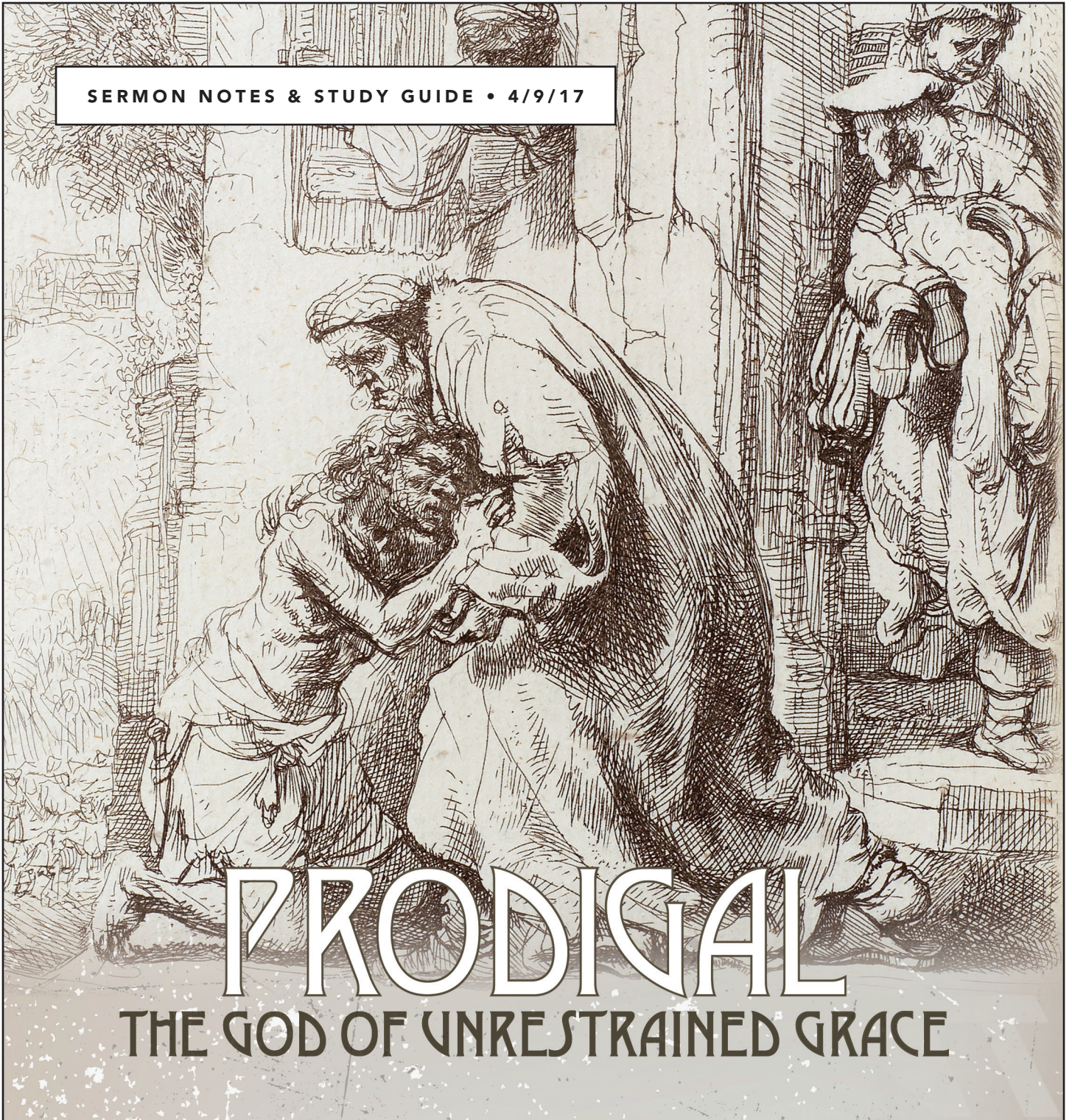


SERMON NOTES & STUDY GUIDE • 4/9/17



PRODIGAL

THE GOD OF UNRESTRAINED GRACE

Our new Lenten Series, **Prodigal: The God of Unrestrained Grace**, centers on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15. The series will carry us throughout the Lenten season, including Easter Sunday, as we look at this parable and its themes of grace and forgiveness. The series dovetails with our Lenten Art Exhibition, "A Father & His Two Sons: The Art of Forgiveness," which includes 43 pieces by artists including Rembrandt, J.J. Tissot, and Thomas Hart Benton that were inspired by the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We encourage you to visit the exhibition and meditate on this powerful parable as we consider the story from the perspective of the father and both of his sons.

