life to celebrate the good stuff of God's presence in our lives. These times of celebration boost our well-being and help to fill our lives with gratitude, which helps us to become resilient even in the midst of the difficulties of life. The grace of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus always gives us reason to celebrate!

So, welcome to the party!

***They will rave in celebration of your abundant goodness; they will shout joyfully about your righteousness.*** Psalm 145:7 (CEB)

### Weekly Topics

1. Welcome to the Party!
2. The Party God Has Planned for You
3. Masquerade Ball
4. Party Favors
5. The Dinner Party
6. The Unwanted Guest

## Outline of Each Community Group Session

Each group session will include the following sections. It will be helpful to familiarize yourself with the structure and flow of the group meetings beforehand.

### G.R.A.C.E.

**Gather** - Each session will begin with the invitation to share a prayer request or praise with the group. The host will then open the session with a time of prayer. This will be followed by an opening discussion to help the group begin thinking about the weekly lesson.

**Receive** - Following the opening discussion the group will read and reflect on passages of scripture related to the topic. Discussion questions will help the group dig deeper into the passages and prepare them for the video teaching of the next section.

**Awaken** - The group will view a video teaching taught by Pastor Dave and Pastor Tim.

**Challenge** - Reflection questions following the video teaching will help the group explore how the insights from the scripture and teaching find application in daily life.

**Exercise** - Each week there will be a closing exercise for the group followed by a closing prayer.

**90 minutes of G.R.A.C.E.**

**Gather ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Receive ≈ 15 Minutes**

**Awaken ≈ 5 Minutes**

**Challenge ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Exercise ≈ 10 Minutes**

### Weekly Rhythm

This community group study was designed with the following weekly rhythm:

1. Each week begins on Sunday in worship, where the sermon will introduce and explore the weekly topic.
2. This will be followed by the opportunity for deeper discussion in the company of your community group during the upcoming week.

## Week 1: Welcome to the Party!

### Gather - Approximately 30 Minutes

#### Open in Prayer Together

- Invite everyone in the group to introduce themselves and to briefly answer the following questions:
  - *What led you to join a community group?*
  - *What do you hope to get out of the community group experience?*
- Invite everyone who is comfortable to share a prayer request or something that they are thankful for with the group.
- Ask for a volunteer to open the group in prayer and to pray for each of the requests and thanksgivings this week. The host will lead the prayer if no one volunteers.

**90 minutes of G.R.A.C.E.**

**Gather ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Receive ≈ 15 Minutes**

**Awaken ≈ 5 Minutes**

**Challenge ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Exercise ≈ 10 Minutes**

#### Opening Discussion

- Why is it important to celebrate the good stuff?
- In what ways is a party an intentional way to celebrate?
- How do you like to celebrate a special event or achievement? Is there a special place, or time, or activity? Be specific!
- How do you celebrate the great little moments of life?
- How are celebration and gratitude related?

### Receive - Approximately 15 Minutes

#### Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:

Most weeks have their ups and downs, but some weeks are harder than others!

In our passage today we look at a story that comes from St. Paul's work in the community of Philippi (Acts 16). St. Paul and his partner Silas were traveling and sharing the good news of the Gospel. Their week began on a high note when the heart of a woman named Lydia was opened by God's grace. Paul baptized Lydia and her entire household. Lydia offered to let Paul and Silas stay in her home so they could continue their work in Philippi. This was definitely a reason for Paul and Silas to party!

While their week got off to a fabulous start there was trouble right around the corner.

**There are three scenes in our story. If possible invite a different volunteer to read each scene.**

### **Acts 16:16-34**

#### **Scene 1 - Volunteer 1**

One day, on our way to the place of prayer, a slave girl ran into us. She was a psychic and, with her fortunetelling, made a lot of money for the people who owned her. She started following Paul around, calling everyone's attention to us by yelling out, "These men are working for the Most High God. They're laying out the road of salvation for you!" She did this for a number of days until Paul, finally fed up with her, turned and commanded the spirit that possessed her, "Out! In the name of Jesus Christ, get out of her!" And it was gone, just like that. When her owners saw that their lucrative little business was suddenly bankrupt, they went after Paul and Silas, roughed them up and dragged them into the market square. Then the police arrested them and pulled them into a court with the accusation, "These men are disturbing the peace—dangerous Jewish agitators subverting our Roman law and order." By this time the crowd had turned into a restless mob out for blood.

