

The Message for March 18, 2012
John 3:14-21
Restoring Relationships Through Love
The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

Strange home remedies... Do you have any strange home remedies in your family, maybe grandma or grandpa handed down through the ages – something guaranteed to cure what ails you? Here are a few examples that people claim actually work.

- Does your child have a fever? Forget the Tylenol. Take two slices of onion, put them in an old pair of socks, and put them on your child's feet for a few hours. It'll draw the fever right out the bottom of their toes. (I always wondered why feet smelled.)
- Got a wart? Rub a piece of red meat on it and then bury the meat in the ground. The wart will slowly disappear as the meat rots in the ground.
- Got a headache? Try rubbing Vick Vapor Rub on your temples and under your nose. The headache will disappear in no time.
- Got malaria? Eat a spider's web. If that doesn't help then eat a live spider.
- Get leg cramps at night? Sleep with a bar of soap under your leg. If your legs still cramp up, at least you'll smell good in the morning.
- Got a bad cough in the middle of the night? Forget that cherry-flavored syrup in a bottle. Try a shot of honey, whiskey, and lemon in that order. If it doesn't cure the cough, it will certainly help put you back to sleep.
- Got a stomach ache? Take a glass of water, add some baking soda and some turpentine, stir it up and then drink it all down at once.

There are lots of strange home remedies out there, and some even work, but none compare to the really strange remedy we have for a snakebite in the Old Testament book of Numbers. It's quite a story.

It takes place during the forty years when Moses is leading the Israelites through the wilderness. During this time, the people had become really good at whining. They whined about everything. They complained about everything especially to and about their leader Moses. But then they went too far, they crossed a line. They complained and whined about God. Listen to what they say:

The people spoke against God and against Moses, (It helps to do this in a whinny voice) 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.'

Now it's one thing to complain about Moses. It's another thing to complain about God. But they are not only complaining about God, they are complaining about God's cooking. Ooooo that's not a good idea! I learned a long time ago never to complain about someone's cooking. Call it "a burnt offering" if you want but don't complain about it.

Did you notice the wording? "There is no food and we detest this miserable food." Wait a minute - did they have food or didn't they have food? This didn't make sense to me until I remembered being a kid. I would be out playing in the yard and I would come in the house and say, "Mom, I need a snack." And mom would say, "Help yourself." I would open refrigerator doors and stand there and say, "There is nothing in here to eat!" It would be stuffed with all kinds of leftovers – cold pizza, apples, carrots, celery... "There is nothing in here to eat." That's what we have going on here in our reading from Numbers. The people aren't happy with the food that God gave them.

So do you know what God did? God isn't too happy with the Israelites lack of gratitude. They seem very ungrateful for the blessings God has given them. So God sent venomous snakes into their camp. The people of God were quick to complain, they were even quicker to beg Moses to pray that God do something about the snakes.

So Moses prays for God to remove the snakes. But God does not remove the snakes. Instead, God gives Moses a very strange remedy. God tells Moses to make a bronze snake, mount it on a pole, and lift it high for all to see. Any Israelite bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and live. Talk about a strange home remedy, indeed! The cure for snakebite is to look up at a bronze snake.

Fast forward about 2000 years later. Jesus is having a conversation with a Pharisee, named Nicodemus. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, which is a hint from John telling us that Nicodemus is in the dark about who Jesus is – coming to him under the cover of darkness.

The text never tells us what Nicodemus is looking for. Perhaps he doesn't even know what he is looking for. Ever been there? Ever know that you need something, but not sure exactly what that something is and so you find yourself searching? To help Nicodemus find his bearings, Jesus recalls the story about Moses, and the Israelites, and a bronze snake. Listen again to what Jesus says:

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

The cure for a snake bite is a snake on a pole. The cure for death is Jesus on a cross. Talk about a strange remedy for our sin.

- Look at the cross, and we see how much God loves us.
- Look at the cross, and we realize that God will do whatever it takes to be in a relationship with us forever.
- Look at the cross and we see an ultimate sign of grace.

The cross is the remedy for that which ails us – sin. Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross.

As the story: At a theological conference, professors and pastors were in a spirited discussion about what is unique about Christianity. Someone suggested the incarnation sets Christianity apart from all other religions – “that God took human form in Jesus and became one of us.” Someone responded, “Other faiths believe that God appears in human form too.”

Someone suggested that the resurrection sets Christianity apart – “that death is not the final word because the tomb is empty.” Someone responded, “Other religions have accounts of people returning from the dead too.”

Then C.S. Lewis walked into the room, sat down and listened. By this time a passionate conversation was under way. After a brief moment of silence C.S. Lewis said, “What’s all this rumpus about?”

Everyone turned to him and said, “We’re discussing the one thing that is unique about Christianity.” “Oh, that’s easy,” answered Lewis. “It’s grace.” He continued, “Christianity alone claims that God’s love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim.”

The dialogue continued and someone said, “That’s true, Buddhists, for example, follow an eight-fold path to enlightenment. It’s not a free ride.”

Someone else said, “And Hindus believe in karma, that your actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; nothing comes to you that is not set in motion by your actions.”

Someone else said, “The Jewish code of the law implies God has requirements for people to be acceptable to him and in Islam – God is a God of judgment not a God of love. You live every day to appease God.”

Lewis said, “Only Christianity dares to proclaim God’s love unconditionally. We celebrate an unconditional love called, grace.”

Philip Yancey wrote: “There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. And there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.” God loves you period! Can I have a – wow? That’s the light into which we live everyday. That’s the light of grace we live by making this world a brighter place.

Now I need to tell you a little story. I’m wearing a bright green shirt here this morning. This is not my color. I had no intention of wearing this shirt this morning. But

as it goes... my wife and daughter went shopping yesterday for a new dress. She had it on this morning. And she saw this green shirt and said, "You know what, mom? Dad needs that green shirt. He needs a new shirt for worship." So she got me this new shirt. I got up this morning and got ready to go out the door and she said, "Here daddy, wear your new shirt." So I didn't even iron it. It still has wrinkles in it. It still smells fresh and new. This is the color of – grace...

I was spending some time this week trying to find something to help bring a deeper understanding of God's grace and love in our lives as disciples of Christ. Then I remembered "the Skit Guys." I love how these guys can bring the Bible stories to life in a modern way through videos.

I found one of their videos on grace and how Peter must have experienced grace after the resurrection after he denied Jesus three times. Peter came to the light of God's love. This video reminds me that if Peter didn't get it then it's okay when we don't get it. When we mess up – like Peter did – love restores our relationships.

Watch... <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhoFEuw2GPA>

Look at the cross and live. The cross takes what is unforgiveable and makes it forgivable. That's grace. Go then... Go and be the grace-filled people we are, loved and forgiven sinners. And remember this. It is never about us. It's always about – say it with me – Jesus! Amen.