

Sounds Like a Zebra:
February 7, 2021

There's a story... **[1 Mother in Law]**

About a son-in-law...
Who had a difficult relationship...
With his mother-in-law...

So one year... he decided to buy her a cemetery plot...
As a birthday present...

On her next birthday he didn't buy her a gift at all.
The mother-in-law was upset
And asked the son-in-law
Why he had forgotten her...
And didn't give her anything...
For her birthday.

The son-in-law responded,
"Well, you still haven't used the gift I bought you last year!"

Not a nice story.

However... the tension between mother-in-laws...
And their son-in-laws...
Have been the source...
Of many many inappropriate jokes.
Throughout the ages.

With the implication that... the son-in-law...
Are never quite good enough...
For his wife...
And therefore...
Will never fully accepted by his mother-in-law.

I do not have that problem.
I have a wonderful mother-in-law...
And I have to say that...
Just in case she listens to this sermon today!

Jk. She really is great.

Today... we have the story... **[2 Simon and Andrew]**

About the beginning of Jesus' ministry...
He's jumping right in...
And getting to work...
For the Kingdom of God.

Last week... we heard how...
He set a man free...
From a demon.

This week... which takes place...
On the very same day... as the last story.
It's the sabbath...
Now he and the new disciples... are coming out of church...

And just as soon as they leave the synagogue...
They went to the house of Andrew and Simon.
Remember... they were the brothers... fishermen...
Whom Jesus had called...

And they left their nets...
Just like that...
To follow him...
That's what it says...

BUT... please notice... they didn't leave everything...
They still had a house.
And we can assume...
It was filled with their family members.

If Simon had a mother-in-law...
He must have had a wife.
And if he had a wife...
Why wouldn't he have had children?

It was normal... to have big families...
There could have been three or four generations...
All living together... in that same house.

Anyway. Simon's mother-in-law is sick. **[3 Simon's Mother in Law]**
She had a fever.
She was burning up.

And Jesus. Took her by the hand.
Which is interesting.
That the gospel writer mentioned that little detail.

Did he need to take her by the hand?
Did he need to touch her?
Did he need to be in physical contact...
In order to heal her sick body?

Of course not. He is the Son of God.
He could have done this from a distance.
He could have just spoken the word.
And she would have been healed instantly.

But he touched her hand. **[4 Touch]**
Why?

Well why do we touch people's hands...
When they are sick?

To reassure them...
That we are there.

To give them comfort...
When they are uncomfortable.

To let them know...
That they are not alone...

And we are going to do...
Whatever we can do...
To help them feel better.

That's why he is touching her hand...
It's a source of human contact...
And a source of holy comfort.

And then... after that contact...
She gets better.

Jesus works better than Tylenol.

He lifted her up.
Her fever was gone.
And her body was healed.

Much to the relief of her family.

So there we are.
A simple beautiful story. **[5 Serves Them]**

But. It's the next sentence.
The next phrase...
That causes some people...
To get a bit wound up.

It says... and she began to serve them.

I was in a text study... one time...
Where one of the pastors said...

Sure. Isn't that just the way it is.
He heals the woman...
So she can get up...
And wait on them.

That pastor said... he healed her...
Because they were hungry...
And wanted her...
To get herself into the kitchen...
To cook them some food.

They wanted her...
To serve them...

And this person... portrayed Jesus...
Like he was just another man...
From that culture...
Who treated woman...
Like they were inferior objects...
With the sole purpose of serving men.

And just so you know...
That kind of thinking...
Bugs the snot of me.

But not just this lesson...
It always bother me...
When some people take...
God's Word.

And especially...
A wonderfully powerful event...
Like a physical healing...
By Jesus.

And twist it... to make it into something...
Ugly... and bad... and misogynistic.
And hateful against women.

Why can't we just take this story...
At its surface value.
Like it's a miracle...
And leave it there.

And I know...
We've talked about this...
Many times before...
How women...
Were seen as an extension...
Of the man's property.
During this time.

They were not seen as prominent...
Or important...
Or even people... who had a voice...
In that culture.

And all that may be true.
But I don't think that's what's happening **HERE**.