#### **Scene 2 - Volunteer 2**

The judges went along with the mob, had Paul and Silas's clothes ripped off and ordered a public beating. After beating them black-and-blue, they threw them into jail, telling the jailkeeper to put them under heavy guard so there would be no chance of escape. He did just that—threw them into the maximum-security cell in the jail and clamped leg irons on them. Along about midnight, Paul and Silas were at prayer and singing a robust hymn to God. The other prisoners couldn't believe their ears. Then, without warning, a huge earthquake! The jailhouse tottered, every door flew open, all the prisoners were loose.

#### **Scene 3 - Volunteer 3**

Startled from sleep, the jailer saw all the doors swinging loose on their hinges. Assuming that all the prisoners had escaped, he pulled out his sword and was about to do himself in, figuring he was as good as dead anyway, when Paul stopped him: "Don't do that!

We're all still here! Nobody's run away!" The jailer got a torch and ran inside. Badly shaken, he collapsed in front of Paul and Silas. He led them out of the jail and asked, "Sirs, what do I have to do to be saved, to really live?" They said, "Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus. Then you'll live as you were meant to live—and everyone in your house included!" They went on to spell out in detail the story of the Master—the entire family got in on this part. They never did get to bed that night. The jailer made them feel at home, dressed their wounds, and then—he couldn't wait till morning!—was baptized, he and everyone in his family.

*There in his home, he had food set out for a festive meal. It was a night to remember: He and his entire family had put their trust in God; everyone in the house was in on the celebration.*

### **Discussion Questions**

- How did Paul and Silas end up in trouble?
- What happened to Paul and Silas?
- What were Paul and Silas' circumstances in the prison?
- How did Paul and Silas respond to their tough circumstances?
- What happened next?
- How did the Jailer respond to the "story of the Master (the Gospel)?"
- What could the Jailer not wait until morning to do (remember Lydia)!
- How does the story end?

### **Awaken - Approximately 5 Minutes**

#### **Play the Video Teaching for Week 1**

### **Challenge - Approximately 30 Minutes**

- Place yourself in the shoes of Paul and Silas. What might you be thinking as you sat in the prison cell that night in pain?
- What might you be doing? What might you be saying (or tempted to say) to God?
- What **two** things did Paul and Silas do in the jail?
- How can prayer help us to find reasons to celebrate during the tough circumstances of life?
- How does worship sustain us during challenging times?

- Can you think of time in your life when you have experienced prayer and worship helping to sustain you during tough times? If you feel comfortable, share examples of these experiences as a group.
- How does our faith change the way that we face suffering?
- How did Paul and Silas' celebration of all that God had done for them in midst of their horrible week impact the lives of others in the story?
- Have you experienced a Paul or Silas in your life? How did they impact you?

## **Exercise - Approximately 10 Minutes**

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

Years later St. Paul would write to the people of the Church of Philippi, reminding them of the importance of celebrating God's grace that came to them in Jesus Christ. In the passage Paul tells them that he has learned the secret to being content and at peace in all circumstances, both good and bad.

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

#### **Philippians 4:4-7, 12-13 (NRSV)**

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus...I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

### **Closing Exercise – Reasons to Party**

#### **Step 1**

The first step in celebrating is to take time to become mindful of the good stuff in our lives. Spend a few moments making a list of the all reasons that God has given you to celebrate today.

#### **Step 2**

As a group spend the remaining time by sharing your reasons to celebrate with each other. Feel free to party as you do!

### **Step 3**

When you are finished, invite a volunteer to close your group in prayer. The host will lead the prayer if no one volunteers.

## **Week 2: The Party God Has Planned for You**

### **Gather - Approximately 30 Minutes**

#### **Open in Prayer Together**

- Invite any new members to the group to briefly introduce themselves. Invite everyone to share a prayer request, or something that they are thankful for with the group.
- Ask for a volunteer to open the group in prayer and to pray for each of the requests and thanksgivings this week.

**90 minutes of G.R.A.C.E.**

**Gather ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Receive ≈ 15 Minutes**

**Awaken ≈ 5 Minutes**

**Challenge ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Exercise ≈ 10 Minutes**

#### **Opening Discussion**

Keep on Moving! This week we are jumping right into scripture!