THE LORD OF GRACE • Matthew 21:1-11 • Tim McConnell • April 9, 2017

Every now and then you see a yellow ribbon tied around a tree, or a giant Welcome Home sign on a front door, and you know—somebody's coming home, after a long time away. Remember that song, "Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree." My grandparents had a player piano powered by air pumps you pumped with your feet. You put the song—this rolling paper scroll—into the machine and started pumping your feet, which turned the scroll, which made the piano keys play. The faster you pumped the faster the song would play. My brother and I competed to see how fast we could play Tie a Yellow Ribbon. I still hear the piano screaming along! The piano doesn't work anymore. I have no idea why.

The story we have been studying, the story on our walls in beautiful art, is a homecoming story. The younger son comes home and is welcomed. The older son, while at home in body, is far from home in his heart—he too is invited to come in and come home, to get right with God the Father and be at home. Now as we enter Holy Week we step aside from the Parable of the Prodigal Son and look at another homecoming, a welcome home moment, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Here's the Son of God entering the City of God. But just like our parable in Luke we've been studying, the responses are mixed. The father raced to embrace the younger son, but the older brother refused. There are some out there singing and shouting and celebrating, but there are others standing back from the parade, arms folded, scowling in the background. The older brother spirit is there – the older brother lostness. Grace isn't welcome here. Which one will you be today?

This is a remarkable moment in Scripture, a huge turn in Jesus' ministry. He used to hide himself. He told his mother once, "My time has not yet come," he told people he healed earlier in his ministry, "Tell no one what happened here; don't tell anyone." Not because he didn't want people to know, but it just wasn't time. Well, now it's time. Now Jesus reveals who he is very publicly. So let's get this straight. Here at First Pres we believe something pretty remarkable when you think about it. We believe a relationship with God is possible in Jesus Christ. We believe it is possible to come into a personal, intimate relationship with God. And this relationship is the source of all you ever wanted in life; all your deepest truest needs are met. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is a fountain of eternal life. It is desire fulfilled, the Proverb says "a desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (Proverbs 13:12). Jesus is desire fulfilled, tree of life, eternal life, life like water, overflowing for eternity. This is a crazy claim. But this is at the heart of Palm Sunday and Easter—coming into a relationship

with Jesus Christ. Jesus is able to show up and reveal Himself in your life. He is able to roll in and present Himself clearly. When He does, how will you receive Him?

We see here in this passage what could happen. We could stand back like the older brother, arms folded, cold and cynical. Or we could join the crowd, singing and hollering! Do you know, sometimes it's possible to get wrapped up in something and carried away—even church. You can get to be part of success church, rising tide, momentum, life change working to make stuff better. Woo-hoo! But remember, the same emotional tide shouting Hosanna on Sunday shouts "Crucify Him!" on Friday. We don't need to stand back, and we don't need to get carried away by emotion for all the wrong reasons. What we need, what we really need, is to know Jesus today; to know Him, and to know He knows us. We need the real embrace, the embrace of the father gives the son. Personal, true, genuine. Here's the point, here's what I want you to remember: Jesus reveals Himself to hear you say His name. We need to say His name. We need to know Him, believe in Him, follow Him, love Him. We need to say His name. Jesus.

Next week we stand to host about 4,000. That's more than double a usual Sunday. What are they all looking for? A comfortable family Easter, something to match what we've seen on Parenthood or This Is Us, something we remember from childhood? Or something more? Jesus is able to reveal Himself. He is able. When He does, will they say His name? People will evaluate a hundred things. "I liked the music. I liked the new Worship Center. I liked the classic feel of the sanctuary. I appreciate the socially conscious coffee. I tolerated the preaching. I liked this. I didn't like that." What about Jesus? Jesus reveals Himself to hear you say His name. Our primary mission is to raise up worshippers—to make disciples of Jesus—to help people come into a living, personal relationship with Jesus Christ! Because we believe, crazy as it sounds, that this is possible! So what about Jesus? Will you say His name? Will you help another to say His name?