I have never had the impression...
That Jesus came into this world... to disrespect women.
To disrespect anyone.

He was all about humility... and acceptance... and grace.

Of course... we need a counter example.... **[6 At the Well]**

How about the Samaritan woman...
The woman at the well...
Who engaged Jesus...
A Jewish man...
In an argument...
A theological argument... no less...
With Jesus... the Son of God...
About the nature of God.

Put those facts aside for a moment...

And consider... that...
Just according to the customs of his day...
Jesus should not have acknowledged her existence...
Should not have spoken to her.
Should not have been alone with her.
In the middle of the day...
Out in public.

It was **SCANDALOUS**.

But instead...
Of following the societal norms...
And living by cultural expectations...
That other people... including his disciples...
Were trying to put on him...

He interacted with this woman...
And gave her the respect...
Of engaging in a heated discussion...
With her... about the nature of God.

So. It seems absolutely...
100% contrary to the nature of Jesus...
That he would start his ministry...
By healing Simon's mother-in-law...
Just so she would get up...
And make them something to eat.

That does not sound true to Jesus.

Do me a favor... if you would... **[7 Listen]**
Close your eyes... for just a minute.
I want you to listen to something.

What do you hear?

Most of you... will probably say... Horses.

Have you ever heard the saying... **[8 Not Zebras]**
When you hear hoofbeats behind you...
Think horses... not zebras.

We live in Colorado...
Have you ever been overtaken...
By a herd of zebras?

No. That doesn't make sense.
Most of the time...
When you hear hoofbeats...
It's going to be horses.
Even if you want it to be zebras...

Right? sometimes...
We look at a text...
Through our own eyes...
And we try to make...
The story...
Fit what we WANT to think.

We make it...
Into something that it's not...
Into something that aligns with...
Our agenda.

When you hear a story about Jesus...
Healing a person... who was sick...
Who had a high fever...

My first thought...
Should not be...
Jesus wants something...
From that person.

Jesus is healing them...
Because of what they can do for him.

That's not grace.
That's not the love of God.
That's not how it works.

Remember last week...
When Pastor Ryan...
Talked about... a person's history...
Didn't matter...

And he put that slide... **[9 Don't Matter]**
Up on the screen...
That said... It don't matter.
Drove me crazy.

There was a series of beer commercials...
For Old Milwaukee... set in different towns...
Across the United States.

Where friends were sitting in the backyard...
Having a good time...
Drinking Old Milwaukee beer...
And they look at each other...
And say... it doesn't get any better than this.

Well... they had one of those commercials... set in Iowa...
And the people sitting around...
Drinking the beer... and they said...
It don't get no better than this.

It drove me crazy.
Contrary to what Minnesota people say...
Iowans know how to speak English.

But that's not the point!
The point that Pastor Ryan made...
Was that it doesn't matter...
What our history is...
Where we have come from.

Whether we have been good or bad...
Whether other people think...
We deserve God's love... or not.

In God's eyes...
It doesn't matter...
God's grace is for all people. **[10 Galatians 3-28]**

There is no distinction...
Jew or Gentile...
Slave or free...
Male or female...
We are all one...
In Christ Jesus.

We are not better...
Than anyone else...
Because we all are...
Simultaneously saints and sinners...

And at some point...
In our tired old lives...
The good news about Jesus...
Came to us...

Came to us...
In our hurt.
Came to us...
When we were hopeless.
Came to us...
When we were broken.

Jesus... came to us...
And offered us grace...
To heal our brokenness...
To restore us to God.
To give us another chance to **LIVE**.

No matter where we have come from.

Well... today is the corollary... **[11 Now What]**
This is what happens next.
After we are healed...
After we are set free... from sin.

After we have had the love of God...
Declared to us...
Right where are.

Then what?

How do we respond...
To the love and grace of God...
That has broken through...
The darkness and deepness...
Of our lives?

It seems completely logical... to me.
That our response...
To the love of Jesus...
In our lives.

Is to get up and serve him.

In the book we are going to study for Lent... called Unoffendable.
The author tells a story... he borrowed from another book.