### **Receive - Approximately 30 Minutes**

#### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

Last week we discussed parties as intentional moments of celebration in response to the grace of God that comes to us in Jesus. This week we are going to think about what Jesus taught us about God's invitation to the party that God has planned for us.

#### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

**Luke 15 The Message (MSG) 15 1-10**

By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” Their grumbling triggered this story.

“Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn’t you leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? When found, you can be sure you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home call in your friends and neighbors, saying,

*‘Celebrate with me! I’ve found my lost sheep!’*

*Count on it—there’s more joy in heaven over one sinner’s rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue.*

“Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she’ll call her friends and neighbors: ‘Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!’

*Count on it—that’s the kind of party God’s angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God.”*

### **Discussion Questions**

- Who was hanging out with Jesus?
- How was Jesus treating them?
- How did the Pharisees respond?
- Why did Jesus tell the Pharisees these stories?
- How does the sheep story relate to what we learn in the beginning about Jesus and the people of “doubtful reputation?”
- What does the story of the lost coin tell us about how God values us?

## **Luke 15 The Message (MSG) 15 11-32**

**There are three scenes in our story. If possible invite a different volunteer to read each scene.**

### **Scene 1 - Volunteer 1**

Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’

“So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

### **Scene 2 - Volunteer 2**

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

“But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

### **Scene 3 - Volunteer 3**

“All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, ‘Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.’

“The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. The son said, ‘Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!’

“His father said, ‘Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!’”

### **Discussion Questions**

- When does one usually expect to receive an inheritance?
- How would you characterize the lost son’s treatment of the Father?
- Why does the lost son return home?
- In scene 2 when did the Father see the son? Why is this an important part of the story?
- How does the Father respond?
- How would you describe the celebration?
- In scene 3 what was the older brother doing when all of this was happening?
- How would you describe the older brother?
- How did the older brother respond to the news of his younger brother and the party thrown in his honor?
- What does the father do in response?
- What does the father tell the older brother?

### **Awaken - Approximately 5 Minutes**

### **Play the Video Teaching for Week 2**

## Challenge - Approximately 30 Minutes

Both brothers turn their back on the father for different reasons.

- What desire led the lost son to leave?
- What was the older brother unable to accept about the father's treatment of the lost son? Why?
- Which brother do you relate to the most? Why?
- What did the lost son learn about the father?
- What did the older brother learn about the father?

In the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, Jesus tells these three stories to teach us about the party that God has prepared for us.

- What do these stories of Jesus teach us about God?
- How might the one sheep have gotten separated from the ninety-nine?
- Have you ever thought about God as a God that searches for you?
- How did the "lost sheep" return to the fold?
- How might this change how you relate to God?
- What do these stories teach us about what God desires for us?
- What do they teach us about what God is willing to do to fulfill God's desire for us?
- Have you ever experienced a time when you wandered away from God? Without sharing the details, what was this experience like?
- How did you return?
- What was it like to return?
- Have you ever thought about God celebrating and throwing a party when God finds you? How might this have helped you come home?

## Exercise - Approximately 10 Minutes

### Closing Exercise: Party Invitations

1. The host has been provided with party invitations for each of you. At this time pass the invitations out.
2. Once everyone has an invitation, enter into a 2 to 3 minute time of silent reflection.
3. During this time you are invited to open the invitation, read what is inside, and write in the invitation any responses that surface for you to the prompt inside.
4. When the time of silent reflection has ended, share any closing thoughts as a group. If there are none, close in prayer.

When you are finished, invite a volunteer to close your group in prayer. The host will lead the prayer if no one volunteers.

## **Week 3: Masquerade Ball**

### **Gather - Approximately 30 Minutes**

#### **Open in Prayer Together**

- Invite any new members to the group to briefly introduce themselves. Invite everyone to share a prayer request, or something that they are thankful for with the group.
- Ask for a volunteer to open the group in prayer and to pray for each of the requests and thanksgivings this week.

**90 minutes of G.R.A.C.E.**

**Gather ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Receive ≈ 15 Minutes**

**Awaken ≈ 5 Minutes**

**Challenge ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Exercise ≈ 10 Minutes**

#### **Opening Discussion**

##### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

At a masquerade ball, partygoers wear masks or fantastic costumes to temporarily become someone they are not. There can be something freeing about pretending to be someone else for a while. In some ways life can be thought of as a Masquerade Ball. We know in life that emotional masks can exist as a way of projecting a persona to the public, an image of whom it is that we want them to see. These masks can cover up deeper layers of insecurity, fear, anxiety, shame, depression, grief, and other facets of our lives. The more masks that we wear, the more exhausting our lives can become as fear grows that the world will see whom we really are.