I want to encourage you to join in the celebration and name Jesus. You might think your response is irrelevant. You might think your own opinion about Jesus, or your own thoughts and responses to Him don't matter. But they do. When Jesus comes into the city, He watches for the response. When Jesus shows up in your life, He waits to hear your voice join the song. Jesus reveals Himself to you to hear you say His name, to hear you cry "Hosanna! Save me!" This matters. Your posture matters. Your personal posture before

Jesus counts. You are an eternal soul, and Jesus came to save eternal souls. He cares what you have to say. He cares whether or not you can see Him today and how you respond. We can take what we have learned from the Parable of the Prodigal and apply those characters to Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and ask ourselves: where do we stand? Where do we want to stand? Do we want to run with the father to embrace the Lord of Grace? Do we want to stand back like the older son and settle into bitterness and religiosity? Where do we want to be on Palm Sunday? Remember being a kid when something exciting happened, and you ran for it. The ice cream truck didn't come by much, but when it did, once or twice in June, we ran for it! Then halfway there we remembered we didn't have any money. So we ran for it back to our houses, then ran for it back to where the truck had stopped...then sat down and cried 'cause it was gone! I want to recapture that spirit—run for it. The spirit that made the father run toward his son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the spirit that made Zacchaeus run ahead of the crowd to see Jesus, the same spirit that made Peter and John run to the tomb at Easter. Jesus is showing up. Run for it! Race to embrace the Lord of Grace. It even rhymes.

Today is a moment of divine self-disclosure. He used to hide Himself, but now he reveals Himself. On the approach to Jerusalem, the normal approach among the great crowds headed into the city for the Passover celebration, Jesus stops. "As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.'" (Matthew 21:1-3) Matthew then adds, just to help us out, "This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet," and He quotes Zechariah 9:9. This is not a subtle moment. Some parables Jesus told, but other parables He acted out. This was Jesus acting out the coming of the Messiah into Jerusalem, the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. This is it. And the people knew it. Verse 8: "A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Hosanna in the highest heaven!'" (Matthew 21:8-9) Make no mistake this is a bold claim. This is Jesus saying, "Look over here. I'm the Messiah." Everyone is walking; only Jesus rides in through the Golden Gate. This is a deliberate act of divine self-disclosure for all who have eyes to see. How will you receive it? Jesus reveals Himself to

hear you say His name.

"Hosanna!!" they shout. We don't use this word a lot. Do you shout Hosanna a lot in your life? I don't. Literally it means, "Save now!" When Jesus arrives and for the first time you lay eyes on Jesus—you see Jesus. You shout out! This is Jesus! This is real. God is a person and He's here right before me. Hosanna! "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" This is a quote from Psalm 118:26. Have you ever had a moment in your life so rich, so full, that you feel like all the events leading up to this event are worth it? Anything that led me to here is a blessing. "God blessed the broken road that led me straight to you," to quote Rascal Flatts. Have you ever had a moment like this? That's what it's like to meet Jesus and begin a personal relationship with Him. Everything that led to this moment is blessed. Everything that led me to get on my knees and pray, everything that led me to start that conversation with my Christian friend, everything that pushed me into church that Sunday morning...Blessed. God did it all to bless me. "*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*" My heart sings. It matters how you respond.

It is worth noting how Jesus rolls in. Is it even possible to respond to Jesus? Isn't He all the way up there, and I'm all the way down here? He rides in humbly. I was struck in my study this week about the animal He rides. Whatever it was, it was a humble creature. It's a little funny how it seems like even the Bible can't figure out what kind of a thing this was. Was it a colt? A donkey? Both? What is that thing? Maybe that's why the owner of it was like, "Take it. Just take it. Nasty little animal." Here's the point. Jesus rides in while others walk, Jesus rides in fulfilling messianic prophecy, but Jesus does not ride in as a coercive and conquering king. He rides in humble. The beast is lower to the ground, slow moving. Jesus rides in as an accessible Lord. You could reach Him if you tried. The beast—whatever it is—is a beast of burden, not a warhorse. We could look outside and see General Palmer on his mighty steed, but that's not Jesus today. He didn't ride in to conquer and oppress but to carry a burden, to carry your burden. Maybe we would be more comfortable with the conquering hero, the military vanquisher of evil come to enlist us in his army. But that's not Jesus today. Jesus reveals himself near, accessible, humble but noble, in order for you to turn to him and say "Hosanna, Jesus." Jesus reveals Himself to hear you say His name, and He wants to be there with you face to face. Jesus—God saves.