It goes like this: **[12 Two Dogs]**

There were two dogs who lived in the country.
They had pretty much the ideal country-dog setting:
beautiful rolling hills,
lots of sunshine and romping,
and a good master who was kind to them
and loved them.

It was the kind of life you'd love to have if you were a dog.

Gypsy was an older dog,
And the young dog was named Snowball.
Every day, about the same time,
Their master called them in for dinner.
They knew to obey;
That means they had to respond
As soon as they heard their master's call.

One day, at the exact moment the master called them—
“Gypsy! Snowball! Dinnertime!”—
A rabbit ran across Gypsy’s path.

Suddenly, she felt a strange sensation:
She wanted to ignore her master and chase after that rabbit.
She was tempted.
But she yielded to what she knew was right
And went to dinner immediately,
As she was trained.

But the next day, it happened again.
And this time, she gave into temptation.
She heard her master’s voice,
but she decided she just wanted to chase the rabbit right now.
And when she finally came for dinner,
she came with her tail between her legs.

She knew she had done wrong. She didn’t want to do it again.

But she did it again. And again, until it became easier for her.

Soon, Snowball was still able to run free,
While Gypsy was now leashed.
Her master was heartbroken.
He loved her, but he knew he couldn’t trust her anymore.

One day, the master loaded his dogs into the car
To take them for a walk in the woods.
Gypsy and Snowball loved the smells of the woods.
When they arrived, Gypsy, now used to disobeying,
Took off before the master could put the leash on her.

She was free! She ran and ran and ran into the woods! Free!

Her master called her name, desperately—“Gypsy! Gypsy! Gypsy!”—
in hopes that she would return to him.
He and Snowball searched for hours.
But to Gypsy, his voice became more distant,
Until she couldn’t hear him anymore.
She was excited, but she noticed it was getting cold.
The sun was going down.

Meanwhile, Gypsy’s owner and master, who loved her so,
Cried as he put Snowball back into his car and drove home.

He never saw Gypsy again.

The master drove home,
And while Snowball missed Gypsy,
Snowball resumed a wonderful life,
Romp through the meadows
And always responding to her owner.

Gypsy lived in the woods the rest of her life.
Her fur grew matted, and she was lost and alone.
She missed her master's voice
And the way he took care of her.

She eventually had some puppies,
And she told them about the master
And how good he was.
But they only knew some stories.
They didn't know him.

The puppies grew up,
And they told their own puppies
About the master,
But by then, no one really knew him at all.

The author tells that story in his book...
Because he wanted the reader to know
That while he loves God,
and he wants to be close to God,
God has given all of us...
A choice whether or not to serve Him.

That seems to be a good analogy...
For the gospel lesson today.

Simon's mother-in-law...
May not have been named...
May not have been powerful...
Or important...
Or any of those things.
That every culture values.

But Jesus loved her.
And I know he loved her...
Because he took the time to touch her hand.
Because he healed her sick body...
Because he raised her up...

And her lovely response was...
To serve.

I mean... bottom line is... **[13 Choose]**
We have a choice.

If we begin at that point...
Where we recognize...
That Christ has healed us.

That he has raised us...
From our sickbeds.

That he has broken the fever...
And cured the infection...
Of sin and death.

Then it seems to me...
The next question to ask is...
How can I say THANK YOU...
To Jesus... for everything he has done for me.

I mean... he's the son of God.
He doesn't really need anything.
And honestly... we don't have much to give.

Other than... what he has asked us to give.

To serve one another.
To love one another.
To work in this world...
To proclaim the good things...
That God has done.

Maybe it's too simple.
Maybe some church...
Would give you the 10 steps to discipleship.
Or how to be a better human.
Or how to make a better marriage.
Or how to succeed in life.

But doesn't that just seem... like too much.
I don't think Jesus came to make our lives complicated.
I think he came to set us free.

And if we are free...
We get to choose how we live.
What if the choice is really simple.
What if... all we need to do...
Is get up and serve.

Like it says... in the book of Joshua...
Choose this day.
Whom you will serve.

As for me and our house...
Our family.
Our church.

Let's choose follow the example set...
By Simon's mother-in-law...

Let's get up... and serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God.
Amen!