#### **Discussion Questions**

- How can our social media personas become a mask?
- What masks do you see others most often wearing (on social media and life in general)?
- What are they trying to hide about the realities of their life?
- What are they most often trying to portray?
- Are masks necessary to fit in to the great masquerade ball of life?

## Receive - Approximately 15 Minutes

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

In Genesis chapter 2 we find an image of human beings in an intimate, face-to-face relationship with God and with each other. God has placed them in a garden that provides everything that they need, and has given them the responsibility of tending the garden. In the garden was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God instructed Adam and Eve that they were not eat the fruit of this tree. In the story Adam and Eve are tempted and eat the fruit.

The author of Genesis gives us a before and after image to help us understand what God intended for humanity and the effect of sin.

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

#### **Genesis 2:25 (NRSV)**

25 And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

#### **Discussion Questions**

- What might it mean to you that human beings were “naked” and “not ashamed?” What is the author of Genesis trying to say?
- What might this tell us about the nature of their relationship to God, to each other, and with themselves?

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

#### **Genesis 3:6-10 (NRSV)**

6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God

among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” 10 He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

### **Discussion Questions**

Adam and Eve recognized they were “naked” and covered themselves in verse 7. In verse 9, we find God seeking them, asking: “Where are you?”

- How did their relationship change with each other, themselves, and God?
- Why do you think Adam and Eve felt the need to cover themselves?
- Why were they hiding from God?
- What is the author of Genesis trying to help us understand?

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

Adam and Eve understood that God was able to see who they really were, and what it was they had done. This fear caused them to try and hide from God. Today we know that God is present in our lives and can see through our masks. In our passage from Luke, Jesus teaches that God has invited us all to a banquet.

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

#### **Luke 14:16b-20 (CEB)**

“A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, ‘Come! The dinner is now ready.’ One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, ‘I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I bought five teams of oxen, and I’m going to check on them. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

### **Discussion Questions**

- What do you think of the reasons of those who were unable to attend?
- Why might they be making excuses?

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

In the following passage Peter is writing to believers to help them understand their identity as Christians.

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

**1 Peter 2:9-10 (CEB)**

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

**Discussion Questions**

- According to this passage how does God see you? "You are a...?"
- How are God's people a people formed by God's mercy?
- How has God's mercy called us out of darkness and into the light?

**Awaken - Approximately 5 Minutes**

**Play the Video Teaching for Week 3**

**Challenge - Approximately 30 Minutes**

**Discussion Questions**

- What does it mean to you to be authentic?
- What does it mean to you to be inauthentic?
- In what ways did Eve and Adam go from being authentic to being inauthentic?
- What are some reasons that we might not feel comfortable in our own skin?
- What role do insecurity and fear play in the masks we might wear?

The Garden of Eden can be thought of like the banquet in the story Jesus used to describe the kingdom of God from the Gospel of Luke.

- How is the banquet (kingdom of God) like the garden?
- How do we enter the kingdom?
- What is Jesus inviting us to?
- What reasons might we have to make excuses like the people invited in Jesus' story (what reasons did they give in the passage)?
- How does God's mercy help us to take off our masks?

- How does God see us (it may be helpful to reread the passage from 1 Peter)?
- Do you find it difficult to think of God seeing you in this way? Why?
- What can prevent us from coming to see ourselves as God sees us?

## **Exercise - Approximately 10 Minutes**

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

We are not born wearing masks. We put them on over the course of our lives. God has invited all of us to strip off our masks. God's mercy has called us out of the darkness and into the light.

The following exercise is one that we invite you to briefly engage with in the remaining time. This is an exercise that we invite you to fully do on your own after this session.

### **Closing Exercise – How God Sees You**

#### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

1. Ask someone to set a timer on his or her phone for five minutes. Once you have read the rest of the instructions and are ready to begin, start the timer, and allow everyone five minutes to engage with the questions of the exercise on their own.
2. What negative messages or beliefs about yourself have you held onto? What masks are you wearing? Take a few moments to write in detail about these perceived inadequacies. What feelings, images, thoughts or experiences come up for you when you think about it? *These are for your eyes only.*
3. Write a letter to yourself from God's perspective. How does God see you?
  - What does God want to say to you?
  - How does God encourage you?
  - What is God inviting you to do?
  - How has God chosen you?
  - How is God offering you healing?
4. As a group reflect on the experience, only sharing what you are comfortable with.

