

(*Celebration* playing--CD) Good morning! How great it is to see you...all of you...on this Growing in Faith Together Sunday. I am running late for the party. Do I look a little different? You're right. I DID brush my teeth for an extra-long time this morning. Do you like my shark pajamas?! How about my hair? It's not quite ready yet—I have my curlers still in. Today is a special day for me, for ALL of us, as we get ready for the party. This is going to be bigger than a birthday party, or anniversary or graduation, even a retirement party! We are going to talk about this party soon, but before we do, we need some things to get ready for it. What do you need in order to have a party?

First, we need...a party table (table cloth). But we can't have a party without people, we need an invitation (SLIDE) to invite people. Look what it says on the bottom..."RSVP." Do you know what those letters mean? It comes from the French expression: "Repondez, s'il vous plait?" Say that with me. It means that we want people to respond and let us know if they are coming to the party. What about food? (cookie) And something to drink? (punch) How about decorations? (Crepe paper, balloons, confetti) What about noise makers? (Noise makers) We can't have a party without hats! (Hats) This is great. And of course we need a party sign (SLIDE) and some music. Celebrate good times...c'mon! Sing it with me, "**Celebrate good times...c'mon.**" One more time. We are cooler than Kool and the Gang!

There is a party going on in the Gospel this morning. It's God's party. Let's read about it. It comes from Matthew chapter 14, as found in our SPARK STORY BIBLE. (SPARK STORY BIBLE SLIDES)

Jesus tells this story to explain how everyone is invited to God's party. We heard about this king who plans a wedding party for his son. Unfortunately, the party did not go as the king hoped. All of the plans were made, the food was ready, the table was set, the invitations were sent, but on the

day of the celebration, who showed up? No one. Everyone had an excuse. The people were too busy. The king was not happy—he was insulted and angry—so angry.

How would feel if you sent out invitations for your party...maybe a birthday party or a wedding or retirement party and nobody came? (Bad. It would hurt your feelings). So the king sends out more invitations, and finally the people came—the good, the bad, the rich and poor, the young and old, everyone. The party was filled with people and celebration. **“Celebrate good times...c’mon!”**

We can’t think of this story as a news report—as something that happened a long time ago and doesn’t mean anything for us today. This is a parable Jesus told—a simple story, that tells us about who God is and who we are as God’s people. Do you have any guesses on who the king is a symbol of (God)? And how about the son (Jesus)? And the people? (us)

God invites all of us. Why? Why would God invite the good, the bad, anyone and everyone to this party? There are some people who think only certain people fit the guest list. Only those who come to church, or those who study their Bible and pray every day, or those who come to Confirmation or go to Sunday School, or put money in the offering plate. Only these people *deserve* to get an invitation to God’s party. But that’s not how it works. Doing those things are ways that we can love God and love others, but they don’t EARN us an invitation or make any one MORE deserving of it. NONE of us are perfect. The most amazing, unexpected thing about God’s invitation is that we are not included because of who we are: of how old or young we are, or how beautiful or how smart or rich or talented or well-dressed or even how often we go to church or read our Bibles. No matter how hard we try, we sin, we mess up, we hurt God and hurt others. We are invited to God’s party because of who God is and how Jesus died to forgive us so we can be with Jesus forever. God’s party is life and

time WITH God – forever. God’s invitation is for each and every person, for you AND for me, even for the person you have a hard time loving or even liking. (SLIDE)

This means we have to be ok with God’s guest list, the list of people invited to the party. We can’t say who is and who is not invited. Maybe you think the only people on God’s guest list should be those who think like you, or dress like you, or talk like you. Maybe you wouldn’t invite Republicans, or maybe you wouldn’t invite Democrats. Maybe you wouldn’t invite any old people besides your grandparents. Maybe you think kids today are too noisy and disrespectful. They wouldn’t be on your guest list. Maybe you think only Lutherans should be invited or only Christians, or only Americans. But we are NOT the party planners, God is. Everyone is welcome and deserves a place at God’s table. That’s something to celebrate. **“Celebrate good times, c’mon!”**

If this invitation is so great, why do you think people say no to God’s invitation? Like the people in Jesus’ story, it’s easy to come up with excuses to not spend time with God. Has your response or RSVP to God’s party on Sunday morning ever said this? Read these with me (SLIDES): “Sorry, I’m busy.” “I’ve got tickets for the game.” “I really want to watch cartoons or CBS Sunday morning.” “Sunday is my only day to sleep in.” “I’ve got soccer practice.” “I went to worship *last* week.” “No one talks to me at church.” “They keep changing things.” “I don’t feel like I belong.” But our excuses reach outside of Sunday morning too. “I’m too busy.” “Church is boring.” “I’m not sure I even believe in God.” “My prayer hasn’t been answered.” “If God exists, why do bad things happen to good people?” “If God really cares, why is there war, hunger, and disease?” “If God knew what I was really like, God wouldn’t want me.” “Christians think they are better than everyone else.”

Do these sound familiar? (SLIDE) They do for me too! I admit there are days I get to bed before I even say God’s name. And even though I’m a pastor, there are Sundays I’d rather sleep in and watch

TV or drink coffee and play outside. There are days I wonder where God is, but our questions, wonder, even doubt, are a part of our faith. We are promised Jesus is with us always, even in the hardest times, even when we doubt and wonder. God's invitation isn't just for Sundays and it doesn't expire. God wants to spend time with us every day. God wants us to say "Yes, I'll be there. Count me in." **"Celebrate good times, c'mon!"**

The question now is what do we do with God's invitation? We are invited to live a life WITH and FOR God. Are we "pleased to attend" or will we regretfully say "no"? Will we keep it on the shelf and let it collect dust? Will we allow our worries of life to be more important than God? Will we continue to say and do things that harm ourselves and others? Will we pass up this opportunity to celebrate good times and live the abundant life Jesus gives? God doesn't call us to come to the party and just hang out at the punch bowl. God invites us to jump fully in, to get out on the dance floor, to mingle with the guests, and to celebrate and live a full life following Jesus. Sing with me! **"Celebrate good times, come on!"**

So instead of our excuses and saying "no" or "sorry, I can't attend," what if we say "yes" to God's invitation? Even though we might be busy, God is never too busy for us. And our friends and family need us to share God's love. How about our RSVP looks more like this (read these with me): "Yes, I will believe." "Yes, I will take time to pray." "Yes, I will be kind." "Yes, I will share." "Yes, I will forgive you." "Yes, I will say I am sorry." "Yes, I will stop complaining." "Yes, I can help." "Yes, I am happy to make a donation." "Yes, I will be in worship." "Yes, I will try to sing a new song in worship or Sunday school." "Yes, I will show others I care." "Yes, I will trust God."

By saying "yes" we live out our faith. We welcome others to this party that brings hope and peace to our world and in our lives. We can gather in this place and at this table to share the best

food of all—communion! We can praise and thank God for all we have. We can dance and party every day as God's most cherished guests. God loves us SO much, God has an invitation for you. (Invitation is read off of powerpoint)

**"Celebrate good times, c'mon!"**

Thanks be to God. Amen