So, Jesus can show up. He can just show up. Be ready to face Jesus at any and every turn. As Oswald Chambers says, "He appears where we least expect Him, and always in the most illogical connections." We

must lean into the intense spiritual reality that Jesus Christ is present, God is present, and expect Jesus at every turn. I think a lot about our high schoolers in our community, where it just feels like hopelessness has taken root in so many hearts. And I hate hopelessness! Don't you? I hate it. But I understand it, I think. Imagine running through high school with no knowledge of God, no spiritual dimension at all you could trust. No awareness of Jesus. You'd feel like a rat in a maze, to be honest. Every turn, only one dimension, right or left. After a while you just have no idea where you're going, or where you've been, or what you were looking for in the first place. Some are trying to get the cheese, ring the bell. Some are trying to get out. Others are just happy to find a quiet corner and try to keep away from the biting and scratching. All two dimensional. All right or left. What about up? What if Jesus dropped in from above? What if there is another dimension to life and Jesus knows the way, and you could look up to Him and know Him and walk with him through all the rest? Let's keep praying every day: Jesus walk the halls of our schools. Walk the halls and show up in kids' lives.

But not just kids. Next week someone will come who is living life in two dimensions, right or left, but never up. Next week Jesus will be on display, in power, in force, in beauty, in truth. Next week the resurrection power of Jesus will flare up among us in such a wash of love and grace, next week someone will see Jesus. How will they respond? How will you? Jesus reveals Himself to hear you say His name. Will you? Will you help another? This can be a place where the top comes off the rat maze. This can be a place where life moves into another dimension. This can be a place where hopelessness dies and life begins anew. The father ran to welcome his son, the older brother sat back angry and cold. The people shouted "Hosanna, Jesus save!" but others sat back arms crossed in resistance. Jesus comes. Jesus, the Lord of Grace. He comes. He reveals Himself. He shows up. Embrace Him. Your response matters. He wants to hear you say His name.

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STUDY GUIDE

"Prodigal: The Lord of Grace"

Matthew 21:1-11

Start It

- Are you taken with celebrity? Admit it. We all are. There is a certain impulse to want to see the famous person, to want to be close to the person you have only seen on TV or online. Now there he is, there she is! Right there! You can't help but think about where you are positioning yourself, where you might linger or stand to increase your chances to say a personal hello. You can't help but feel compelled, sometimes even to run, to get in front of others and get close.

Study It

- Read Matthew 21:1-11. Do you have any memories of Palm Sunday from your childhood to share? Why is Palm Sunday significant? It is also called Passion Sunday.
- How would you have responded if you were one of the disciples asked to go ahead and find a donkey? Are you surprised by the success of this mission?
- Why do the people want to be close to Jesus? What compels them to make a big deal of Him, waving tree branches and throwing cloaks on the ground? What different responses do you notice in the passage? What other responses to Jesus' entry to Jerusalem can you imagine were also happening (imagine a child, a soldier, a zealot, etc.)?
- Read Zechariah 9:9-17 and Psalm 118:19-29. Do you see how Jesus has fulfilled prophecy? Was this a subtle way to claim his place as Messiah or was it bold?

Pray It

Lord Jesus Christ, You boldly entered Jerusalem this day to shouts of acclaim, knowing fully that the week would end on the cross with shouts of insult ringing in Your ears. Your love for us is beyond our understanding. Forgive the sin that made the cross necessary. Forgive the sin that joins the chorus against You. Forgive the sin continues in disobedience even after Your glorious sacrifice and resurrection. Open our hearts this week to receive You gladly, Savior and Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Live It

Jesus was recognized by some and denied by others as he entered Jerusalem. Think of one person who needs to see Jesus this week and pray each day that He will make Himself known to them on Easter morning.