#### **The following three prompts may be helpful:**

- How has this exercise helped you to think about how God sees you?

- How might this exercise help you to show yourself more self-compassion for your perceived mistakes, failures, or shortcomings?
- Are there any masks that God is inviting you remove? What stands in the way?

When you are finished, invite a volunteer to close your group in prayer. The host will lead the prayer if no one volunteers.

## **Week 4: Party Favors**

### **Gather - Approximately 30 Minutes**

#### **Open in Prayer Together**

- Invite any new members to the group to briefly introduce themselves. Invite everyone to share a prayer request, or something that they are thankful for with the group.
- Ask for a volunteer to open the group in prayer and to pray for each of the requests and thanksgivings this week.

**90 minutes of G.R.A.C.E.**

**Gather ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Receive ≈ 15 Minutes**

**Awaken ≈ 5 Minutes**

**Challenge ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Exercise ≈ 10 Minutes**

#### **Opening Discussion**

Play Super Bloom Video: 3 Minutes

#### **Discussion Questions**

Death Valley Park Ranger Valkenburg describes his experience of living in Death Valley for 25 years and seeing lots of incredible blooms that he was very excited to see. His first experience of the extravagance of a true Super Bloom completely blew him away. He says that he had no idea that there could be that many seeds out there.

#### **Have you ever had a “Super Bloom” experience?**

- As a group, spend some time, sharing stories of “Super Blooms” in your life.
- How do these experiences of unexpected extravagance impact us?

### **Receive - Approximately 15 Minutes**

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group.**

## **John 2:1-11 (MSG)**

Three days later there was a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there. Jesus and his disciples were guests also. When they started running low on wine at the wedding banquet, Jesus' mother told him, "They're just about out of wine."

Jesus said, "Is that any of our business, Mother—yours or mine? This isn't my time. Don't push me."

She went ahead anyway, telling the servants, "Whatever he tells you, do it."

Six stoneware water pots were there, used by the Jews for ritual washings. Each held twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus ordered the servants, "Fill the pots with water." And they filled them to the brim.

"Now fill your pitchers and take them to the host," Jesus said, and they did.

When the host tasted the water that had become wine (he didn't know what had just happened but the servants, of course, knew), he called out to the bridegroom, "Everybody I know begins with their finest wines and after the guests have had their fill brings in the cheap stuff. But you've saved the best till now!"

This act in Cana of Galilee was the first sign Jesus gave, the first glimpse of his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What happens in this story?
- How many gallons of wine did Jesus' first miracle produce?
- What was the host's response?
- How did the disciples react to this "glimpse" of Jesus' glory?

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group.**

## **Ephesians 1:1-10 (MSG)**

I, Paul, am under God's plan as an apostle, a special agent of Christ Jesus, writing to you faithful believers in Ephesus. I greet you with the grace and peace poured into our lives by God our Father and our Master, Jesus Christ.

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be

made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What feelings does this passage bring up in you?
- How does Paul describe God's feelings in doing this for us?
- How is it that God invites us into "the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son?"

## **Awaken - Approximately 5 Minutes**

### **Play the Video Teaching for Week 4**

## **Challenge - Approximately 30 Minutes**

### **Discussion Questions**

- How long does a Death Valley super bloom last?
- How long did the wine from Jesus' first miracle last?
- What do these temporary extravagances teach us about the nature of God?
- Have you ever thought of God taking pleasure in planning the favor that God poured into our lives in Jesus? How might this change the way you think about what God did for us in Jesus?
- How long does God's favor for us in Jesus last?
- What "favors" does God lavish on us in Jesus?
- How much did these "favors" cost God?
- How much does it cost us?
- If God's favor is free to us, does that mean that it is cheap? Why is this important to think about?

## **Exercise - Approximately 10 Minutes**

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group.**

**Luke 12:22-28**

### **Steep Yourself in God-Reality**

He continued this subject with his disciples. “Don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or if the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your inner life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the ravens, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, carefree in the care of God. And you count far more.

“Has anyone by fussing before the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? If fussing can’t even do that, why fuss at all? Walk into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They don’t fuss with their appearance—but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. If God gives such attention to the wildflowers, most of them never even seen, don’t you think he’ll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?

### **Closing Exercise – Living in Gratitude**

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group.**

This week we thought about the lavish, extravagant, grace of God that is sufficient for every need, and that never runs out. As Christians, God’s desire for us is that live our lives from this perspective of abundance. This is not always easy to do. In the passage that we just read, Jesus is trying to remind his disciples of what living with the recognition of God’s favor is to look like.

The following exercise begins with a time of personal reflection followed by sharing as a group. Take a few minutes to write down the responses that come up for you to the following prompts.

- What events of this day are you grateful for?

- Who or what in your immediate surroundings are you grateful for?
- What people in your life are you grateful for?
- What is it about you as an individual (gifts, health, etc.) that you are grateful for?
- How is it that God is the source of all of these extravagant blessings?
- For what are you grateful to God today?

As a group share the blessings that came up for you during this exercise.

When you are finished, invite a volunteer to close your group in prayer. The host will lead the prayer if no one volunteers.

**Next week you will close your time together with a Holy Meal reflecting on the practice and meaning of Communion.**

This meal will include the elements of communion, bread and grape juice.

Any form of bread will do, check with your group to see if anyone is gluten or dairy free to make sure that you have an option for them. You can break the bread into pieces beforehand or you can pass around a loaf for everyone to take a piece from. Use grape juice so everyone can receive. Small plastic cups will be sufficient. The amounts needed are small. This is not a meal in regular sense of the word.

Take a look at the closing exercise for next week and spend a few moments to plan as a group.

## **Week 5: The Dinner Party**

### **Gather - Approximately 30 Minutes**

#### **Open in Prayer Together**

- Invite any new members to the group to briefly introduce themselves. Invite everyone to share a prayer request, or something that they are thankful for with the group.

**90 minutes of G.R.A.C.E.**

**Gather ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Receive ≈ 15 Minutes**

**Awaken ≈ 5 Minutes**

**Challenge ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Exercise ≈ 10 Minutes**

- Ask for a volunteer to open the group in prayer and to pray for each of the requests and thanksgivings this week.

### **Opening Discussion**

Eucharist is the Greek word for thanksgiving and is also another name for the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. Communion may best be understood as a dinner party celebrating the victory of God.

### **Discussion Questions**

- As a group discuss your understanding of the meaning of communion.
- How do you understand communion as a celebration of God's Victory? What are we giving thanks for?
- What was your most meaningful experience of the Eucharist? What made it so significant?

#### **Communion:**

The practice of eating and drinking consecrated bread and wine (or grape juice), as a worshipping community.

### **Receive - Approximately 15 Minutes**

#### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

The Passover is an annual Jewish feast and holiday in which God's liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in ancient Egypt is remembered and celebrated. The Passover meal that Jesus celebrated with his disciples was the last meal (supper) that Jesus would eat with his disciples before his crucifixion.

#### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

#### **Luke 22:14-20 (NRSV)**

14 When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. 15 He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16 for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." 17 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; 18 for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 19 Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance

of me.” 20 And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What does Jesus do and say in verse 17? What instructions did he give his disciples?
- What does Jesus do and say in verse 19? What instructions did he give his disciples?
- What does the bread represent?
- What does the wine represent?
- What are Christians remembering (Verse 19) in the practice of communion?

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

In Paul’s letter to the people of the church in Corinth St. Paul is trying to help them understand one of the main reasons that Jesus commanded us to continue, “practicing” communion.

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

#### **1 Corinthians 10:15b-17 (CEB)**

Think about what I’m saying. Isn’t the cup of blessing that we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Isn’t the loaf of bread that we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one loaf of bread, we who are many are one body, because we all share the one loaf of bread.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How do you understand Paul’s statements that in sharing in the cup and the loaf that we share in the body of Christ?
- Who is the “one loaf of bread” that Paul refers to?
- How do you understand what Paul means when he says; “we who are many are one body?” What “body” is Paul referring to?
- How do you understand Paul’s main point to the Corinthians in this passage?
- What is communion supposed to be helping them to remember and recognize about the Christian community?

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' last supper with his disciples is contained in chapter 13. Chapters 14 through 17 are understood to be Jesus' last time to speak with his disciples before his arrest that same evening. In these chapters Jesus shares many important things that they need to know before his crucifixion. In Chapter 17 Jesus prays for his disciples. Following is the closing portion of that prayer.

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

#### **John 17:20-24 (NRSV)**

20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Who, other than the disciples is Jesus praying for in verse 20?
- What is Jesus' prayer for us verse 21?

Jesus illustrates the depth of his desired unity for us as the body of Christ throughout this passage. Take a moment to reread it looking for his descriptions.

- What words would you use to describe Jesus' desired union for us?
- How does this union reflect Jesus' union with God?
- How is this an uncommon-unity that Jesus is calling his followers to?

## **Awaken - Approximately 5 Minutes**

### **Play the Video Teaching for Week 5**

## **Challenge - Approximately 30 Minutes**

Jesus commands his disciples to “do this in remembrance of me.” Holy Communion is a gift to us from the Lord with many layers of meaning, teaching, and remembrance of what Jesus did for us. Beyond these layers of meaning Holy Communion is also a source of Jesus’ real sustaining, healing, and nurturing presence, in which we experience the grace of God through the Holy Spirit. Jesus invites us all to come to the Lord’s table.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What has stood out to you during our discussion of communion?
- Why is it important for us to remember Jesus’ sacrifice for us in the broken bread and wine? How have you experienced this?
- How is communion an individual practice? What are we “practicing?” How have you experienced this?
- How is communion a practice of the Christian community? What are we “practicing?” How have you experienced this?

The Triclinium discussion helps us to understand that there are different “seats” that we can take around the Lord’s Table. In one seat Jesus serves us, in another seat we serve Jesus, and in another seat we are the servant of everyone at the table. Jesus invites us to spend time in each of these seats as his disciples.

- How have you experienced Jesus serving you (nurturing, healing, sustaining), while at the Lord’s Table?
- How have you experienced Jesus inviting you to serve him, at the Lord’s Table?
- How have you experienced Jesus inviting you to serve others at the Lord’s Table?
- Which seat is Jesus inviting you to sit in today?
- Is there a seat that you have not experienced at the Lord’s Table?

## **Exercise - Approximately 10 Minutes**

### **Closing Exercise: Practicing Communion Together**

#### **Preparation**

Make sure the elements are ready to share. Each person will serve the person next to them, passing the elements around the circle. Take a moment to decide how you would

like to do this before you start so you do not have to interrupt your time in sharing the Holy Meal. Once you have figured it out follow the steps below.

Please identify the volunteers who will be reading and which parts they will read before you begin. Four volunteers are needed. As a community practice it is important to have different volunteers for each part.

### **Opening Prayer - Volunteer 1**

Take a moment as a group to take a few breaths and become present to each other. Invite someone to read the opening prayer.

### **Invite a volunteer to lead the group in prayer. Join together as a group to pray the Lord's Prayer at the end.**

Gracious and loving God, we give thanks to you for the many blessings that we have in your Son, Jesus Christ; Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with the lowly. Your Spirit anointed him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and to recover the sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, and to announce that the time had come when through your grace that you would bring salvation to all.

By the baptism of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your Church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.

When the Lord Jesus ascended, he promised to be with us always.

Tonight we ask that your Holy Spirit would be with us and bless us as we give thanks to you. Join us together that we may be one. Sustain us with your presence and fill us with the healing power of your grace that is sufficient for every need.

All of these things we ask and pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name,

your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

**John 6:35 (NRSV) - Volunteer 2**

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

**Pass the Bread**

Pass the loaf; each person serving their neighbor.

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

**1 Corinthians 10:17 (CEB) - Volunteer 3**

Since there is one loaf of bread, we who are many are one body, because we all share the one loaf of bread.

**Eat the Bread Together**

**Pass the Juice**

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

**Luke 22:14-20 NRSV - Volunteer 4**

And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

**Drink the Juice Together**

**Conclude in Prayer: Everyone**

**As a group read the following prayer together close:**

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery  
in which you have given yourself to us.  
Grant that we may go into the world  
in the strength of your Spirit,  
to give ourselves for others,  
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Week 6: The Unwanted Guest**

**Gather - Approximately 30 Minutes**

**Open in Prayer Together**

- Invite everyone to share a prayer request, or something that they are thankful for with the group.
- Ask for a volunteer to open the group in prayer and to pray for each of the requests and thanksgivings this week.

**Opening Discussion**

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

Have you ever been to a party where an unwanted guest shows up? Maybe the party was so good that the police showed up, threatening the party? Maybe it's that person that no one wants to be around, the person whose presence ruins the party for some reason. I'm guessing that many of us have had this experience or that maybe there have been times where we have felt like the unwanted the guest.

**Discussion Questions**

- In what ways can an unwanted guest ruin a party? How have you experienced this?
- Have you ever been to a party "so good" that the police show up? Why did they come? How did their presence ruin the party?
- Have you ever felt like the unwanted guest? What was the experience like?

**Receive - Approximately 15 Minutes**

**90 minutes of G.R.A.C.E.**

**Gather ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Receive ≈ 15 Minutes**

**Awaken ≈ 5 Minutes**

**Challenge ≈ 30 Minutes**

**Exercise ≈ 10 Minutes**

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

Last Sunday was Palm Sunday, which marks the beginning of Holy Week. In our time together as group last week we thought about Jesus' last supper with his disciples and the institution of the Christian practice of Communion. We remember this night during Holy Week, on Thursday. Jesus was betrayed and arrested on Thursday night and crucified on Friday, which Christians remember as Good Friday.

Palm Sunday is when Christians remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Jerusalem was full of those who had come to celebrate the Passover (Jesus' Thursday night meal with his disciples). The Passover was a festive occasion. It was a celebration of Israel's release from Egyptian bondage.

The Passover was party time in Jerusalem! Everyone who was anyone was there. People came from all across the land! And, Passover parties were not just feasts, they were a time of great expectation that one day the host of the party, the Messiah would come. Jesus makes his way to the party. His followers know he is the long awaited one. So, as he enters Jerusalem, they shout Hosanna. This is going to be the best party of all!

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

**Matthew 21:1-9 (NRSV)**

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,  
“Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

### **Discussion Questions**

- How did Jesus enter Jerusalem?
- Do kings normally enter the capital city on the back of the foal of a donkey? How is Jesus’ entry different? Why do think Jesus chose to enter this way?
- How was Jesus greeted?

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

“Hosanna!” means hooray for salvation! It's coming! It's here! Hooray for the king!  
Salvation belongs to the king!

- What were the people saying about Jesus?
- Who did they believe him to be?
- What were the people of Jerusalem expecting?

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Matthew Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. For the next two chapters Jesus interacts with the religious leaders of Jerusalem who make it clear that ***Jesus is not welcome at their party.*** Following are Jesus’ words at the end of the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter.

### **Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

**Matthew 23:37-39 (NRSV)**

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

### **Discussion Questions**

- What was Jesus’ desire for the people of Jerusalem?
- What feelings come to mind when you think of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings?

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

### **Matthew 27:16-26 (NIV)**

At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.”

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

“Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” asked the governor.

“Barabbas,” they answered.

“What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” Pilate asked.

They all answered, “Crucify him!”

“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!”

All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!”

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

## **Awaken - Approximately 5 Minutes**

### **Play the Video Teaching for Week 6**

## **Challenge - Approximately 30 Minutes**

As Christians, if we are honest, most of us have likely experienced Jesus’ presence in the “party of our lives” at times with shouts of Hosanna and welcome, and at other times as an unwelcome guest.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How have you experienced Jesus presence in the “party of your life” with shouts of Hosanna? Share some stories of these experiences.
- What are some ways that Jesus’ presence in the “party of our lives” can make him feel like an unwanted guest? How have you experienced this?
- What feelings does Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem from Matthew 23:37; “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” bring up for you?
- What is Jesus’ desire for us?
- How have you heard Jesus’ knock at the door, his desire to come in and feast with you (Rev 3:20), during this season of Lent?

## **Exercise - Approximately 10 Minutes**

### **Closing Exercise: Party Time**

**Invite a volunteer to read the following out loud to the group:**

On Easter Sunday we celebrate Jesus' resurrection. In this study we have reflected on the many reasons that we have to celebrate as Christians. Jesus has invited us all to the party! We conclude our study tonight with a final question and then invite you to party together as a group, in celebration of all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

**John 14:2- 3 (NRSV)**

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

**Revelation 3:20 (NRSV)**

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

**Discussion Question**

What have you found to be the most meaningful take-away from this study?

When you are finished, invite a volunteer to close your group in prayer. The host will lead the prayer if no one volunteers.